

Faculty Constituency Report
Virginia Tech Board of Visitors
June 2, 2020

John Ferris, President—VT Faculty Senate

Good afternoon Rector Valeiras, President Sands, members of the Board, and all others gathered here today.

I wrote a rather light piece a few months ago that I planned to present to the Board. I spoke of the success that the Provost's Office and the Faculty Senate have had in collaborating on academic matters of shared governance and experiential learning. But I'm afraid that tone does not match today's world and today's university. I've served as Faculty Senate President for two years and I'd like to reflect on how things have changed, and stayed the same, in these two years.

In August 2018, I spoke to the Board about the faculty engine running at redline for far too long. Faculty had been hired at half the rate that undergraduate enrollment had increased since at least 2015. And that was before the over enrollment of 2019. And that was before freezing faculty hiring this year.

In 2018 we learned that the Strategic Plan calls for us to be in the top half in every category and to increase our performance in every measure by 5% every year going forward. We also heard that the 2 of the 3 lowest rated responses in the COACH survey were workload and work-life balance. I asked that, with few notable exceptions, Virginia Tech respect faculty life outside of Virginia Tech; to protect evenings and weekends from Virginia Tech obligations. I hear now that this time may be taken from us while families cope with a pandemic.

In 2018 we learned that a billion dollars became available, devoted to an expansion of our inclusive state-wide campus. We learned that the Virginia Tech endowment exceeded a billion dollars and that the non-capital assets are nearly a billion. Meanwhile faculty pay relative to peers has dropped from about the 35th to the 29th to the 25th percentile, while the goal remains the 60th. And that was before freezing faculty salaries. And that was before discussions of cutting faculty pay.

In March 2020, faculty responded admirably to the COVID-19 virus, moving, I believe, 4500 classes online in 12 days. On April 15th VT News touted the new buildings in the Innovation Campus. Many faculty have voiced to me a perception that the focus is on building buildings rather than on the people who fulfil the mission of our university, at a time when we are all dealing with the stress of the pandemic and significant financial hardships.

Yesterday I was asked if there is a risk in losing faculty, if some may simply choose not to return. The boldness and honesty of this core question floored me, given all that has happened to faculty in the last two years.

My fear is that the familial bonds holding many faculty members to Tech have been worn away, leaving many disillusioned, disenfranchised and disengaged, with only their "job" remaining. Many will do the simple math: even fewer of us, doing even more work, for even less pay; and decide they are done. I can imagine that cutting faculty pay may be the last straw for some who have the means to simply walk away, which would leave us in quite a bind. But I worry more that when the economy improves and positions outside Tech become available, there will be a large, but quiet exodus of our best faculty members.

The concerns I've raised here are substantial and the decisions you make this summer and fall will determine the character of Virginia Tech for a generation. Who we are and what we stand for. Do our deeds match our words. Yet the working relationship between the Provost's Office and the Faculty Senate gives me faith that you can answer the challenges I have laid out. I don't know what new form Tech will take in the coming years, but I choose to believe that you have a carefully considered plan to take us to some envisioned future that will be better for faculty, A/P faculty, staff, undergraduate students and graduate students.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Faculty Senate, John Ferris