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

Thinking back to the many discussions I’ve been party to in and out of the Faculty Senate in recent years, the one recurring topic that sticks out is the proliferation of demands on faculty time that have no direct bearing on our work as scholars and teachers. It seems that every year, the list of obligation is lengthened by another training we must attend, another assessment we have to perform, another form we need to fill out, another report are obliged to prepare for the latest university-wide initiative. The recent introduction of EFARS is only the most significant recent example of a novel drain on faculty time, but there are many others, each I’m sure laudable in isolation, but taken together amounting to an increasingly large bite out of the typical Virginia Tech faculty member’s workweek.

Faculty time is arguably the most valuable resource the university has, since it is required for all the core activities of the university. Without faculty spending the time, no courses are taught, no research is performed, and no papers or books are written. It’s also a fully subscribed resource. Contrary to what many outside of academia may believe, university faculty work hard—nearly 60 hours a week on average, year round, although most of us only get paid for nine months of work. With this in mind, it is worth noting that research into human productivity shows that increasing work hours beyond about 55 or 60 per week actually leads to a decrease in productivity over the long haul. In other words, for every additional task that you assign faculty, there is something else that will be done less well, or not at all.

The opportunity cost of all the administrative demands on faculty is in other words large, and made even larger by to the way in which faculty work. If you do administrative or managerial work, you can readily divide your day into half-hour chunks, assign each to a different task or meeting, and be successful at what you do. Creative work, on the other hand, requires long stretches of uninterrupted time—I my I believe not atypical case four hours at least—to be effective. In other words, you can schedule a half-hour meeting with me at 10 in the morning, and another at 2:30 in the afternoon, and while you have directly taken up only an hour of my time, as far as creative work is concerned, the entire day is gone.

Now, it is true that tedious chores that don’t make use of your full talents are an inescapable part of life. For instance, I suspect that if I were to argue that I shouldn’t do the laundry or the dishes because that is a waste of my Ph.D.-level talents, it would not go over too well with my wife. However, while we cannot completely avoid laundry duty, the value and scarcity of faculty time would seem to dictate that a concerted effort should be made to at least minimize our time with the dirty-clothes hamper.
But this doesn’t appear to be happening. On the contrary, as a faculty member you sometimes get the impression that others think of your time as an all but unlimited resource that can be assigned to sundry tasks as needed, free of charge. I can understand why this attitude exists. There is simply no mechanism for measuring the true cost of assigning additional work to faculty, or for assessing how much time we actually spend on secondary tasks. But perhaps the time has come to compile a measure of this. As I discussed at the last board meeting, faculty is the subject of a rapidly growing number of metrics that aim to measure various aspects of what we do, including some things that are objectively extremely tricky to measure, such as the overall impact of the university’s scholarship, or the quality and value of the instruction that we offer our students.

If the administration thinks that strengthening Virginia Tech requires us to try to perform such challenging measurements, each of which incidentally requires a significant investment of faculty time to realize, I submit that we should also go after some of the more low-hanging fruit. Such as identifying what can be done to increase the amount of time that faculty is able to spend on teaching and scholarship, i.e. on the things we do best, on the things we were hired to do.

The Faculty Senate is ready to do our part in this effort. We are about to launch the Faculty SoundBoard, a permanent survey open to Virginia Tech faculty, where they can anonymously discuss issues they would like to see addressed and make suggestions for improvements in policies and procedures at the university. This could be one tool for identifying inefficiencies and poor use of faculty time. In addition, John Ferris, the incoming Faculty Senate president, will make this topic a priority for the upcoming year. I hope that the Administration will be able to partner with us in this effort. If you do, I can promise you that not only will we be able to deploy the faculty’s time more effectively, it will send the message that the university values and respects its faculty, and the resulting improvement in morale will pay dividends well beyond any direct gains in faculty effort spent on instruction and on scholarship.

Thank you.