

Faculty Constituency Report
Virginia Tech Board of Visitors
November 6, 2017

Hans Robinson, President—VT Faculty Senate

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

In my September constituency report, I devoted significant time to urging the administration to make communication with the university community in general and the faculty in particular a high priority for this academic year. I am very happy to report that the quality and frequency of communications between the administration and the Faculty Senate has taken a big step forwards in the two months since that report. In particular, I would like to commend Dr. Rikakis for partnering with us in a series of conversations between himself and small groups of faculty senators, where we have tackled issues of importance to us. Dr. Clarke has already agreed to continue these conversations, which I also find very encouraging. In addition, when President Sands visited the Faculty Senate earlier this week, he stated that he will recommit himself to clearly communicating the reasons for and goals of the various initiatives being implemented at the University. I very much look forward to working to sustain this increased engagement into the future.

Because there is no doubt this work is vitally needed. As part of our communications effort since the beginning of the semester, the Faculty Senate cabinet has engaged in numerous conversations with faculty, department heads, and deans, and the picture that has emerged is one of deep strain and worry among large segments of the university community. If we are to reverse this on more than a temporary basis, one-time changes to organizational charts are not going to be enough. The very real and deep-seated concerns that exist among faculty and department heads need to be addressed head-on in a thoughtful and systematic manner that involves all stakeholders, and this is work that is going to take substantial effort and an extended time to complete.

Luckily, we are already making good progress. The first topic we have chosen to tackle is Promotion and Tenure at Virginia Tech, which in large part defines the relationship of the faculty to the university, and therefore is of great importance to us. I believe most of my colleagues share my view that respectful and thoughtful deliberation and a commitment to fairness at all levels have long been hallmarks of Promotion and Tenure at our institution. Lately, though, the outcomes of a few cases have raised questions in the minds of some as to whether the letter or spirit of this long-established process has not been violated, and this has begun to undermine confidence in the process and lead to considerable anxiety among many of our pre-tenure faculty.

Here, I would again like to thank Dr. Rikakis for his commitment to transparency and to a fair and nurturing Tenure process, which has helped lead us to a point where we have a way forward that I believe will restore full confidence in the Promotion and Tenure process, both in the short and long term. To achieve long-term stability and confidence, the Commission on Faculty Affairs has established a stakeholder committee that will take a top-to-bottom look at all policies

and procedures associated with Promotion and Tenure to ensure that expectations on the process, policy documents, and actual practice are all aligned and clearly spelled out. While this is ongoing, minimal amendments to the Faculty Handbook will be adopted to ensure that the events that have, at a minimum, been perceived as irregular, are unlikely to be repeated.

When President Sands visited the Faculty Senate, he also touched on the importance of faculty involvement and indicated openness to the possibility of expanding it. I want to thank him for valuing the faculty in this way, and also state for the record that we are ready and willing to take on a fuller role in shaping the university in matters that fall within our expertise. I look forward to collaborating with the administration to find ways to achieve this.

Valuing the faculty also means compensating us appropriately, and I know that it has long been the administration's goal to reach the 60th percentile in faculty salary among our peer institutions. I applaud this ambition, but I would also like to urge the administration to look beyond simple averages and tackle the issue of salary compression and inversion, where many Virginia Tech mid-career and senior faculty lag significantly behind their junior colleagues in compensation, even when accounting for actual performance. This is a matter not only of equity, but also—since our salaries are public—of faculty morale.

I would like to conclude on a note of optimism. It is undeniable that we have been through some rocky times lately, and that much work still needs to be done before the sailing will be entirely smooth. But at the same time, faculty interest in the future of the University and engagement with the issues that face us are at a high point. Similarly, the communications channels between faculty and administrators are more open than they have been in a long time. If we can capitalize on this, I believe our future is bright.

Thank you.