

Faculty Constituency Report
Virginia Tech Board of Visitors
September 10, 2017

Hans Robinson, President—VT Faculty Senate

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

We are here to discuss the internal affairs and workings of Virginia Tech, and I will spend the bulk of my report on an issue that I believe is of great relevance to this topic. First, though, I would like to briefly turn to something that was regrettably imposed on us from the outside. This past Tuesday, president Trump announced that he would be ending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA, which allows law-abiding undocumented immigrants who were brought here as children to obtain a measure of protection against deportation from the country where they have lived most of their lives. This affects nearly 800,000 people, including some 30 hokies.

Also on Tuesday, the Faculty Senate, at the instigation of the Graduate Student Assembly and the Student Government Association, unanimously passed a joint resolution expressing our support for the hokies who are affected by DACA's elimination and face being uprooted from their life and the only home many of them have ever known. They are as much hokies as we are, and we welcome them here. We believe that DACA is a humane and beneficial policy that should be kept in place until comprehensive immigration reform can be signed into law. We also believe that all of our students, regardless of their background or country of origin, have the right to try to improve their lives, and are equal members of our community. The decision to end DACA is antithetical to these values.

My second topic is perhaps more prosaic, but as I stated initially, quite relevant to our proceedings today.

I think it is fair to say that the university is in the communications business. To be a good teacher is to be a good communicator, and no matter how brilliant your scholarship may be, it means little unless you are able to communicate your findings to your peers and to the public. But as crucial as good communications is to the core missions of the university, good internal communication between the administration and the faculty is just as important to the long-term health of the university. This is particularly true in a period of rapid change such as this one, where we face multiple major initiatives being implemented at the same time. They include, for example:

- A new, quite complex, and, from what I can gather, uniquely structured budget model now coming into place across the university;
- a substantial growth in student enrollment, which will require careful planning and a sustained effort over years to accommodate while maintaining instructional quality; and
- the transdisciplinary Destination Areas, which will have profound implications for Virginia Tech's research enterprise and its curriculum.

Faculty, along with staff, are largely responsible for implementing and responding to these initiatives at the ground level. If we are to do so effectively, applying our expertise, our talent, and our creativity, the full context and goals of each initiative needs to be clear to us. In other words, it not enough to just understand the minutiae of whatever task lies before us, we also need a clear accounting of the analysis that motivates the need for change, the reasoning behind the design of the initiative, and, most importantly, the goals we are trying to achieve. I know from many conversations with faculty, that to a large extent, these things are unclear or unknown to most of us.

Not having this information is also deleterious for another reason. When my six-year-old looks at her dark closet at bedtime, her mind fills the spaces she cannot see with all kinds of scary beasts and monsters. We like to think of ourselves as wiser and more rational, but when we are faced with an information void, many of us tend to react the same way as my daughter, and fill it with our worst suspicions and most cynical assumptions. I wish I could say this is not happening here at Virginia Tech, but I regret to report that in many cases, it is.

The reason for this is simple. As faculty, our time is already overcommitted—we are so busy with teaching, research, and running programs and departments that there is little time or mental energy left over for administrative changes. The result is that each new proposed action is liable to be met with fear and instinctive rejection, unless it motivated and explained with clarity and precision.

For these reasons, I would like to urge the administration to make communicating to the university community the whys, the hows, and the wheretos behind your initiatives a high priority and central component of your plans for the upcoming year. If you do so in a thoughtful and concerted manner, I believe you will be rewarded with an energized and involved faculty.

Now, let me be clear. I am very optimistic about the future. I bring this issue to your attention because I believe it needs to be addressed, but I also believe this is eminently doable, and that the payoff would be large. After all, everyone I have met with and spoken to wants this institution to be the best it can be, and is willing to contribute their work and talent toward that goal. We may not always agree with the exact means of getting there, but I am confident I speak for the faculty when I say that we are as ready as ever to be a fully engaged partner in taking Virginia Tech to an even better place than where it already is.

Thank you.