

Joseph S. Merola

Faculty Constituency Report to Virginia Tech Board of Visitors

August 29, 2023

Good afternoon, Rector Baine, President Sands, all the members of the VT BOV, VT administrators and all guests. It is a distinct honor to be able to represent the Virginia Tech Faculty on this board and to speak in this open session. I was honored to have been in this same position 10 years ago and, I can say that the Virginia Tech landscape is very different today than it was then and it is all for the better. The physical landscape is strikingly different – the addition of many new buildings but the academic landscape is just as altered new programs and new directions.

Based on our conversations yesterday at the Board Retreat, I decided to spend my time giving a chemistry lesson to the group, especially Mr. Chris Petersen who shared a poor experience with chemistry as an undergraduate and I just couldn't let that stand.

From the faculty perspective, shared governance in the university is stronger than ever and the role of faculty senate has moved to a more central position in university governance and has a key role in initiating, developing and approving key university policies. The entirety of the governance system is a robust interaction between administrators, faculty, staff, and students, both graduate and undergraduate. By having input from all of those constituents, the university ensures that its structure, the academic curricula and a myriad of policies are, to borrow from a recruiting ad, “all that they can be.”

Shared governance is critical to the health of the university and, to a large degree, is responsible for VT being in a better place than many universities around the country including several peer institutions.

There are some 2600 faculty at Virginia Tech and, on any given issue, there could be as many as 2600 opinions. Here are some of the issues that FS will grapple with this year:

1. Improving communication between Faculty Senate and administration. We had some glitches in that regard concerning the rollout of various IT policies that confused and caused concern among faculty. Earlier consultation with faculty senate and other bodies would have allayed much of the concern by allowing for more education of what the policies meant or did not mean. AND to tweak those policies for the benefit of those universities I am pleased to say that many administrators, including Amy Sebring, have reached out to me with their willingness to have regular meetings accomplish just that.

2. How can Faculty senate best represent and serve VT faculty? As VT expands, how should those new faculty be brought into the fold of the faculty senate? VT Carilion Med school, Innovation campus, etc.
3. Artificial intelligence – our discussions about this subject at the retreat yesterday were both fun and stimulating. The importance of the liberal arts in what we often refer to as a digital or technical future clearly came across the the importance of a university educating the full human was a very strong message, one that I believe that faculty embrace. On a narrower front, faculty need to understand the AI tools and how students can use them and how then can use them as teaching tools.

Someone yesterday asked how many admissions essays are written by AI. As an exercise, I went to ChatGPT, one of those AI tools. I posed the following task: “Subject: Faculty Representative Constituent Report”. I will share that report for the record, but let me now give you a few snippets to show you the power of the tool. (ChatGPT generated document is added to the end. I mentioned the bullet points in that report and showed how they coincided with the actual concerns of faculty.)

I again want to thank the board for the wonderful discussions we had at the retreat yesterday and your continued willingness to listen to the various constituent groups. I am the tip of the Faculty Senate iceberg. Other officers, administrative and staff support all of the senators. All of the concerns brought up by other constituents are also faculty concerns – a university is a holistic organism and faculty cannot do their best if the students, staff and AP staff are not healthy.

Thank you again for paying attention to the input from the faculty and I look forward to updating the board on the activities of the faculty.

Addendum 1: Constituent report generated by ChatGPT

Subject: Faculty Representative Constituent Report to Virginia Tech Board of Visitors

Dear Members of the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors,

I hope this message finds you well. As the faculty representative, I am honored to provide you with a comprehensive report on behalf of the faculty constituents at Virginia Tech. This report aims to highlight key concerns, achievements, and suggestions that have been voiced by our faculty members.

Faculty Concerns:

1. **Workload and Burnout:** A recurring concern among faculty members is the increasing workload, which has led to burnout in some cases. Many faculty members are managing a delicate balance between teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities. There's a call for more support mechanisms, such as hiring additional teaching assistants, streamlining administrative processes, and exploring flexible work arrangements.
2. **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:** Faculty members are committed to enhancing diversity, equity, and inclusion on campus. However, there's a consensus that more can be done to foster an environment where all voices are heard and valued. Efforts such as providing implicit bias training, diversifying curriculum, and creating safe spaces for open dialogue have been suggested.
3. **Faculty Development:** Continuous professional development is crucial for maintaining the excellence of our institution. Faculty members are interested in more opportunities for workshops, training sessions, and networking events that facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration and pedagogical innovation.

Faculty Achievements:

1. **Research Excellence:** Virginia Tech's faculty members continue to make significant contributions to their respective fields. This year, several research projects have gained national and international recognition. The dedication of our faculty to advancing knowledge and addressing real-world challenges is commendable.
2. **Student Mentorship:** Faculty members take pride in their role as mentors. Many have gone above and beyond to provide guidance and support to students, both academically and personally. The positive impact of these relationships on student success cannot be understated.

Suggestions for Consideration:

1. **Transparent Communication:** Improved communication between the administration and faculty can enhance collaboration and understanding. Regular town hall meetings, where faculty can engage directly with the leadership, could be instituted to address concerns and share updates.
2. **Resources for Well-being:** Considering the challenges posed by the recent global events, allocating resources for faculty well-being, including mental health support and wellness programs, is highly recommended.
3. **Recognition of Service:** Recognizing faculty members' service to the university, beyond research and teaching, can boost morale and motivation. Acknowledging contributions to committees, outreach programs, and community engagement can foster a sense of appreciation.

In conclusion, I would like to express my gratitude for the opportunity to serve as the faculty representative and convey the thoughts and aspirations of my colleagues. I am confident that by working together, we can continue to elevate Virginia Tech's reputation as a premier institution of higher learning.

Thank you for your attention, and I remain at your disposal for any further discussions or clarifications.

Sincerely,

[Your Name] Faculty Representative Virginia Tech

Addendum 2: Rector Baine asked if I used ChatGPT to generate the board response. Here is what it produced:

[Virginia Tech Logo]

Office of the President Virginia Tech Blacksburg, VA 24061

[Date: Insert Date]

Dear [Faculty Representative's Name],

On behalf of the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors, we want to express our sincere gratitude for your comprehensive and thoughtful constituency report

presented during our recent meeting. Your insights and perspectives have provided invaluable information that aids us in better understanding the needs and concerns of our esteemed faculty members.

Your dedication to representing the faculty's interests and fostering open dialogue within our university community is commendable. Your report touched on various aspects that are crucial to maintaining and enhancing Virginia Tech's reputation as a center of academic excellence and innovation.

We appreciate the time and effort you invested in gathering and presenting data, addressing a range of topics including faculty development, research opportunities, curriculum improvements, and campus facilities. Your report has already sparked productive discussions among the Board members, highlighting areas where collaborative efforts can be undertaken to drive positive change.

Rest assured that your report will be carefully reviewed and considered as we move forward. We believe that an inclusive approach, involving faculty representatives like yourself, is essential in shaping the strategic direction of our institution.

We would like to extend an invitation to you to attend our next Board meeting to engage in further discussions based on your report. Your presence and active participation will provide additional context and insights that will be beneficial as we deliberate on various decisions and initiatives.

Once again, thank you for your dedicated service and your commitment to advancing Virginia Tech's mission. We are eager to work together with you to create a brighter future for our university and its community.

Sincerely,

[President's Signature]

[President's Name] President, Virginia Tech Board of Visitors

Cc: [University President's Name] [Other Relevant Board Members' Names]
[Faculty Senate Chair's Name]