

Joseph S. Merola  
Faculty Constituency Report to Virginia Tech Board of Visitors  
November 6, 2023

Rector Baine, board members, President Sands, VT administrators, my fellow representatives, and honored guests,

Thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the faculty at Virginia Tech.

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Seriously, I am grateful that I only need to make this report four times a year. Relaying the views of the faculty at Virginia Tech is a daunting task. To even think that the faculty can be represented as a monolithic group with the same concerns is quite a stretch. With over 2500 faculty, spread out over nine colleges including a medical school and a veterinary school participating in over 280 undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Then consider the geographic locations throughout the commonwealth and beyond, there is quite a diversity of duties, activities, needs and opinions. And, we have many different classifications of faculty: Tenured and tenure-track, lecturers, collegiate professors, research professors and all the ranks that go along with those. I bring this up only to underscore the low probability of finding a true “consensus” within such a varied group.

All of that makes the beliefs that UNITE us all the stronger and all the more significant. All faculty have an abiding passion for academic freedom and a system of shared governance in which decisions are made, and policies are crafted for the benefit of all constituents of the university with input from all constituents of the university. Only with full transparency in all directions are the resources available from which the best paths forward will be found. We have made great strides in the last two years in establishing a new shared governance system at Virginia Tech that is an incredible step forward in achieving that transparency. The establishment of a Senate for each of the important constituencies encompassing students, both undergraduate and graduate, staff, and professionals. The Faculty Senate now holds a central spot in faculty governance, playing a key role in policy making. For the first time this fall, a faculty member chaired the University Council, Virginia Tech’s highest policy making body.

However, we have more progress to make to make our system the best it can be and a model for other universities. While the faculty have a strong commitment and embody the spirit of ut prosim, we are also being called on to serve the university in ways that stretch us so thin that, frankly, they are facing burn out and one of the areas that suffers is, well, shared governance. Some departments are not accurately represented in faculty Senate because the faculty are stretched very thin and cannot add another service activity to their agenda. The same holds true for our calls for faculty representation on essential commissions and committees. In terms of transparency, there are areas now where a LOT of work is being done on what must be called “damage control” in explaining the establishment and implementation of policies when much

LESS work would have been done on consulting governance in the beginning before formulation and implementation.

Think about what we ask of our faculty – Research and Scholarly activity, teaching, and service. In the category of service, we are expected to conduct committee work for the department, for the college and the university. That is just inside our institution's walls. We are also expected to conduct activities in service of our professions – in societies, on government panels and in a host of other ways. Oh, and for most, all of that service counts for about 10% of our evaluations in P&T and salary reviews.

Now, consider our strategic plan and the metrics that will propel us into the Global 100 – ALL GOOD GOALS. This is not a criticism of those goals. But note that service, especially internal service does not DIRECTLY impact those metrics. The key word is DIRECTLY – our internal health is critical for the attainment of ALL of these strategic goals, and we often assume that all is well on the home front. And for the most part, it may be, be we are not always meeting our potential because the things that make for a healthy internal culture are often taken for granted and are not addressed directly. And I submit that a vital shared governance system and a healthy faculty body, both physically and mentally, are two particularly crucial factors that must be addressed directly. We cannot keep assuming that we can keep asking more of our faculty.

Now, I am going to skip over THE most prominent issue that faculty share – parking. Dean Kevin Pitt shared with me that he heard a definition of university being thousands of entrepreneurs all sharing a common complaint about parking. But, enough of that.

While compensation is not the most important motivation and driver for the majority of faculty, it cannot be ignored, especially in an area where the cost of housing and cost of living have seen dramatic increases. We heard today about the progress made in average faculty salaries. This progress cannot be denied and is laudable. But the current percentile is not where we want to be and not where we need to be. AND that is an average that does not tell the story of a number of populations within that envelope of all faculty. As we continue to attract and reward the national academy members and other distinguished prize winners. Sometimes those who work “in the trenches” – the instructors, the tenured and tenure-track faculty focusing on giving our students the best educational experience that they can give – are often the victims of salary compression. I wish I had a solution to present today – only the suggestion that this is an area that must be examined and one for which a solution must be forthcoming. We are making great strides in the mechanics and organization of shared governance and the support of this board has been critical – we need to instill an appreciation and a reward system appropriate to keeping it a healthy system.

Please do not take the above as a critical constituency report. But any good faculty report cannot simply be a cheerleading piece – and there is so much to cheer – I doubt that I would not be in my 37<sup>th</sup> year here if that were not the case. For me, the message that I want to deliver

today is that Virginia Tech is outstanding, but we can be even more. And I have presented the areas which, if addressed, will help us be that more. Thank you for listening.

Joseph S. Merola

President of Virginia Tech Faculty Senate.

Faculty Representative to the VT Board of Visitors

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