

Constituent Report by Faculty Representative Joseph Merola to the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors, April 8, 2024.

Rector Baine, Vice Rector Calhoun, and all member of the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors,

I am pleased to share a few words with you as the Faculty Representative to this Board.

It is hard for me to believe that ten years ago, I sat in this same position, and I went back to see what I said then. Here is a snippet:

“Faculty senate has been intensely discussing the issue of faculty voice. Mr. President (Sands), in the article in today’s Roanoke Times, you are quoted ‘I can throw out ideas, but I have to bring along the faculty. The faculty can throw out ideas, and staff, and they need to bring me and the board along,’ he said. ‘It’s a two-way street.’ The two-way street is exactly what we ask for and we truly need. While we have a great tradition of shared governance at Virginia Tech, it can be greatly improved by the addition of a forum for more frank (emphasis here) discussions on programs. Right now many of those discussions are compartmentalized and often they get far down the road at which time no one wants to be seen as obstructive.”

We have come a long way in those 10 years and have a shared governance system that has made tremendous strides in having faculty (and other constituents) find their voices. In recent weeks, I have reflected on the message I wished to convey, and foremost, I feel fortunate for my 37-year career and my current role as President of the Faculty Senate, speaking for Virginia Tech’s faculty. This role has enabled me to listen to and learn from members of our community and our counterparts across the Commonwealth and the nation.

Our commitment to shared governance, evident in the robust system implemented last year, encompasses various senates and commissions, ensuring diverse participation and democratic policy formation. This governance structure has gained national attention for its inclusivity and efficiency. Additionally, this year’s revisions to our shared governance system will further enhance the resolution process, reinforcing our mission as an inclusive community dedicated to improving the quality of life and the human condition within the Commonwealth and throughout the world, inspired by our land-grant identity and guided by our motto, *Ut Prosim*. However, a change in a shared governance system is an iterative, ongoing process, and the faculty have accordingly made observations about what has and has not worked in the system over the past year and a half.

Recent campus discussions and activities have prompted dialogue and reflection on enhancing our shared governance’s efficiency and effectiveness. For instance, the Faculty Senate is currently deliberating over “Position Statements.” Last month, a proposed statement about the situation in the Gaza Strip was presented to the Faculty Senate for its consideration. It has given us an opportunity to study and refine our

processes on position statements related to matters on international events, war, crises, and other matters that affect our faculty members' well-being and mental health, both directly and indirectly. While resolutions must fall within a body's governance purview, the appropriateness of various statements and their crafting remains an area for improvement. This situation emphasizes the importance of attentive listening, constructive dialogue, and welcoming diverse perspectives.

This semester, the Global Distinction initiative has sparked faculty concerns, particularly regarding campus equity and consistency with our land-grant values. While the Global Distinction Initiative has shifted to articulate more of these values, more needs to be done to incentivize, reward, encourage, and/or assess our land-grant values, such as valuing locally relevant research, community-based research, arts and humanities scholarship, and other scholarship not indexed in the major databases utilized by external evaluators, such as the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE WUR). For example, performances, films, and Extension publications have no fit within the current metrics included in Global Distinction, yet they are an invaluable part of our university's scholarly and creative activities. Without clearly outlined incentives, rewards, and/or indicators for *all* of our land-grant values, faculty will continue to view the Global Distinction Initiative with skepticism if not cynicism. These concerns suggest a potential identity crisis, challenging us to balance global aspirations with our commitments to inclusivity and service. I believe our shared governance system, emphasizing diverse participation in university mission goals and values, can address these challenges to some extent; however, more importantly, it is crucial that all voices are heard who are affected by Global Distinction, which includes administrators, faculty members, staff members, graduate students, and undergraduate students.

I thank the Board for its willingness to listen to constituent representatives, both during formal presentations and through informal interactions. I am grateful for the board members' openness and look forward to our June meeting, where I will review this year's faculty issues and introduce next year's Faculty Representative.

Respectfully submitted,

Joseph S. Merola
Faculty Representative to the VT BOV