

June 2025 Faculty Senate Constituency Report

Rachel Miles, Faculty Senate President

As we end this academic year, I find myself reflecting on what the future may hold for the faculty, staff, students, and community members of Virginia Tech. It has been an eventful year, full of uncertainty, chaos, volatility, and evolving complexity. How we, as a university and institution of higher education, respond to such changes in our status quo will shape our future in ways we cannot yet fully understand. We must maintain a proactive and agile stance while the ground shifts, or threatens to shift, beneath our feet. We must rely on, and reaffirm, our values and principles in all that we do while we navigate an unpredictable future.

The pendulum of federal policy and priorities is swinging with unprecedented speed and force, moving in a direction not seen before. Institutions of higher education, by their nature, are more deliberative and cannot pivot as quickly as corporations when the pendulum swings. Funding agencies cannot guarantee that the processes governing grant reviews and awards will be efficient or predictable, particularly in an environment shaped by federal priorities that may change overnight. I have heard plenty of stories from faculty members who are affected by this unpredictable environment; for example, one faculty member shared that his National Science Foundation proposal related to innovations in data science education and workforce development had received strong reviews and was expected to be funded, but it has been stalled for months at the award stage due to staffing shortages and operational disruptions at the NSF. The scale of such disruptions is still unknown, but it is now the backdrop against which we all carry out our work. I have experienced these issues personally. A conference grant awarded to me by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) was terminated last month as were most, if not all, IMLS grants to libraries and museums across the country. In another instance, a faculty member expressed deep frustration that his proposal had been delayed, noting that it had taken years to build trust and partnerships with local communities in the New River Valley—relationships now at risk of unraveling due to the stalled funding that may never be awarded. These are just a few examples of how the current, strained federal funding landscape is impacting faculty members, and I want to emphasize that these examples only touch the surface of the deep implications such disruptions are having on the research enterprise in higher education; disruptions on this scale do not just delay research – they derail the trajectory of research, sometimes stopping it entirely in its tracks, and they have real life consequences in health, innovations, and societal problems. These disruptions strike at the very core of our mission as a land-grant institution, to serve the Commonwealth and the nation. Yet, despite the significant challenges and widespread

disruptions, faculty have remained remarkably resilient—steadfast in their commitment to their students, colleagues, and the mission of the university.

Faculty members are not only coping with an increasingly unstable funding landscape; they are also working to support and reassure their graduate students, whose stipends and research opportunities often depend on grant funding. There are also those students whose legal status in this country is under threat. A persistent undercurrent of anxiety and fear can be felt throughout the halls of every building on campus, affecting faculty, staff, and domestic and international students alike. The ongoing uncertainty fuels stress and apprehension, often leading to isolation, diminished productivity, and an erosion of the sense of connection that makes our community so special.

Faculty need more than reassurance—they need a system that actively supports and sustains them. As we saw during the pandemic, it is the most vulnerable among us who face the greatest risk of loss when that support is lacking. We recognize that offering guarantees or reassurances in times like these may not be feasible—but it remains essential that faculty feel valued, appreciated, and fully supported.

One way of supporting our faculty is to make sure that their academic freedom and freedom of expression are protected here at Virginia Tech. These protections allow faculty to explore new ideas and take risks—without fear of backlash—which is essential for innovation and discovery. Equally critical is preserving tenure as a core part of who we are. Tenure helps us attract and retain the best faculty, which in turn drives more research funding, enhances our national and international profile, and supports long-term projects that stimulate growth and economic prosperity. Tenure is essential for maintaining our competitive edge in attracting top talent and fueling innovative research; it should be viewed as an investment in faculty and the entire institution that strengthens Virginia Tech's research capabilities and adherence to our mission. Preserving academic freedom and tenure are not only vital for us to attract and retain the faculty and students we will need to achieve Global Distinction, but threats to these principles can seriously damage our reputation as a leading research university and therefore actively harm our efforts to become a globally recognized destination for talent.

It is also critical that we uphold our commitment to shared governance at Virginia Tech; we have a unique system of shared governance here, and it is a strong and enviable one. We must continue to uphold the principles of shared governance, encourage faculty to actively participate in key commissions, committees, and Faculty Senate work, and strengthen the system through ongoing improvements in policy, procedures, communication, collaboration, and transparency. I would like to recognize Provost Clarke for his efforts to help redesign our system to provide faculty with a collective voice and a greater role in the

system, and I thank him for his continued support for the principles of shared governance. I also want to recognize the incoming Faculty Senate President, Dr. Justin Lemkul. Dr. Lemkul is exceptionally well prepared to lead this effort. He has been a dedicated member of the Faculty Senate and the Commission on Faculty Affairs for several years, with a record of contributions to shared governance that is both extensive and impactful. I'm confident that the faculty will be in capable hands this coming year and that Dr. Lemkul will be a strong and thoughtful advocate on their behalf.

Thank you for the privilege of serving in this vital role on the Board over the past year. It has truly been an honor and an extraordinary learning experience. This opportunity has deepened my understanding and appreciation not only for the mission and complexity of higher education, but also for the values and vision that define Virginia Tech. While I will miss serving as a faculty representative, I am confident that my successor will be a strong advocate, an effective communicator, and a dedicated bridge between the faculty and the Board. The future is in capable hands, and I look forward to seeing continued progress in the year ahead.