

“How Can We Raise Each Other Up?”

Presented by Eric Kaufman, Faculty Representative to Virginia Tech’s Board of Visitors

Like many faculty, I find advising students to be an important and fulfilling part of my work. I thought you might be particularly interested in an advising session I had with a Master’s student last month. We were meeting in my office, and he was sharing that his coursework was challenging him to read the equivalent of a book per week. Another faculty member, Dr. Paul Siegel, was walking by my office door, heard the conversation, and asked if he could interject. Dr. Siegel shared that as a graduate student, he made a commitment to read a book a month that was unrelated to his research. The commitment was in response to advice from his father, who said, “there is more to life than chickens and genetics.” Dr. Siegel explained to me and my advisee how helpful it has been for him to have read books on a wide variety of topics, and he continues—decades later—to read a book a month.

Dr. Paul Siegel is one of the longest working professors on our campus.¹ He began his career with Virginia Tech in 1957, and the University has not paid him since he retired in 1999.² Even still, he continues to devote a self-estimated 50 hours a week to his work, including conducting research and mentoring students.³ Although I cannot certify his hours, I regularly see Paul Siegel on the second floor of Litton-Reaves Hall, where we both have an office, and his commitment to mentoring was apparent in the brief interaction with my graduate student. Dr. Siegel is one of the icons that makes Virginia Tech a great place to study and work, and I am grateful my student was able to interact with him during his time at Virginia Tech.

So, what does this have to do with Virginia Tech faculty in general? I don’t expect all faculty members to keep investing 50 hours per week when they are 88 years old, but I do believe Paul Siegel exemplifies the commitment that occurs when the University provides faculty with the freedom and support to do what they do best and serve the greater good. Indeed, Virginia Tech faculty have demonstrated their commitment to the greater good through contributions to the Commonwealth of Virginia Campaign⁴ and Virginia Tech Giving Day⁵, with both programs exceeding their goals over the past year. (While Giving Day may be heavily geared toward alumni giving, you may be interested to know that roughly 10% of this year’s donors self-identified as faculty. With approximately 25% of faculty members contributing to Giving Day, faculty already exceed the goal for alumni giving.⁶)

¹ “The Chicken King: Virginia Tech professor reflects on more than six decades of teaching,” by Annie Schroeder, WLSL, October 7, 2020,

<https://www.wsls.com/news/local/2020/10/07/the-chicken-king-virginia-tech-professor-reflects-on-more-than-six-decades-of-teaching>

² “‘Chicken guy’ Siegel reflects on decades of work with students,” by Jane W. Graham, *The Delmarva Farmer*, August 5, 2019, <https://americanfarmpublications.com/chicken-guy-siegel-reflects-on-decades-of-work-with-students>

³ “Virginia Tech’s king of Chicken Hill keeps 61-year experiment alive,” by Robby Korth, *Roanoke Times*, November 3, 2018, https://roanoke.com/news/education/virginia-techs-king-of-chicken-hill-keeps-61-year-experiment-alive/article_4343ee3c-073c-5681-b6d3-691e8b1f1234.html

⁴ “Virginia Tech employees donate more than \$404,000 to charity,” January 15, 2021, <https://vtnews.vt.edu/articles/2021/01/cvc-2020-campaign-exceeded-goal.html>

⁵ “More than 12,000 Hokies come together to raise over \$6.1 million for Virginia Tech on Giving Day,” February 25, 2021, <https://vtnews.vt.edu/articles/2021/02/giving-day-2021.html>

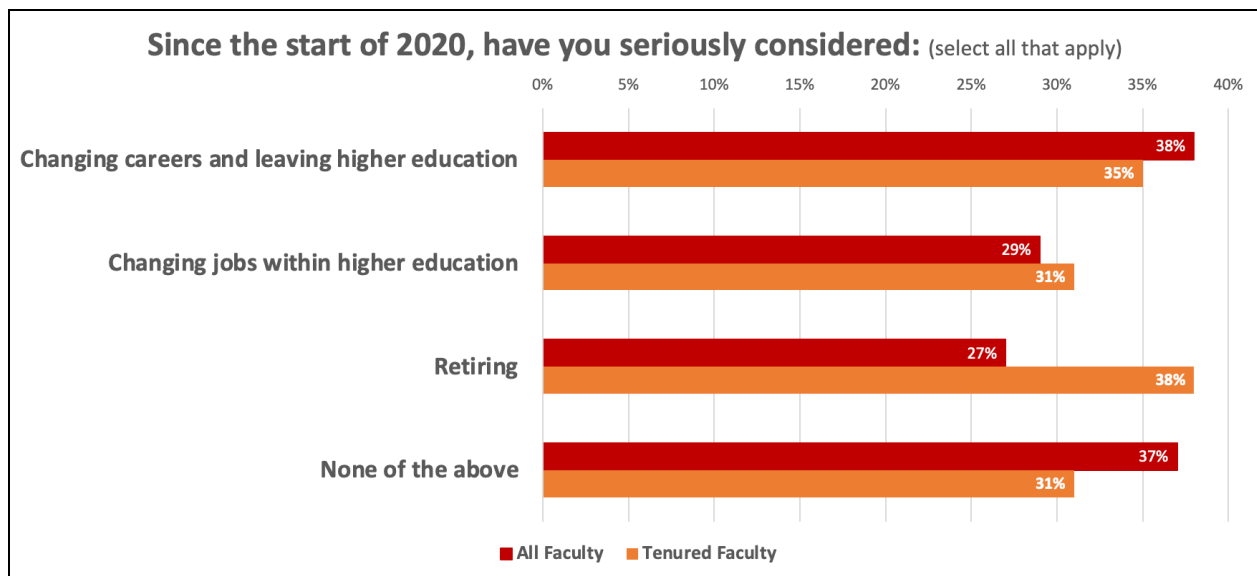
⁶ Alumni Giving Strategic Planning Metric, University Data Commons, <https://udc.vt.edu/spm/data/excellence/fund/alumni>

While Dr. Siegel embodies an ideal, what is unfortunate is evidenced by research recently conducted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Survey findings suggest that many faculty members may be “On the Verge of Burnout.” Fidelity Investments funded the study, and their executive vice president identified the following noteworthy findings:

- “The majority of faculty are experiencing elevated levels of frustration, anxiety, and stress”;
- “More than two-thirds of survey respondents are struggling with increased workloads and a deterioration of work-life balance—particularly female faculty members”; and
- “More than half of all faculty are considering retiring or changing careers and leaving higher education, with tenured faculty members even more likely to retire than others.” (p. 2)⁷

These are troubling assertions, and I am particularly concerned that more than one-third of faculty (including tenured faculty) have seriously considered “changing careers and leaving higher education” during the past year (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Faculty Departure Considerations from a National Survey on Faculty Well-Being and Career Paths, Conducted in October 2020.^{8, 9}



The Chronicle research was a national survey, and results are shaped by the pandemic. However, the stress and pressure to perform was already on the rise for faculty members prior

⁷ “‘On the Verge of Burnout’ Covid-19’s impact on faculty well-being and career plans,” research brief by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and Fidelity Investments, https://connect.chronicle.com/rs/931-EKA-218/images/Covid%26FacultyCareerPaths_Fidelity_ResearchBrief_v3%20%281%29.pdf

⁸ “Faculty Well-Being and Career Paths: What College Leaders Need to Know” Virtual Forum, November 16, 2020, <https://connect.chronicle.com/rs/931-EKA-218/images/FacultyWell-BeingandCareerPaths.pdf>

⁹ “‘On the Edge of Burnout’ A Chronicle survey finds many faculty have considered changing jobs, leaving academe, or retiring,” by Maura Mahoney (2021), in *Burned Out and Overburdened: How to Support Faculty*, <https://store.chronicle.com/products/burned-out-and-overburdened>

to the pandemic, as highlighted in Virginia Tech's 2020 COACHE Survey of Faculty Job Satisfaction.¹⁰ And, in recent months, I have spoken directly with Virginia Tech faculty who are leaving the University this year—some for retirement, but others that have become disenfranchised by higher education and are changing careers.

The impact of faculty departures is not mitigated simply by hiring new colleagues to replace those that have left. Departures create circumstances in which there are fewer people available to compete for open positions. The reduced supply of qualified faculty contributes to increasingly aggressive recruiting efforts from our peers, and there is poaching of faculty members currently at Virginia Tech. Additionally, our own efforts to recruit high quality faculty require more and more salary and start up funds because candidates frequently have multiple offers to consider.

So, what can we do? Certainly, financial support helps. And, a culture of mutual respect also goes a long way. Findings from a recent Gallup poll confirm that “when faculty have the materials and equipment they need, feel cared for at work, and feel connected to their leaders and colleagues, they are able to invest discretionary effort that improves the student experience” (Marken, 2021, para. 7).¹¹

In January, I participated in an international colloquium on Collective Leadership and Leadership-as-Practice.¹² The event explored a particular question: “How Can We Raise Each Other Up?”¹³ This question resonates with me in much the same way as I am inspired by Virginia Tech's motto, *Ut Prosim*; it commits us collectively to leadership as practice as we advance Virginia Tech's missions through shared governance. So, I encourage you to consider: “How can we raise each other up?” There's no simple answer, but there are a variety of ideas worth considering.^{14, 15, 16}

I look forward to a future at Virginia Tech where we have faculty members, like Paul Siegel, who continue to invest in the lives of those around them. To accomplish that vision, it is important for the Board of Visitors to support policies and budgets that empower the faculty to succeed. Let's all commit to “raise each other up.”

¹⁰ COACHE Survey of Faculty Job Satisfaction, Virginia Tech Faculty Affairs, <https://faculty.vt.edu/faculty-development/coache-survey.html>

¹¹ “Faculty Engagement Linked to Better Student Experience,” by Stephanie Marken, *Gallup Education*, March 2, 2021, <https://www.gallup.com/education/330167/faculty-engagement-linked-better-student-experience.aspx>

¹² “Collective Leadership & Leadership as Practice January 2021 Colloquium,” <https://januarycolloquium.wordpress.com/>

¹³ “How can we raise each other up?,” Collective Leadership for Scotland, <https://collectiveleadershipscotland.com/2020/11/11/how-can-we-raise-each-other-up/>

¹⁴ “Faculty Members Are Suffering Burnout. These Strategies Could Help.” by Emma Pettit, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 25, 2021,

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/faculty-members-are-suffering-burnout-so-some-colleges-have-used-these-strategies-to-help>

¹⁵ “Findings from the First Ever Multi-Institutional Survey of Faculty Retention & Exit [Infographic],” The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, March 26, 2018,

<https://coache.gse.harvard.edu/blog/findings-first-ever-multi-institutional-survey-faculty-retention-exit-infographic>

¹⁶ “Pandemic Toll: More Than Half Of College Faculty Have Considered A Career Change Or Early Retirement,” by Michael T. Nietzel, *Forbes*, February 26, 2021,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelt Nietzel/2021/02/26/pandemic-toll-more-than-half-of-college-faculty-have-considered-a-career-change-or-early-retirement/>