

More than Employees: Faculty as Suppliers

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

I want to start by thanking several board members. Earlier this fall, Rector Valeiras joined a Faculty Senate meeting and answered several questions faculty members had at the time. The candid communication really helps faculty feel better understood and supported. I also want to highlight the generous financial support Mehul Sanghani provided for ["The Market," to address food insecurity](#). The pandemic has exposed many disparities, and programs like The Market are truly supporting Virginia Tech students in need.

During [my address in August](#), I highlighted the importance of Virginia Tech's engagement mission, and I appreciate those who followed-up with related questions. I look forward to future conversations about our land-grant roots. Today, though, my goal is to highlight more generally the relationship between a university and its faculty.

To best understand the relationship, I encourage you to think about a supermarket. Near where I was raised, there is a small chain called Buehler's. Like your typical grocery store, they stock products from a wide variety of suppliers, some local and some national brands. In the mid-2000s, Nabisco noticed declining sales among its products, and it selected Buehler's to pilot a redesign of the cookie and cracker aisle.

The design was dubbed "Mom's Kitchen," because it placed Nabisco's products in a self-contained area, built out to reflect a nostalgic vision of a home kitchen and pantry. The finishing touch was fridge cases filled with milk, backlit and glowing. (Who doesn't want milk with Oreos?) From a sales perspective, the stores saw double-digit increases in sales of cookie and cracker products. (Sales of Nabisco products increased by as much as 32 percent.) Not only that, they started selling out of milk; they simply couldn't keep it on the shelves. Despite the



"Mom's Kitchen" installation at a Buehler's in Ashland, Ohio. Photo from Shook Kelley archives.

tremendous success, though, the experiment stalled. Buehler's employees found it inconvenient to stock milk in two places, and the corporate division of Nabisco's parent company never capitalized on the success. Instead, the architect of "Mom's Kitchen," took the general vision to another midwestern supermarket (Harvest Market) and used it to advance the sales of a wide variety of local goods (see [Fassler, 2019](#)).

So, what does this have to do with universities and faculty? Well, faculty are more like grocery store suppliers than employees. What the university sells is produced by faculty. Not only that, but faculty often have good ideas for how to better connect with the interests and needs of those

who support the university. When faculty are supported, they continue to contribute in ways that allow the entire university to benefit. However, if they feel stifled or unappreciated, they will become disengaged or take their talents elsewhere.

As I consider the struggles through the pandemic, I am thoroughly impressed by faculty investments in University success (see [news articles related to COVID-19](#)). While the admissions folks have done a remarkable job with enrollment, instructional faculty deserve a share of recognition for [success with student retention](#). As [Dr. Kevin Hamed noted](#), “we are trying to show the students that this is a great opportunity to learn how to be adaptive and creative.” In reflecting on a first-year experience course, [Dr. Herbert Bruce added](#): “Doing it this way has been a lot more difficult, but I honestly believe it’s what the students need to get as much normalcy out of the semester as possible.” Faculty are working hard to deliver the best format for the circumstances (as highlighted in the recent article about [Dr. Kristopher Hite’s different approaches for different classes](#)).

On the research front, [Virginia Tech's sponsored awards have increased by 15 percent](#), and that is aside from the nearly 100 [COVID-19 rapid response proposals](#) submitted for seed funding. Faculty are leading a wide variety of [research projects related to the pandemic](#), including [numerous interdisciplinary projects funded by the National Science Foundation](#). In a recent [article on “Crisis Response.”](#) College of Science Dean Sally Morton noted: “Scientists solve problems, and COVID-19 represents one of the most extensive challenges to our nation ever.”

However, not all faculty have been thriving in this environment; [many faculty are burning out](#). The 2020 [COACHE Survey of Faculty Job Satisfaction](#) reveals one of the most significant challenges of working at Virginia Tech is the “unrelenting pressure to perform.” The challenge is even more daunting for the 30% of faculty who rely upon dependent care in order to fulfill their duties at Virginia Tech, because the options for dependent care have been seriously constrained during the pandemic (and [support from the Women’s Center](#) is too limited).

So, what can the Board of Visitors do with these insights? When the Board approves compensation plans and employment policies, please remember the investments faculty are making for the betterment of the University. Also, please ensure Virginia Tech administrators are listening to faculty concerns and engaging faculty representatives in decision-making processes. I encourage you to promote increased transparency and improved communication wherever possible. (We need to avoid the [‘toxic positivity’](#) publicly reported on at other institutions.) Plans are underway for a new shared governance model at Virginia Tech, and your support of that model depends upon an appreciation for the contributions faculty make that go far beyond the notion of employee obligations. My hope is the supermarket analogy helps you to envision the symbiotic relationship between faculty and administrators. I would be glad to answer any questions that you have.