

Camellia Pastore
Undergraduate Representative
Virginia Tech Board of Visitors
August 2020

The sentiment of the season is tension, and it is weighing on our undergraduates. Because of the pandemic and its effects, much of this revolves around the cost and value of Virginia Tech. Students understand that it is not realistic to expect tuition cuts -- however, we cannot help but feel the loss as so many campus resources are unavailable or altered. In the wake of diminishing in-person classes and the cancellation of so many Hokie traditions and social events, students are asking themselves, "why are they bringing us back?" The answer is an important one. Instead of simply replicating existing teaching methods or VT traditions, students are hoping to see technology used in new ways to further the exemplary level of teaching and uniquely personal culture that drew many of us to Tech in the first place. We are also hoping to see the university create new and exciting ways for students, and particularly freshmen, to make friends and find meaningful ways to get involved on campus.

The pandemic has hit the younger generation hardest in an emotional way. Many of us thrive off of large social gatherings, bouncing from place to place, and intimate conversations as we navigate the challenges of becoming an adult. It is not the instinct for undergraduates to return to campus only to stay in isolation, and I believe that the university needs to guide students towards safe ways to engage with others and meet new people, rather than wielding the threat of punishment over our heads. For many of us, we haven't seen our closest friends and significant others in six months -- it gets harder every day to stay inside and alone.

It's also important to remember that not all students have a family home to return to when the university goes virtual. These issues are less prevalent with undergraduates than graduate students, but they are no less important. I hope to see Virginia Tech continue to use its student emergency fund and other resources to help our students with food and housing insecurity and limited internet access.

As students, we understand that administrators can't magically read our minds and come up with exactly what we want. That's why we need to create many more opportunities for students to be involved in university decision-making and brainstorming processes. Too many announcements are made that leave our students wondering why the decision was made, who made it, and how come none of us were consulted.

When considering student involvement with the administration, it's important to think about which students we're reaching and which we're not: the majority of undergraduates at Tech go four years with only seeing administrators at orientation or graduation. Too often, administrators only interact with a select few students, giving them a distorted picture of the wide variety of student experiences. I have heard time and time again that students don't even know that they have representatives, or even worse, that they don't trust them. I understand the

irony of this, seeing as how I'm now one of those "select few" students who now has more than my fair share of influence, but I plan to counter that by inviting other students to join me. During the recent interviews for the AVP of Student Affairs, I was fortunate enough to be able to invite several of my peers who aren't as involved in students leadership to be a part of the process. Sabrina and I have also worked to expand our social media presence and create a two-way conversation with students about what happens in university governance.

To continue this effort, I hope to see administrators create opportunities for students to have their input heard and ideas implemented. These roles don't need to be all-encompassing--students are simply seeking to know that administrators are not creating a college experience without any input from college students. I think students would be very invested in playing a role in the specific areas of campus life that matter most to them, and the division of representation would also make student governance a more equitable place. Over the past few weeks, I have met with nearly every major student group that I could think of, and their observations and concerns span a wide range. These insights are invaluable as I seek to represent the undergraduate student body as accurately as possible, and I believe the administration would benefit from new perspectives as well.

This summer, inspired by a wave of Black Lives Matter protests and activism, undergraduates have been considering the role they play in their own communities. I know Virginia Tech understands this sentiment as well, and I would like to sincerely thank the Board for the recent approval of the renamed residence halls, now Hoge and Whitehurst Hall, as well as ongoing efforts to make our campus a more inclusive space.

While I am grateful, we must not forget that many of the real oppressions that occur on this campus happen behind the scenes. I recognize and applaud Virginia Tech for its genuine commitment to making the Hokie experience welcome for all, but I worry we're not doing enough. We need to be engaging our majority students and helping them understand the effect of their actions and words. We need to be educating our students to correct the misinformation or lack of information they may have learned from K-12 history classes. There is no easy fix for these sorts of nuanced behaviors, but the end result will be well worth the effort.

I'd like to end by saying a very heartfelt thank you to the Board for this opportunity of a lifetime. Virginia Tech has given so much to me, I hope that I can give at least a fraction of it back.

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The most dreaded question of the summer is "how are you doing?" How many of us can honestly say that we're doing well? If you can name an emotion, students are feeling it, and often all of them at once. Over the past six months, we have moved back in to live in our childhood bedrooms, or stayed in Blacksburg apartments and dorms while the rest of the town grew quiet. We have celebrated at picnics with carefully spaced out blankets. We have gone to virtual office hours, waited in virtual lines, and taken virtual exams while professors watched us through our laptop cameras. We have lost jobs and found new ones as cashiers or delivery drivers. We have had surprise birthday parties on Zoom. We have watched loved ones be taken to the hospital, and later attended virtual funerals.

One topic on everyone's minds as we begin the school year is student socialization and the potential for Virginia Tech to have a spike in COVID cases like so many of our peer universities. Let me make something clear: the majority of our undergraduates understand the severity of the virus and its implications for ourselves, our classmates, and our families. However, this pandemic has forced all of us to evaluate priorities and weigh options, and many students are realizing that it is no longer sustainable to put our mental and emotional needs at the bottom of the list. When we say "this is home," we mean it: being back in Blacksburg is a large part of that home, but so is our Virginia Tech community. Without going to class, getting involved with research or clubs, hanging around campus or downtown, or spending time with old and new friends, what is the Hokie experience?

I want to let you know that we need your help. Undergraduates would like to be a part of the reason why Tech stays open through Thanksgiving, but we need to be able to learn, grow, have fun, and be challenged like we are in normal semesters. It's on all of us -- students, faculty, staff, and the administration -- to create new ways to make this happen, rather than scaring our students until they stay in isolation. It's also on all of us to have empathy and support each other through this harrowing time that is already having a major impact on my generation.

When considering student involvement with the administration, it's important to think about which students we're reaching and which we're not. Too often, administrators only interact with a select few students, giving them a distorted picture of the student experience. Most of my friends cannot name a single administrator at this school (other than President Sands). Most of my friends don't know that there is a student body president, let alone three branches of student government. When we allow this disconnect to happen, we are letting our students believe that the administration doesn't see or value them. Everyone in this room knows that's not true, but getting rid of that image involves the administration reconsidering what it means to be

welcoming to students and creating many more spaces for student input to be involved in conversations around policy and budget.

Nobel prize-winning economist Edmund Phelps researches a topic called "mass flourishing." The idea is, when a nation's citizens are all involved in its innovation, creativity, and progress, the society and everyone in it does well. In context of Virginia Tech, what I'm trying to say is that the administration doesn't have to come up with all the answers. Our students are bright and dedicated and looking to help, and especially during this crisis, we need all the ideas we can get. In recent weeks, as I've Zoomed with student leaders from most major campus organizations, I've been overwhelmed by their willingness to collaborate on advocacy issues and interest in providing more ways for their constituents to have their voices heard. I hope that as the university continues to brainstorm unconventional ways to stay connected in and out of the classroom, students will be treated as a resource rather than an afterthought.

This summer, inspired by a wave of Black Lives Matter protests and activism, undergraduates have been considering the role they play in their own communities. I know Virginia Tech understands this sentiment as well, and I would like to sincerely thank the Board for the recent approval of the renamed residence halls.

However, we must not forget that many of the real oppressions that occur on this campus happen behind the scenes. Performative actions will not affect our Black students who move into their freshman dorm only to discover that their roommate supports the Confederacy. Nor will they affect our Black students who watch their white classmates choose to work alone rather than join a group with a student of a different skin color. Nor will they affect the students who stand outside of dining halls and hand out flyers for an "Anti-PC Halloween Party" where attendees are encouraged to dress as mocking versions of marginalized groups. These are not theoretical examples. They are real events that happened to people I care about in the past few years. I recognize and applaud Virginia Tech for its genuine commitment to making the Hokie experience welcome for all, but I worry we're not doing enough. There is no easy fix for these sorts of nuanced behaviors, but the end result will be well worth the effort.

To wrap up, I want to say that you all make me really proud to be a Hokie. The genuine commitment to our students and to bettering the university makes me certain that we are headed in the right direction. I am working to bring empathy, humility, and creativity to my work this year. I won't be the first or last representative with big ideas, and I have relied on the guidance and wisdom of the Board members, current and previous representatives, many administrators, and my friends and peers as I navigate advocacy in a time of uncertainty. I cannot wait to let more undergraduates see what I see, and I know that they will make you all even prouder to be a Hokie than you already are.

Helpful resources:

[Colleges are Getting Ready to Blame their Students](#)

[This Summer will Scar Young Americans for Life](#)

[Mass Flourishing: How Grassroots Innovation Created Jobs, Challenge, and Change](#)

[Dr. Paul Offit \(CNN Transcript\)](#)

Hello all. I want to start by extending my gratitude to the members of the Board of Visitors, the graduate school, and the graduate student population for entrusting me to be the graduate student representative to the Board of Visitors for the 20-21 academic year. In addition - I want to thank Dean DePauw, Maruf Hoque, Ellen Plummer, and my predecessor Ryan King, among others who have aided in swiftly transitioning me into this role during such volatile times.

I applied to be the Graduate Student Representative, because I hold an immense passion for university governance and a desire to uplift the student collegiate experience. I came with ideas I hoped to address and with the intention to always put the needs of my constituency, graduate students, before my own. As I come before you today, I hope to articulate those needs, which are amplified in the era of COVID-19. I will be articulating three points.

The first point that I wish to present is student's dissatisfaction with communication on behalf of the University. I approach this from the standpoint of my history as a communication studies scholar. Let me begin by saying, I appreciate my daily "Virginia Tech News" email and what I see come out of social media. I see student success stories and the most ground-breaking research to come from the intelligent minds of our Hokie community. It's truly inspiring. What I think students are missing is the feeling of a candid transmission of information that boasts humility - in other words, communication that acknowledges shortcomings and emphasizes reality, even when it is not pretty. This is especially important today. In times of crisis, people seek transparency and prompt communication from their leadership. Students report being notified of fee increases and jarring policy changes second-hand through social media like Twitter and Reddit before official University channels.

This has been a long-standing issue that frustrates students and perpetuates inefficiency. Perhaps what is needed is an assessment of current communication initiatives and how students perceive them? Perhaps a greater centralization of strategic communication? With media trends and expectations changing so rapidly, it is essential that we, as an institution, stay current and meet students where they are at to foster a community built on trust and respect. We are a massive enterprise with students across the state of Virginia and beyond who rely on effective strategic communication as they are navigating life choices and their education at large. An effective community is only as strong as its populace is informed.

The second point that I find important to shed light on is student concern over graduate student funding and means to perform their duties. With the fear of budget cuts at the forefront of everyone's mind, myself and my colleagues beg the question - "Will my funding or stipend be cut?" With Universities across the country returning to remote learning just weeks into the semester they are asking - "Will I have an assistantship or research to return to if we fall victim to the same course of action?" These are the questions being asked by the graduate students that are fortunate enough to have assistantships.

As decisions are being made and future budget cuts are considered I ask that you keep in mind how essential it is to not allow graduate students to bear this blow. By virtue of our positions,

many of us are dependent upon the university to sustain our opportunity at education and depend on our stipends to simply live. If I do not have an assistantship, I cannot continue my education at Virginia Tech. Consider the graduate student who resides at the Northern Virginia campus whose cost of living is nearly double what it costs to be a student in Blacksburg. Think of the graduate student supporting a family on a twenty thousand dollar per year stipend. Not to mention - graduate students have their stipends cut then the entire university research enterprise is going to come to a screeching halt.

Pragmatically, there has been a \$300/semester reduction in fees for students that live 50 miles away or have classes/research completely remote. All research credits are considered to be "in-person" even though advisors have allowed people not to come in. if this rule could be relaxed, more students could benefit from the fee reduction.

The final point that I hope to emphasize today is the current state of affairs for students living off-campus. It is no surprise that most graduate students reside off campus. A great deal of emphasis has been placed on creating a safe, well-prepared on-campus residency, but our off-campus students will bear the true brunt of the blow that COVID-19 will have. While on-campus students can expect enforced policy surrounding facial coverings, socially distanced programming, and requirement of testing upon arrival, our off-campus students do not have these luxuries or expectations. If we meet the same fate as UNC Chapel Hill and Notre Dame, off-campus residents will not have the opportunity to simply cancel their contract and move back "home".

I bring this up to frame the immense risk my constituency faces. This neglect in resources will heighten mental health concerns, risk student health, and place a financial burden on students who are already bridled with immense student debt. Policy and added reinforcement of guidelines will be necessary to keep this population safe, along with continued funding and programming to vital resources like Cook Counseling, Dean of Students, and Shiffert health. Regardless of remote or in-person learning, we must provide support to off-campus students in this trying time.

I want to conclude this report by stating once again, as my predecessors have before that we are not the same as undergraduate students. Our experience is differentiated and my predecessor articulated it best as, "Graduate students are more likely to be older, have spouses, dependents, and elder care responsibilities, and far more likely to not be in Blacksburg." Each of these are amplified by the threat of COVID-19 and as we are moving forward considering policy, funding, and safety, it would be heinous to neglect these facts.

Although my tone is critical, I am impressed with our response to opening and initiatives taken to ensure student safety at large. As I shared with a colleague recently, Virginia Tech is taking all the right action and as we move forward with hybrid in-person and remote learning. I am confident that the administration will continue doing everything in its power with the hope that we all have to retain a degree of normalcy through in-person experience.

I am eager to serve and learn in the coming year, representing the needs of the graduate student populace and to work collaboratively to find effective solutions to our trying dilemmas.

Staff Senate Constituency Report

Virginia Tech Board of Directors

August 24, 2020

Presented by Tamarah Smith, Staff Senate President

Good afternoon Rector Valeiras, Board of Visitors members, President Sands, Provost Clarke, Administrators and distinguished guests.

I am honored to be serving my second year as the staff representative to the Board of Visitors.

First, the staff at Virginia Tech want to recognize and thank President Sands and others for their leadership during this pandemic. We remain grateful for the enormous effort that has gone into preparing for the fall semester to help ensure the safety of students, faculty, staff, administrators, and the community.

While these efforts are great, there still remains a level of anxiety and nervousness especially for those working on campus. There are many positions that have been granted approval to work from home but there is still concern about what this year will bring. The question remains, what if things get worse; will I still have a job.

While we cannot control how other universities address outbreaks or the things that go into the media, the underlying anxiousness of what we read and see is taking its toll on mental and physical health. For example, students have been observed “partying” together and while it could be their pod, it appears to be more than that which could easily put everyone at risk. Thankfully, students are being held to the student conduct (https://studentconduct.vt.edu/fall_2020.html) and will have to face the penalty if they choose not to follow the rules.

It is not just students that need to take this seriously, it's everyone. Staff have asked me how situations will be managed if people working on campus do not comply with physical distancing. The same question arises with face mask wearing as both Faculty and Staff have been observed on campus without a mask. These issues also bring into play the question of will there be consistency across the campus. It's been shared from our administration that Human Resources is working on training for department heads and supervisors to ensure everyone knows how to interpret and enforce policies as these two groups will be responsible for ensuring we are in compliance. Hopefully, the training will address some of the questions.

Another area of concern is Parking changes. Jeri Baker addressed the Staff Senate this past Thursday in response to concerns that were shared.

Low salaries continue to be a concern, however, with the current state of our budget this is not a priority but still worthy of mentioning.

As the fall semester is starting, the same questions I shared in my last report are still applicable:

- What happens if the community has an outbreak and schools go back to being closed, what am I to do with my children when I need to work? There are no openings in daycare centers. Most daycares have waiting lists that are very long.
- I can't afford to take a pay cut, when are we going to hear about what the university is going to do if the economy does not pick up?

Transparency in our communication continues to be an area of high importance. Having the dashboard of Virginia Tech COVID19 testing results updated every Monday is appreciated (<https://ready.vt.edu/>) and a great step in being transparent, but daily would be better. It is a fact that with the COVID19 pandemic our university budget was hit very hard. And it's also a fact that our university carried positions for months to ease the burden on faculty, staff, and student workers, but it's also reality that if we have to have another hit to our budget like we did in the spring then we cannot proceed the same way. Staff want to see in writing what the plan of action will be for each instance than to have it come as a surprise or to sit and let minds wander to the very worst scenarios. We have been told administrators would take a cut first, but with the state of our economy, and if we have another outbreak, that will only go so far, we know that, we just want the plan laid out for all to see and prepare for.

I am a resource for this university advocating for staff, working beside our faculty, undergraduate and graduate student constituent leaders. I welcome encouragement and input on how we can work together to make our university stronger and work towards meeting the goals of our strategic plan.

Thank you for your time.

Pursuing the Modern Land-Grant Mission

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

Twelve years ago, my son was beginning a preschool program here in Blacksburg, and I was grateful to have support. Like so many Virginia Tech faculty, the closest member of my extended family lives hours away, which makes dependent care a critical factor in allowing me to fulfill my role as a faculty member. That same year, [Virginia Tech expanded an agreement with Rainbow Riders Childcare Center](#), allowing faculty, staff, and graduate students more access to local day care services. For [Dr. Linsey Marr](#), though, placing her son in the day care offered more than time to work; [the experience altered the trajectory of her research](#). Dr. Marr used her expertise as a civil and environmental engineer to study airborne transmission of viruses, first with the seasonal flu and more recently with the novel coronavirus. As one of our University Distinguished Professors, Dr. X.J. Meng, [shared with the New York Times](#): “There are not many people who are trained engineers who also study infectious disease.... She’s really the star in the field right now.”

You have likely seen Dr. Linsey Marr quoted and interviewed in a variety of media outlets. My own spouse highlighted the connection for me during the news one evening, when she saw Linsey on TV and said, “I think that’s one of our neighbors.” While we are proud to know such a [renowned scientist](#), it is important to understand the environment and support that allowed Dr. Marr to emerge as a trusted scientist when the entire world is looking for guidance. Her story includes [Virginia Tech policies](#) that allow for modified duties, but her story may be better characterized by Virginia Tech’s motto of *Ut Prosim* (that I may serve).

Earlier this month, I met with Dr. Marr on the deck outside her home. Her spouse, Erich Hester, is also a faculty member at Virginia Tech and successful in his own right; but that evening, he stayed inside with their children. I asked Linsey what has allowed her to be successful at Virginia Tech, and she highlighted several mentors and programs, including Virginia Tech’s internal funding for interdisciplinary projects—things like [ICTAS \(the Institute for Critical Technology and Applied Science\)](#), as well as [IGEPs \(Interdisciplinary Graduate Education Programs\)](#). She particularly emphasized the collaborative and collegial environment, within her own department, but also when working across departments. I asked Linsey what attracted her to Virginia Tech, and she noted how important it was that she was not going to be the only female faculty member in her department. If we want more faculty like Linsey Marr, we need to take care of the faculty we have and support them in ways that allow them to address the world’s most pressing challenges.

Personally, my admiration for Linsey Marr relates to her reflection of Virginia Tech’s land-grant mission. As a land-grant institution, Virginia Tech was founded with a tripartite mission, including learning, discovery, and engagement. On the learning front, Dr. Marr teaches courses on air pollution and environmental engineering. In 2019, [she earned the Excellence in Teaching Award](#) from Virginia Tech’s Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). Related to discovery, Dr. Marr leads the [Applied Interdisciplinary Research in Air \(AIR2\) laboratory](#). She is

especially interested in emerging or non-traditional aerosols such as engineered nanomaterials and viral aerosols. She collaborates broadly with others to understand how changes at the microscopic to global scale affect public and environmental health. On the engagement front, Linsey remains committed to [public communication](#) and combating misinformation. Part of the reason Marr has become so popular in public forums is her ability to explain difficult scientific concepts in easy-to-understand terms. The engagement mission is about more than just communicating research, though, it is about addressing meaningful problems. And that takes me back to Linsey's experience with the community day care. She noticed her son kept getting sick with minor illnesses that seemed to be spread through the air, and that practical problem guided her research. Considering Linsey's persistent commitment to learning, discovery, and engagement, I believe she represents the epitome of Virginia Tech's land-grant mission.

Within the Commonwealth of Virginia, there are many higher education institutions, yet Virginia Tech has a unique heritage as the "people's university," because of its founding as a land-grant institution. As we head into Virginia Tech's [sesquicentennial celebration](#), let's reclaim the tripartite land-grant mission of learning, discovery, and engagement. Yes, faculty share this responsibility, but it is critical that the faculty who are investing in interdisciplinary work and engaged scholarship are recognized and rewarded for their efforts. The needed support cannot be achieved at a department or program level; it must be a commitment at the university level. It is critical that the Board of Visitors embrace engaged scholarship as a core mission of the University and ask Virginia Tech administrators questions about how such work can be better supported.

I will close with a statement by a senior administrator, quoted in a recent book on [*Land-Grant Universities for the Future: Higher Education for the Public Good*](#):

Faculty will be most active where they see themselves as being rewarded. Out of all the things we have figured out in higher education and land-grant universities regarding faculty rewards, we probably have failed most miserably on engagement. I think we have figured out how to reward great teaching, and certainly we have figured out how to reward great research and scholarship. But when it comes to engagement, I don't think we do a very good job. And we can give a lot of lip service to it as a land-grant university, and we often do just that. But when it comes right down to it, to evaluating faculty and giving them rewards, I think engagement is undervalued. In fact, it is often just ignored. (p. 123)

I am asking for your help to ensure that engagement is not ignored at Virginia Tech. Thank you.