

Paolo Fermin

Undergraduate Representative to the Board of Visitors

August 2021

Undergraduate Constituent Report

Good afternoon members and constituents of the Board. It is a great honor to serve as the undergrad representative this year, and allow me to quickly introduce myself before we dive into things. I am a senior studying Computer Engineering, and I live in Alexandria, VA. I have served as an RA in the Honors Residential Commons at East AJ, a member on the Student Life Council, and also worked on various undergraduate research projects with the Hume Center and the FASER lab. I hope to provide the student perspective to you all throughout the year as best as I can. It is even more special to hold this position during this historic sesquicentennial year, and hopefully, I'll learn how to pronounce it by the end.

At this time last year, some students hadn't even fully unpacked their belongings in their residence halls, because they were expecting to be sent back home before the month was out. In stark contrast, the mood on campus this year is quite hopeful. One of the biggest reasons that students fall in love with Virginia Tech is the community, and I feel that it's back and stronger than ever. Once again students can randomly bump into a friend in the classroom or walking across the Drillfield, and often you haven't seen each other in over a year. New friends are being made simply by being around other students again, connections that could never have been made in an awkward Zoom breakout room that we've gotten too used to. Huge tour groups led by Hokie Ambassadors walking backward seem to have only gotten bigger, and even the iconic electric scooters that were a pre-pandemic hit have made a comeback. By far the biggest factor in students being comfortable with this return to normalcy is the university's strict COVID policies, requiring every student taking in-person classes to show proof of vaccination, or submit to regular COVID testing. I would like to be absolutely clear that students are largely in favor of these policies, as shown by the 94% vaccination rate recently publicized in the VTNews. These numbers are certainly something to be proud of, and I thank the Board and administration on behalf of students for taking a strong stance when it comes to vaccination.

Mask usage among students has also been high – most of the time, those seen inside not wearing a mask are quickly reprimanded by a faculty, not to mention the dirty looks they'll get

from their peers before then. However, as soon as you step outside, the mask policies become a free for all. The university itself has hosted events such as the Welcome Week concert and the Hokie Hi picnic, where thousands of students gather in proximity outdoors, with few masks in sight. This disparity between indoor and outdoor mask usage has led to some confusion amongst students, who have expressed this to me via conversations and social media. I recognize that this puts decision makers in a tough spot. On one hand, students are dying for a return to normalcy (not to mention the upcoming football games), and these big events have been great for introducing the freshman and sophomore classes to Hokie traditions that they have missed out on. On the other hand, the Delta variant is still a concern for many. The solution is not clear, and I hope that university leadership can work together with students to provide more communication and guidance on this issue.

It is truly a testament to Virginia Tech's reputation that we received a record-breaking number of applications for the incoming Class of 2025, with just under 7,000 new students accepting offers. Students are eager to be back on campus and fully immerse themselves in the Hokie experience. Yet a population of about 30,000 undergrads flocking back to Blacksburg has presented a challenge for some of our infrastructure. For off-campus students to return, they must navigate around a maze of construction sites, only to find that the very same construction has eaten up some of the available parking space. On-campus students must schedule around packed dining halls, with wait times upwards of an hour at peak times. As our numbers continue to grow, students would love to see continued investment in infrastructure that is front-facing to the daily student experience.

I would lastly like to mention the new Undergraduate Student Senate or USS. The USS transition team has worked tirelessly over the summer creating a constitution, bylaws, and an election code, all to build a new model for student governance. With the lessons learned from the former Student Government Association, the USS is designed systemically with accountability, diversity, and clarity in mind. I would like to thank the administration, especially the Student Affairs office, for their support has had an "incalculable impact" on this process – that's a direct quote from the transition team. Through this year, I will work together with the USS as it will provide an outstanding new avenue for undergraduates to make their voices heard.

Once again, I'd like to thank the Board and administration for navigating us through these past three difficult semesters, and now it is a fresh start. This palpable sense of energy and

optimism on campus presents a great opportunity for university leaders. I hope to work closely with students, administration, and the Board this year so that Virginia Tech can once again demonstrate what it means we say that "This is Home."

**Report from the Graduate Student Representative to the Board of Visitors
Phil Miskovic**

Delivered at the August 2021 Meeting

Good morning/afternoon Rector Long, Vice Rector Baine, members of the Board, President Sands, and other guests.

I want to begin by thanking you for entrusting me with this appointment. The honor of serving my fellow graduate and professional students during this year, at a convergence of two historic events for our University, is certainly not lost on me.

As we begin our sesquicentennial festivities, we also break ground on the Innovation Campus next month. This new facility further extends our already strong graduate student presence in the northern Virginia area, where, as you know, [we've had graduate education for over 50 years.](#)

The celebrations of our 150th anniversary coincide with laying the foundation for our next 150 years. The speeches basically write themselves.

But it's within that same theme of the past meeting the future that I frame my remarks for you today.

In preparing for my new role, I looked back at some of the initiatives undertaken by my predecessors.

One of Tara Reel's focuses was on the physical space, ensuring graduate and professional students had adequate facilities. Zo Amani emphasized the differences between undergraduate and graduate students. Ryan King advocated for services at our extended campuses. Sabrina Sturgeon sought increased diversity and inclusion, as well as open communication.

Virginia Tech has made great strides in addressing some of these issues, but there's always more work that can be done. Issues that have been the focus of past discussions continue to perpetuate. For example, this summer, Graduate and Professional Student Senate President Jack Leff, Amanda Burroughs, and other graduate students organized 14 listening sessions across the 9 colleges. Students were given an opportunity to voice their concerns about any issues they had, though several themes formed:

- There's an unhappiness with compensation for graduate assistants, and a particular concern for international students for can't seek outside employment over the summer

- Related is an increasing cost of living, especially in the Blacksburg and northern Virginia areas
- Parking issues were the most frequent response and where many students focused their frustration
- There's also a concern about fees—not necessarily that they're too high (though they could always be lower), but rather concern surrounding communication around fees: how they're determined, how they're used, and so on. Students would also like to engage in conversations regarding late fees and penalties, perhaps allowing for grace periods or more forgiving processes for waiving late fees administratively.

I look forward to working with the administration, the GPSS, and my fellow graduate and professional students on continuing this foundational work started long before me.

Simultaneously, my goal is to set up a structure for readily identifying graduate and professional student concerns and a process for prioritizing the most pressing needs.

The inspiration for this concept comes from the last board meeting. Allow me to get a bit theoretical for a moment. Board members will recall Dr. Sui's presentation on the four frontier areas of future research. One such area was Whole Health—changing the paradigm from a focus on disease and symptoms to one of whole health, integrating intersections of animal, environment, and human health and building in communities and systems to empower multifaceted well-being.

What that basically means is all aspects of society are linked—natural and built environment, systems and policies, and so on. All contribute to a societal homeostasis.

If we take this macro concept and apply it to the individual level, we can better understand the need to focus on the “whole health” of the graduate and professional student. Academic, mental, physical, financial, social, and spiritual health all work together to contribute to the individual student's homeostasis.

From there we can take those broad categories and form a grid with grad student's most pressing needs, not unlike the Enterprise Risk Management prioritization from last meeting. I envision a sort-of living dashboard updated with various data as it becomes available. Data would come from sources as formal as the [Report of the Graduate Education Task Force](#) from last year; the [Mental Health Task Force Report](#) from 2019; and the [Food Access and Security Study](#); or sources as informal as surveys or less-formal studies by the GPSS. All of these would combine to form a single, common understanding of the graduate experience.

My overall objective is to create a sustainable system where we all work collaboratively to continue to build upon past work, always moving further and further into the future.

In closing, I would be remiss if I did not mention and personally thank Dean Karen DePauw for her many years of dedicated service to the graduate school, and to graduate students especially. Dean DePauw's commitment to the health and well-being of graduate students has been extraordinary. We'll miss seeing her, and I personally would like to wish her a happy retirement, and I look forward to getting to know and working with the new Dean of the Graduate School, Aimee Surprenant.

Thank you.

Attachments:

Executive Summary of the Report of the Graduate Education Task Force

Phil Miskovic Background/Bio

Report of the Graduate Education Task Force (GETF)

Executive Summary

Virginia Tech is a strong university with excellent opportunities for graduate education, and is among the leaders in land grant universities in the United States, with our crucial missions of teaching, scholarship, and outreach to our communities. Our trajectory has been upward, with our global university ranking recently rising substantially to the 201-250 band (from 251-300). Looking to the future, VT leadership has publicly announced strong ambitions, including our aspiration to be among the top 100 global universities. This ambition is not without relevant precedent; as noted elsewhere in the report, land grant universities from states with comparable populations and gross domestic products, like Purdue (88), Penn State (78), and Michigan State (84), are already among the top 100 global universities. There is, however, much work to be done for VT to perform in the area of graduate education at the levels of the land grant universities ahead of us in world rankings, and we have significant opportunity to improve upon the real, important, existing strengths in the quality of VT graduate education.

VT lags its aspirational peers (throughout the report, we refer to the fourteen land grant universities that are ranked higher than VT in the global rankings, as well as nearby North Carolina St. U., as our “aspirational peers” in key performance criteria for graduate education). We have one of the smallest overall enrollments of the group, and we have **full time graduate student enrollment that is only 55% of the average of those aspirational peers** (trailing that average by fully 4000 full time graduate students). Graduate enrollment per tenured and tenure track faculty member (TTF) lags the average of our aspirational peers by approximately 1.4 graduate students (3.2 per TTF for VT vs. 4.6 peer average). Effective mentoring of graduate students of course requires faculty mentors; yet, particularly in the science departments (defined broadly across several colleges), VT tends to trail most of our aspirational peers in both TTF faculty members and TTF faculty members normalized by total enrollment. External funding, so crucial to graduate education and research, and a very significant limiter on graduate enrollment, was fully 47% lower than the average of our aspirational peers (VT \$297M, peer average \$564M) in 2017. Since historically a significant proportion of VT external funding has come to the VT Transportation Institute, the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute, and the Biocomplexity Institute (the first two do not tend to fund many graduate students, and the research of the former Biocomplexity Institute has a decreased footprint), VT external funding for graduate education and research could actually be less than suggested by the 2017 numbers. Graduate enrollments at VT have declined in recent years, while graduate enrollments at our aspirational peer institutions have increased. It is equally worrying that both VT graduate applications and yield have declined, while those at our aspirational peers have increased. Some of the enrollment issues can be assigned to specific causes, and the vast majority of the decline has been in master’s programs. Declines in master’s of education program enrollments have continued over a long time span, believed to have been driven mostly by changes in teacher certification requirements. Declines in business master’s degrees may have resulted from discontinuation of the full time MBA program in Blacksburg. Yet at VT the level of PhD program enrollment has been stagnant as well, and some programs have experienced declines.

The GETF constructed hypotheses to explain these data, and considered approaches to improving enrollment in graduate education. Funding is essential to successful graduate programs. We noted that many other aspirational peers have far more robust programs to assist incoming and enrolled graduate students in crafting student-initiated funding proposals. In fact, in some respects the environment at VT not only fails to support such energetic students, but is punitive. Students who get a fellowship proposal funded, for example by the National Science Foundation, may receive a stipend that is lower than the VT average stipend for their program, and/or they may not receive funding for health insurance. We propose a mechanism herein that **encourages and supports student-initiated funding proposals, and ensures that students who succeed will be advantaged, not disadvantaged**. Currently, there are relatively few endowed graduate fellowships at VT. We contend that the level of bequest or giving to endow a graduate fellowship eternally is within the financial means of far more alumni and other potential VT supporters than, e.g., funding a building. We believe that graduate fellowship endowment targets should be set and potential donors approached such that we **substantially grow the number of endowed graduate fellowships at VT**. Many of our aspirational peers

provide a version of candidacy status for graduate students who have passed their preliminary exams, are now PhD candidates, and who are focusing on research. The funding that will be freed up by candidacy status will ease the financial burden on students, and make external funding go further in supporting VT graduate research. **We propose herein a mechanism by which the resolution to create candidacy status at VT, passed by University Council, can be implemented in such a way as to provide these benefits and yet be less costly to the university.**

In order to enhance the success rate of VT faculty in obtaining external funding, we surveyed faculty and office of sponsored programs (OSP) personnel at our aspirational peer universities to get a picture of how they are supported in creating research proposals. The survey reveals that VT faculty get a comparable amount of support to that available at our aspirational peers, but that there are **best practices for support in crafting proposals that the GETF hopes will be adopted at VT**. These include more assistance in preparing forms for which the data can be extracted directly from OSP databases, further experimentation on placing some OSP personnel out in the colleges where they can interact more with proposal writers, and consideration of the possibility that OSP personnel in the colleges develop specific expertise and strong contacts with a funding agency of special pertinence to that college, acting as a conduit so that VT can extend its knowledge of upcoming opportunities, and even influence the nature of upcoming opportunities.

To directly address the issue of recruiting success, the GETF recognizes the energy, expertise, and creativity of departments, and their essential role in the graduate recruiting process. We also recognize the value of a coordinating body; one which can create dashboards, university communications that are customizable to departments to keep up frequent contact with recruiting targets, help with constructing strategies tailored to characteristics of groups of similar departments, and bring together program and department recruiting experts to share and promulgate best practices. **We recommend a hybrid model, which has also been called a “central coordination, local deployment” model, to improve VT graduate recruiting.** The Graduate School can play a strong role in this new model, and can also play a much stronger role in periodic program evaluation. A capable and neutral entity like the Graduate School can substantially improve graduate program assessment and review, promoting a culture of learning from one another, and constant improvement. We also note that the graduate student stipends that many of our programs offer fall well below those of our aspirational peers and that this likely has a negative impact on our ability to recruit top students.

With regard to the quality of VT graduate education, our students tell us that they greatly appreciate the outstanding sense of community that is fostered here for graduate students; overall, they have many positive things to say about the quality of the VT graduate education experience. At the same time, there are areas for improvement as well. Quality and cost of housing for graduate students is a continuing issue; there may be opportunities for VT to work more closely with apartment owners and community leaders to raise expectations and improve availability. Mentorship is a crucial aspect of the interactions between faculty, particularly chairs of graduate committees, and graduate students. Most new faculty members have had no formal training in running a research group, supervising students, dealing with problems that arise, managing a research budget, and other aspects of successful mentorship. **We propose herein that new VT TTF faculty members should all participate in mentorship training, using effective and proven methodology.** There are many other aspects of professional training that are highly beneficial to graduate students, preparing them to move on to virtually any imaginable career; effective oral and written communication, team leadership and working effectively on teams, basic statistics, and a number of other professional skills. **The GETF recommends organization of VT professional training opportunities in a Graduate Certificate to increase awareness and ultimately achievement for our graduate students.** Effective mentorship training for young faculty and professional development of our graduate students will thrust VT into a leadership position among land grant universities in these respects, and will make VT students exceptionally well-prepared for their professional careers.

We give here abbreviated versions of the key GETF recommendations; all recommendations are elaborated within the appropriate, subsequent report section. We Recommend that VT:

1. Provide to graduate students resources to support enhanced numbers of student-initiated research proposals.
2. Make a focused effort to solicit donations for endowed graduate fellowships.
3. Increase the number and scope of self-funded graduate programs.
4. Implement a modified version of the Candidacy Status resolution passed by the University Council in spring 2019.
5. Expand mentorship training to include all new assistant professors.
6. Implement 360° feedback for tenure-track faculty (TTF).
7. Implement a Professional Development Graduate Certificate.
8. Increase the minimum assistantship stipend rate to match the minimum rates of Virginia Tech's aspirational peers..
9. Annually compare graduate stipend rates to our peers, and create incentives for colleges to maintain competitive rates.
10. Develop standard phrasing to properly convey intentions to employ graduate students for multiple years.
11. Enhance Office of Sponsored Programs support to faculty preparing research funding proposals.
12. Co-locate OSP staff in colleges and enhance agency-specific expertise and relationships.
13. Adopt a hybrid model where the Graduate School assists departments and programs to improve graduate recruiting.
14. Enhance the role of the Graduate School in graduate program review and evaluation for continuous improvement.

Phil Miskovic Background



Phil Miskovic is a PhD student in the Center for Administration and Policy (CPAP), focusing his research on local government. He is also completing a Master of Public Health (MPH) with concentrations in both Public Health Education and Infectious Disease.

Phil splits his time between Blacksburg and Crewe—a town of about 2,300 population in rural Nottoway County, about three hour's drive from the main campus—where he serves as that town's mayor. He says his motivation comes from a desire “to bridge the gap between theory and practice, especially in economically disadvantaged areas rich with strong communities and culture, but lacking in financial resources or the subject matter expertise of the modern public administrator.” His elected service began in 2012 with his first of four 2-year terms as a member of Crewe Town Council before being voted into his current role in the 2020 municipal election.

Phil has a Master's degree in Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness from Virginia Commonwealth University and a BA in Religion from Hampden-Sydney College. He also serves as a graduate assistant in public relations for the College of Architecture and Urban Studies and as the emergency planner for Virginia's Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS). Prior to his employment with DBHDS, Phil was a policy analyst for Virginia's Secretary of Public Safety in the administration of then-Governor Bob McDonnell.

Phil also serves on the Board of Directors of the Virginia Municipal League. In 2019 he was the first recipient of the Emerging Leader Award by the Sorensen Institute for Political Leadership. In his free time, Phil enjoys cooking, traveling, and home renovations. His Crewe home is a century-old historic Catholic Church he purchased and painstakingly repurposed for its current use.

Staff Senate Constituency Report
Virginia Tech Board of Visitors
August 30 31, 2021 Presented by Serena Young, Staff Senate President

Rector Long, members of the Board of Visitors, President Sands, administrators, and guests: Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you about Virginia Tech's staff.

I would like to take a moment to thank President Sands and Administrators for your transparency and leadership during this last year and a half and for continuing that leadership into what will become our new normal. We appreciate your ongoing communication and your attentiveness to staff. Thank you!

I am honored and proud to represent the Staff today and I want to take a moment to brag on our phenomenal staff here at Tech. I am always astounded and proud to see the strength and resilience that our staff show time and time again. Whether it be in the day-to-day things or things that pop up and surprise us like a Pandemic. Our staff always come through better and stronger. They are truly the backbone of this University and without them the University couldn't function.

This summer our Senate has been busy. Our constitution and by-laws are currently under review because we are trying to align them with the new and improved governance restructure which is also on-going. We are excited to see the changes happening in shared governance which appears to give all senates a collective voice in areas that impact our specific constituent groups. Hopefully the changes will be making their way through the governance system this year. I am also happy to announce we have added an ad-hoc committee for Staff Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Up to this point all most all of the DE&I efforts have been faculty and management focused so, we are looking forward to having DE&I professional development and involvement opportunities available to staff in the coming year. Our staff are really excited for the new "Future of Work" Program that HR's Bryan Garey and his team have created. This is going to be the main focus of my report.

The "Future of Work" Program is a program which allows and encourages flexible work options whether it be flexible work hours, hybrid work options, or fully remote work. I would like to take a second to personally thank Bryan and his team. It's because of their hard work that the door is now opening for more flexible work options for employees moving forward. So many people have now experienced the benefits of flexible work, such as time and money saved since they no longer have to commute/or commute as much. Morale and productivity have also increased in most cases and the overwhelming issue of caregiving responsibilities and safety concerns have been made easier because of this flexibility as well. The university is also seeing the benefits of flexible work, it can now expand the size and breadth of Virginia Tech's candidate pools for jobs by reducing historic barriers, including geographically remote and rural locations. Flexible work options also make Virginia Tech more

competitive in the job market while increasing retention efforts. There is also space savings as well, as we all know, space here at Virginia Tech is a hot commodity. These are just a few of the benefits of flexible work options here at Tech. We understand that some jobs have to remain in-person but normalizing flexible work could help initiate long-term change. I believe this is the way of the future and part of our new normal.

Just like with any new program or change there come challenges. While HR is a large supporter and advocate for this program, the decision to allow staff to have flexible work options have been delegated to each Department and its Leadership. A large number of staff are reporting inequitable use of the new flexible work program. While some departments/leadership are open to having conversations about flexible work options and are willing to allow their staff to continue or start new flexible work schedules, other departments/leadership have a different philosophy. It's what I like to refer to as the "old school philosophy" where the thought is people have to fill the seats in the office to get the work done and done well. Not to mention some of the leaders are unwilling to even have conversations about flexible work options because they feel their marching orders have been given to have everyone back in-person. It sounds clear that the problem isn't the old school mindset necessarily but, one of poor communication and accountability. If the communication throughout leadership, departments, and supervisors were the same, in supporting flexible work options when feasible and then have leadership holding all departments and supervisors accountable for providing such flexibility, this would ensure much less inequalities within the Future of Work program. Staff have proven for the past year and a half that they can do this just as well from home and other states as they ever could do it from an office. It is important for staff to have this support and what is needed is a trickle-down effect to accomplish lasting change for the future of work. Virginia Tech stands to have a tremendous loss of many valuable staff if the inflexibility and lack of support aren't address quickly. I don't think anyone wants to see that happen. Together we can create a better work force and stronger Hokie Nation well into the future.

On behalf of Staff Senate, I would like to thank you for listening today and thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts. I look forward to sharing our ongoing progress and collaborating with you all to make this year the best one yet!

Sincerely,
Serena D. Young

Early Faculty Engagement in Transformative Initiatives to Enhance Research, Teaching, and Engagement

A student asks a provocative question after a lecture that results in a continued discussion over a semester that leads to a fulfilling research experience that flowers into a career the student would never have considered without this series of events. I have now been at Virginia Tech long enough to see this progression take place several times, and I consider sparking a student's interest to the extent that their prospects fundamentally change and improve as among the proudest moments of my professional life. I know there are many faculty members who could tell similar stories because student interactions with faculty members at Virginia Tech are often life-altering experiences. Faculty members serve the university community in other ways as well. Almost all research grants that come to Virginia Tech are awarded to faculty members. The knowledge discovered and the research products generated by these grants make the world a better place. The community engagement efforts of faculty members extend and apply that knowledge and creativity throughout Virginia, the country, and the world. All told, the teaching, research, and engagement of faculty will propel us in our ambition to be recognized as one of the leading 21st-century global land-grant universities.

Yet every part of our community can make reasonable claims for their importance. Take away the students and why are we here? Without staff, what could we achieve? Without the various levels of administration, the operation would grind to a halt. The ongoing revision to shared governance at Virginia Tech asks us to recognize this interdependence and to make the most of it by bringing representatives of the different groups together in the right numbers at the right times.

One of the more exciting aspects of this revision is the realization that large changes or additions to our missions will be more fully implemented if the groups that will be impacted by those changes, that will be asked to carry them out, have a significant role in their development. The process we are creating, called the university mission initiative process, would bring representatives of senates and the administration together in small numbers to create proposals that address additions to or new ways of meeting our mission goals. Experiential Learning is the first initiative we are trying to develop through this process.

What appeals to me about this process is how it seeks to capitalize on our collective knowledge and leverage the benefits of genuine representative involvement to increase collective adoption of new policies or procedures. In any large organization, bringing the right talent to a piece of work can be hard to do, and convincing large groups to accept new ideas can be ever harder. While the university mission initiative process cannot solve these problems, it will help us minimize their negative impacts and should lead to better, more broadly trusted results.

More exciting to me, though, is the potential for this process to create moments and synergies very similar to the student experience I presented earlier. Since part of the UMI process is to give these small groups a clear charge and high degree of autonomy in the development of their proposals, members will be in a position to spark new ideas and see where they take them, initially free of the necessarily political process of gaining support for their ideas. Finding a way to free our creative and entrepreneurial energies is essential, as is making sure that ideas are genuinely supported to a degree that allows us to apply them in fact and not just

in word. The UMI process seeks to balance these phases of change and give them appropriate and necessary breathing space from each other, while also recognizing that both are essential.

If I have a request of you, it is that you continue to support the shared governance revision and the UMI process in particular. The hardest aspect of the kind of change that the president, provost, faculty, staff, a/p faculty, and students are trying to initiate is often cultural, and the tone you set at the top resounds. In particular, I ask that you consider the benefits of involving faculty early in the development phase of any substantial revision that impacts teaching, research, or engagement at Virginia Tech.