

President's Open Session Report – Aug 25, 2020 BOV Meeting

Fiscal Year 20 was a record year for philanthropy, research expenditures, research awards, and enrollment, despite a disrupted fourth quarter. We had incredible momentum coming into the pandemic, and our goal is to maintain this momentum so that we emerge a stronger institution as the health and economic crises subside.

In that spirit, the Virginia Tech BOV held a retreat this past Sunday on the topic of the *Next Normal*. As some of you recall, our generational Beyond Boundaries vision was constructed between 2015 and 2017 with an explicit understanding that the landscape of higher education is shifting, and our vision must recognize this reality. Our recently approved Strategic Plan, *The Virginia Tech Difference – Advancing Beyond Boundaries*, is built on that principle as well, and has taken the form of a continuous planning operation. The pandemic is, hopefully, the ultimate example of disruption. Disruption brings both challenges and opportunities. Our BOV spent the afternoon asking the questions: What has changed in our planning assumptions as a result of the pandemic and the racial reckoning of the spring and summer? What initiatives should be prioritized? How will we resource those strategic initiatives to ensure that we are successful?

My summary of the conversation can be outlined in four “What ifs..”

- What if ... a student, staff or faculty member could be anywhere in the world engaging in a learning or discovery community, and still be fully engaged with Virginia Tech?
- What if ... Virginia Tech were known as the premier institution in the world at convening diverse talent within and outside the academy to take on the world's biggest challenges from a holistic, human-centered perspective?
- What if ... Virginia Tech engaged learners from birth to the end of life – that the traditional residential student experience was just one phase in a student's lifetime Virginia Tech journey?
- What if ... Wealth, income and zip code were not predictive factors in student access and success at Virginia Tech?

The BOV and the administration recognize that achieving our goals will only be possible if we focus resources and make bold, smart and difficult decisions, questioning the status quo as we recognize that the world has changed permanently. This is the hard part. We came away from the retreat optimistic that we can make the bold and timely decisions necessary to move our institution forward.

While preparing for the future is our duty, influencing it – or if you prefer, inventing it - is what we do every day. Especially this week. We have welcomed some 36,000 students to our campuses to start a fall semester like no other. Our role as an institution is to provide the resources and environment that will allow these individuals to develop their skills and harness their passions to design and create a better world. The pandemic, climate change, and racial injustice give our students direction and a sense of urgency, and we need to do our best to allow that developmental process to continue, even during a pandemic.

Despite the fragility of the situation we are in globally, I remain hopeful. That sense of hope and a good deal of pride was reinforced on Saturday when I witnessed the New Cadet Pass in Review on the Drillfield. That experience brought a sense of normalcy to the campus in a chaotic time. To see hundreds of new cadets, masked and distanced, adapt successfully to the challenges that face us, was incremental and symbolic proof that we can do this.

I continued to be buoyed by the incredible work at the Molecular Diagnostics Lab in the FBRI@VTC in Roanoke. Without our own testing capacity, we would be at the mercy of supply chains that we can't control. Combined with the partnership with the New River Health District, our own Incident Management Team, and the widespread adoption of public health practices by our community and our students, I am optimistic that we will weather the inevitable outbreaks during our opening weeks. As you have heard, we tested every student arriving to live on our Blacksburg campus – nearly 8,600 in total – and 0.2% tested positive. That level of prevalence tells me that our students did heed our request for two-weeks of self-quarantine. We are testing students and employees who are in high-contact roles, who are symptomatic, and who have been identified through contact tracing by the New River Health District as having contact with someone who has tested positive. We are also planning to scale up surveillance to ensure that we

catch any outbreaks early. We are not over the hump. A successful fall will require continued vigilance by all in our extended community. Please support each other, as everyone is under considerable physical, emotional and mental stress.

Finally, I'd like to thank the Commemorative Tributes Committee and the Council on Virginia Tech History for the efforts that culminated in the Executive Committee of the BOV, and now the full BOV, in approving the renaming of the residence halls that are now known as Hoge and Whitehurst Halls, and doing so *before* fall move-in. The urgency for taking action, even those that are largely symbolic, increases every day. Just this past week, there has been another shooting of an unarmed Black man, Jacob Blake, in Wisconsin, and I just read today about a Black professor who was asked to verify her identity in her home in faculty housing.

Several years ago, Athletics introduced the slogan "This is Home." This slogan resonates with Hokie Nation and with many of our current students, but given the words and images attributed to the former namesakes of these residence halls, it would have been hard to justify asking any student, and especially a student of color, to make one of these halls their home for another academic year.

Thank you for taking Virginia Tech one step closer to home!

Go Hokies!