

Board of Visitors Constituency Report  
Leslie Orellana, Undergraduate Representative  
June 2 and 3, 2025

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Good morning, Rector Baine, members of the board, President Sands, administration, and guests. I am excited to be with you all today as I deliver my last constituent report of my term.

This year has truly been a transformative experience. This position has allowed me to expand my knowledge of governance structures, university complexities, and meet incredible people who have a true passion for Virginia Tech and the advancement of this institution.

Some of the highlights of this year were working with facilities, the police department, and the Undergraduate Student Senate to work on installing a blinking pedestrian crosswalk sign. This new signage will not only serve for the enhancement of campus safety, but also showed students in Undergraduate Student Senate that they can have an impact on campus, sparked by a single idea. I was also able to work with Career and Professional Development Services to create student and employer surveys to understand the landscape of career fairs as we strive to equip all students not only with the knowledge to complete their degree but the tools for them to succeed with experiential learning and opportunities after graduation. I was even able to serve on the search committee for the new Vice Provost for Undergraduate Academic Affairs and on the Local Visioning Initiative Steering Committee. All these things remind me of a lasting impact students can have on Virginia Tech, the surrounding community, and our fellow students.

Last month, I was also able to celebrate the completion of my degrees at graduation. While the weekend was filled with joy, celebration, and lots of goodbyes to the people and places that made Virginia Tech home. I also think back to the person that first arrived at Virginia Tech 5 years ago. She was a shy and timid freshman, scared of everything. I also think back to the memories of my high school teacher who told me I would never get into Virginia Tech because I was horrible at math, or how I was so bad at public speaking – my class would skip me when it was time to read out loud or present the class. But I thank Virginia Tech endlessly. Because here, I was able to have the opportunity and encouragement to join clubs, stay engaged in class, and slowly start to push myself out there. I joined Hokie Ambassadors and became a tour guide – where I was able to practice my public speaking skills, show prospective students around the school I love so much, and find my community here. I pushed myself to add a dual degree in building construction – where I was able to challenge myself taking physics, linear algebra, and testing

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the strength of a home-made pasta bridges as we successfully calculate the load capacities of over 80 pounds. But most importantly, Virginia Tech taught me to be a leader, to lead with compassion, and always live out Ut Prosim. This was more than a degree – this education changed my life and me.

I think back to the story I shared during my first constituent report, when a prospective student asked me after a tour “Is Virginia Tech worth it?” and I would say a million times again... yes. Coming as a first-generation student, I was the second person on both my mother and father’s side to earn a degree - first being my sister. I had to withstand hardships and navigate the difficult world with the support and love from my parents who first-generation Americans who immigrated here in early twenties working blue-collared jobs while forever teaching me perseverance and strength. And with the support of them, my siblings, and the amazing community of professors, faculty, staff, and students – I am lucky to call this place home. Whenever I ask myself “Is it worth it” I think back to how much I changed at Virginia Tech and how I am about to start a career in something I didn’t even know existed 5 years ago... and I say absolutely yes. The opportunity to receive an education from Virginia Tech has truly been a privilege. And I hope that all students can have the opportunity to choose to be Hokies, to flourish, push the boundaries, and that obtaining this life-changing education that can be accessible for all.

I hope that we continue to strive to make Virginia Tech home, as we work to ease burdens on students. This included fighting food insecurity for our undergraduates, graduates, staff, faculty, and surrounding community. As well as supporting students seeking affordable housing options off and on-campus. Multiple students are also tasked with making difficult decisions if the loans are worth the degree or if it’s worth working semester jobs, while missing out on clubs, study groups, and experiences due to financial restraints. But I believe in Virginia Tech and believe we can make this a place where students truly flourish as we support them to navigate and ease the hardships they may face.

Many students have also felt isolated and that their communities are suddenly changing this past year. They feel insecure about who to reach out for to help and how to communicate these

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feelings of fear, worry, and disappointment. I hope that we all strive to uphold principles of community, the land grant mission, and our school-motto to always foster a collaborative environment so that the Virginia Tech community can serve as a positive force for change around the commonwealth, country, and world.

Thank you once again for the opportunity of a lifetime and to be able to share my passion of Virginia Tech with you all. This has been truly such an incredible honor to see such advocates of Virginia Tech as we strive for continuous growth. Thank you to Rector Baine, members of the board, all the administrators, and my support system who have taught me so much this year. I am sure my successor, Thomas Feely, will carry on a similar passion as he brings an abundance of experience to aid him in this position. While I am ending my time as a proud Virginia Tech student, I am leaving as an even prouder alum who is already planning their next trip back. Thank you and go Hokies.

## **Graduate & Professional Student Constituency Report**

### **Virginia Tech Board of Visitors**

**June 2 – 3, 2025**

#### **Presented by William Poland, Graduate & Professional Student Representative**

Rector Baine, members of the Board of Visitors, President Sands, Provost Clarke, EVP Sebring, administrators, and guests. Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you all about the graduate and professional students today.

It is bittersweet that this is the last constituency report I will give to the board. It hasn't always been easy, but I have greatly enjoyed my term serving as graduate and professional student representative, and I know I have learned much and grown as a result. With my last report I want to focus on a couple relevant issues that continue to impact our graduate and professional students.

The landscape of higher education continues to be dynamic with further changes from the federal administration. Cuts and revocation of federal research funding continue to impact our graduate students. Reductions in grants and assistantship funding will certainly have an impacted on the number of new graduate students who come to Virginia Tech in the fall.

In addition to continued struggles with research funding, the suspension of visa interviews for international students is the most recent development that will undoubtedly impact our student population. As international students make up about 40% of the graduate student population at Virginia Tech, they provide integral resources to the university's teaching and research enterprises.

While the board does not have control over federal policies, I believe it is still important to be aware of these issues and do everything we can to support our students and provide whatever help we can to alleviate the pressures they are facing. Our university has proven to be resourceful and resilient in reallocating funding to support faculty and students, and this is something we should continue to enable. Similarly, we must continue to support our international students and explore any available options so that we do not lose the international segment of our graduate student population.

Next, I would like to shift attention to the topic of student housing. With the continued discussion around student housing, I feel it is my duty to explain how this affects our graduate student population. Reducing the amount of housing on campus or maintaining the same amount of housing on campus while increasing enrollment will result in an increased number of students who are forced to live off-campus. While enrollment and on-campus housing discussions revolve around the undergraduate student population, this does not mean that graduate and professional students are unaffected. More students looking for off-campus housing creates a tighter housing market, which is often disadvantaged to graduate students. Many off-campus housing options, especially newer developments, are tailored to undergraduate students and those seeking more expensive luxury style apartments. Graduate students, for a number of reasons, often face more financial challenges than undergraduate students, and an oversaturated housing market only exacerbates the financial instability that

many graduate students face. We are already living in a time of general economic pressure and students have already expressed concerns over rent prices rising faster. In this time, we must work to alleviate economic burdens rather than increasing them. This means providing students with as many housing options as possible, both on and off campus.

Furthermore, the current discussions around on-campus housing and enrollment growth have the local community, including the Town of Blacksburg, nervous. While there have always been differing perspectives on this issue, it feels like tensions are becoming increasingly high. Participating on the steering committee with the Partnership for Progress initiative between Virginia Tech and the local region has reinforced to me the importance of regional cooperation and collaboration towards shared objectives. While growth and expansion may have benefits, it is necessary to be strategic in this growth so that it does not come at the cost of our partnership with the local region, and also so that growth does not degrade the quality of the Virginia Tech experience which has shaped so many students' lives. I truly believe that this is a time where collaboration is more important than ever, and that our university can achieve the greatest success by strengthening our relationship with the town and local region and leaning into collaborative endeavors to attract talent, create economic opportunity, and demonstrate the value of the university to people in the Commonwealth.

Finally, as my term as a student representative comes to an end, I would like to acknowledge Katie Drinkwater, who will be succeeding me in the role of graduate and professional student representative to the Board. Katie completed her undergraduate degree at Duke university and choose Virginia Tech for graduate school, where she is now a PhD candidate in the engineering education program. From my interactions with Katie, I am confident in her ability to step into the student representative role for next year. Katie is smart, determined, and not just passionate about current issues impacting graduate and professional students, but also conscientious of strategic priorities and long-term impacts to the university. I have no doubt that she will be successful in the role, and I feel reassured that the job is being passed on into capable hands.

With that, I thank the board one last time for granting me this opportunity to serve the university. Thank you and go Hokies!

**Staff Senate Constituency Report**  
**Virginia Tech Board of Visitors**  
**June 3rd, 2025, Presented by LaTawnya Burleson, Staff Senate President**

**Rector Baine, members of the Board of Visitors, President Sands, Provost Clarke, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Amy Sebring, administrators, and honored guests**—thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. This marks my final report on behalf of staff and non-student wage employees at Virginia Tech, and I'm grateful for the chance to share a few reflections.

My time as board representative has been rewarding, challenging, and—above all—deeply meaningful. It has been an immense honor to serve in this role, to be a voice for staff and non-student wage employees, and to advocate for the needs and contributions of our dedicated colleagues across the university.

Please allow me to recognize a few individuals by name who have been especially impactful during my term.

**Rector Baine**, I am so grateful to have served under your leadership. Your steady guidance, thoughtful insight, and unwavering support have meant so much—not just to me personally, but to our entire community. You led with strength and humility, and under your leadership, staff concerns were truly heard and respected. Thank you for your partnership and for setting a tone of collaboration and respect that made my role both fulfilling and impactful.

**President Sands**, thank you for your leadership and your consistent attention to staff issues throughout my time as Staff Senate President. Your recognition of the essential role staff play in the success of the university has meant a great deal. I've appreciated your openness to dialogue, your willingness to engage with our concerns, and your commitment to fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for all members of the university community. Your leadership has laid the foundation for meaningful progress, and I am grateful for the opportunities we've had to elevate staff perspectives at the highest levels. Thank you for ensuring that staff voices remain a valued part of the university's vision and future.

**Amy Sebring**, your leadership as Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer has been nothing short of inspiring. Your accessibility, transparency, and genuine respect for staff have set a powerful example. I have deeply appreciated your willingness to listen, to engage in difficult conversations, and to act with integrity and compassion.

There are many others in this room today who deserve my heartfelt thanks. Each of you has made my time in this role deeply meaningful and made me feel truly heard. While I don't have time to name everyone individually, please know how grateful I am for the kindness, engagement, and care you have shown me.

During my term, several key initiatives came to the forefront, and I would like to highlight their success.

One was the **resolution affirming employee participation in university governance and professional development**. While this resolution applies to all full-time Virginia Tech employees, it was created by the Staff Senate. It represents a significant step in recognizing that staff are not only foundational to university operations but also vital contributors to its strategic direction and culture. By formally supporting staff involvement in governance and encouraging professional growth, the university has demonstrated a long-term investment in its people. This resolution reflects the belief that staff should have a seat at the table—not just in words, but in practice—and I'm hopeful it will continue to foster a more empowered, engaged, and supported staff community.

A more practical, yet no less impactful, achievement was the **implementation of year-round payroll deduction for parking**. While it may seem like a small administrative change, it reflects a deeper commitment to easing financial and logistical burdens for staff. This change offers greater flexibility and predictability in managing expenses and supports a more employee-friendly approach to university operations. It's a clear example of how listening to staff concerns—no matter how routine they may seem—can lead to meaningful, everyday improvements in our work lives.

One of the most significant efforts during my time as Staff Senate President has been the work of the **Staff Compensation Task Force**. This task force was created in response to long-standing concerns about pay equity, transparency, and the need for a more strategic approach to staff compensation. While we are only halfway through our term, I'm proud to be part of this initiative, which brings together voices from across the university to assess where we are and where we need to go. The conversations are honest, sometimes difficult, but always rooted in the shared goal of building a fairer and more sustainable compensation framework for staff. While there is still work ahead, this task force represents a foundational step toward making staff compensation a central priority—and ensuring that the vital contributions of staff are reflected not just in words, but in meaningful action.

As my term comes to a close, I want to express my deepest gratitude to the **Staff Senate Executive Committee**—thank you for your trust, your collaboration, and your candor. To my fellow Senate members, thank you for your dedication and for always reminding me why this work matters.

To the university leadership and the **Board of Visitors**, thank you for listening, engaging, and valuing the perspectives of staff. I urge you to continue this support and engagement for the staff and non-student wage employees at Virginia Tech—more than 4,000 individuals who work every day to make this the very best place to be.

While I step away from this formal position, I do not step away from my commitment to this community. I look forward to supporting the next chapter of Staff Senate leadership and continuing to champion the causes that matter to us all.

**Go Hokies!**

**LaTawnya Burleson**

*Staff Senate President*



## **Administrative and Professional Faculty Constituent Report**

June 2-3, 2025

Presented by Janice Austin, A/P Faculty Senate President

Good afternoon Rector Baine, board members, President Sands, Provost Clarke, Executive Vice President Sebring, administrators, and guests. It is a pleasure to be with you all for the June board meeting.

At the end of the spring semester, new senators were elected and the Senate selected the 2025-26 officers. I am pleased to share the new officers will be Dr. Marlena McGlothlin Lester, President; Jennifer Jones, Vice President; Nicole Connors, Secretary/Treasurer; and Chad Proudfoot, Parliamentarian. I am confident these officers will continue the good work of the senate and look forward to supporting them next year. The A/P Faculty Senate will finish out the academic year with our upcoming June senate meeting and recognition of senators and officers who have completed their term of service.

The AP Faculty employee group is comprised of over 2,400 individuals doing a great diversity of work in support of the university's strategic initiatives. Over the past year I have shared about our constituent groups to highlight the work of AP faculty members and I hope you have found these to be helpful in understanding our employee group and the functions within the university we support. Today I would like to highlight some of the work done by AP faculty members in our last two groups, General Professional and General Administrative.

AP Faculty in the General Professional constituent group work in areas around the university not designated as academic support, extension, or student affairs. These faculty include employee health educators, human resources recruiters, directing regional initiatives at our extended locations such as the Roanoke Higher Education Center, and working in various information technology roles including data management and analytics, end user support in business management systems, and academic applications in enterprise systems among many other types of work. AP Faculty in the General Administrative constituent group hold senior roles such as vice president, vice provost, dean, and assistant or associate vice president or dean and are responsible for managing the educational and general activities of the institution. You are familiar with the work of this constituent group as it many of the senior leaders you interact with throughout your board appointment at various events, ceremonies, and board meeting presentations, including some who are in the meeting today, are General Administrative AP Faculty.

As my term as AP Faculty Senate president and this my last Board of Visitors report are both coming to an end, I want to take a moment to acknowledge how incredible this experience of being a representative to the Board of Visitors has been for me. As a two-time Virginia Tech Graduate School alumnus and an employee of the university for 19 years, these last two years as AP Faculty representative to the Board have afforded me the opportunity to meet and interact with many leaders and colleagues across the institution, spend board meeting time with the board members not only sharing concerns of and the important work done by AP Faculty members but also learning more about each of you, your families and careers, and have deepened my love of and commitment to the Virginia Tech community. I thank each of you for your openness to hearing about the A/P faculty constituency and your engagement with all the constituency representatives to the Board.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you my final constituent report today and while my role will change, I still look forward to seeing you all again at upcoming board meetings.

## **June 2025 Faculty Senate Constituency Report**

Rachel Miles, Faculty Senate President

As we end this academic year, I find myself reflecting on what the future may hold for the faculty, staff, students, and community members of Virginia Tech. It has been an eventful year, full of uncertainty, chaos, volatility, and evolving complexity. How we, as a university and institution of higher education, respond to such changes in our status quo will shape our future in ways we cannot yet fully understand. We must maintain a proactive and agile stance while the ground shifts, or threatens to shift, beneath our feet. We must rely on, and reaffirm, our values and principles in all that we do while we navigate an unpredictable future.

The pendulum of federal policy and priorities is swinging with unprecedented speed and force, moving in a direction not seen before. Institutions of higher education, by their nature, are more deliberative and cannot pivot as quickly as corporations when the pendulum swings. Funding agencies cannot guarantee that the processes governing grant reviews and awards will be efficient or predictable, particularly in an environment shaped by federal priorities that may change overnight. I have heard plenty of stories from faculty members who are affected by this unpredictable environment; for example, one faculty member shared that his National Science Foundation proposal related to innovations in data science education and workforce development had received strong reviews and was expected to be funded, but it has been stalled for months at the award stage due to staffing shortages and operational disruptions at the NSF. The scale of such disruptions is still unknown, but it is now the backdrop against which we all carry out our work. I have experienced these issues personally. A conference grant awarded to me by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) was terminated last month as were most, if not all, IMLS grants to libraries and museums across the country. In another instance, a faculty member expressed deep frustration that his proposal had been delayed, noting that it had taken years to build trust and partnerships with local communities in the New River Valley—relationships now at risk of unraveling due to the stalled funding that may never be awarded. These are just a few examples of how the current, strained federal funding landscape is impacting faculty members, and I want to emphasize that these examples only touch the surface of the deep implications such disruptions are having on the research enterprise in higher education; disruptions on this scale do not just delay research – they derail the trajectory of research, sometimes stopping it entirely in its tracks, and they have real life consequences in health, innovations, and societal problems. These disruptions strike at the very core of our mission as a land-grant institution, to serve the Commonwealth and the nation. Yet, despite the significant challenges and widespread

disruptions, faculty have remained remarkably resilient—steadfast in their commitment to their students, colleagues, and the mission of the university.

Faculty members are not only coping with an increasingly unstable funding landscape; they are also working to support and reassure their graduate students, whose stipends and research opportunities often depend on grant funding. There are also those students whose legal status in this country is under threat. A persistent undercurrent of anxiety and fear can be felt throughout the halls of every building on campus, affecting faculty, staff, and domestic and international students alike. The ongoing uncertainty fuels stress and apprehension, often leading to isolation, diminished productivity, and an erosion of the sense of connection that makes our community so special.

Faculty need more than reassurance—they need a system that actively supports and sustains them. As we saw during the pandemic, it is the most vulnerable among us who face the greatest risk of loss when that support is lacking. We recognize that offering guarantees or reassurances in times like these may not be feasible—but it remains essential that faculty feel valued, appreciated, and fully supported.

One way of supporting our faculty is to make sure that their academic freedom and freedom of expression are protected here at Virginia Tech. These protections allow faculty to explore new ideas and take risks—without fear of backlash—which is essential for innovation and discovery. Equally critical is preserving tenure as a core part of who we are. Tenure helps us attract and retain the best faculty, which in turn drives more research funding, enhances our national and international profile, and supports long-term projects that stimulate growth and economic prosperity. Tenure is essential for maintaining our competitive edge in attracting top talent and fueling innovative research; it should be viewed as an investment in faculty and the entire institution that strengthens Virginia Tech's research capabilities and adherence to our mission. Preserving academic freedom and tenure are not only vital for us to attract and retain the faculty and students we will need to achieve Global Distinction, but threats to these principles can seriously damage our reputation as a leading research university and therefore actively harm our efforts to become a globally recognized destination for talent.

It is also critical that we uphold our commitment to shared governance at Virginia Tech; we have a unique system of shared governance here, and it is a strong and enviable one. We must continue to uphold the principles of shared governance, encourage faculty to actively participate in key commissions, committees, and Faculty Senate work, and strengthen the system through ongoing improvements in policy, procedures, communication, collaboration, and transparency. I would like to recognize Provost Clarke for his efforts to help redesign our system to provide faculty with a collective voice and a greater role in the

system, and I thank him for his continued support for the principles of shared governance. I also want to recognize the incoming Faculty Senate President, Dr. Justin Lemkul. Dr. Lemkul is exceptionally well prepared to lead this effort. He has been a dedicated member of the Faculty Senate and the Commission on Faculty Affairs for several years, with a record of contributions to shared governance that is both extensive and impactful. I'm confident that the faculty will be in capable hands this coming year and that Dr. Lemkul will be a strong and thoughtful advocate on their behalf.

Thank you for the privilege of serving in this vital role on the Board over the past year. It has truly been an honor and an extraordinary learning experience. This opportunity has deepened my understanding and appreciation not only for the mission and complexity of higher education, but also for the values and vision that define Virginia Tech. While I will miss serving as a faculty representative, I am confident that my successor will be a strong advocate, an effective communicator, and a dedicated bridge between the faculty and the Board. The future is in capable hands, and I look forward to seeing continued progress in the year ahead.