

## Staff Senate Constituency Report

Virginia Tech Board of Visitors

November 15-16, 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 grateful to be here today to present on behalf of our staff. First, I want to thank Tracy Vosburgh and her team for the transparency in the communications that we are receiving. One of the hardest things for any of us, is to not have the information that we need to succeed. The communications coming from the university (all areas of impact) has been helpful and informative. In addition, the staff would like to extend a thank you to Bryan Garey and his team for delivering information about how spring semester will be managed.

I would like to speak briefly about diversity. We have a large diverse campus, yet there remains much fear felt by faculty, staff, and students. There are fears of hate crimes, sexual harassment and abuse, bullying, and fear of saying the wrong thing that can and will offend someone. A good start to addressing some fears is our mandatory diversity training, but we need more. When I participated in the Diversity Ally, Advocate, and Ambassador training years ago, I learned a lot about others and myself. The training presented us with the opportunity to be in class with other faculty and staff and engage in conversations that are critical to our growth. These types of programs need to be brought back to the forefront.

In terms of work and mental health, there are some staff that are doing well during this pandemic, the majority, however, are not (please read, [The Staff Are Not OK](#), by Lee Skallerup Bessette, October 30, 2020, Chronicle of Higher Education). Our staff are the frontline that have had to help students, answer the calls from upset parents, be a sounding board for struggling faculty, learn yet another software program, become good enough at new programs to teach others, keep up with our jobs, while also managing our children's school schedules that are in constant flux, arrange child and elder/dependent care, serve as the first point of contact for faculty as they struggled to get their classes online and a huge amount of the success of that goes to the staff that are there willing, able, and without credit to do the job that needs to be done. More meetings are set up back-to-back, advising is at an all-time high, inboxes are flooded with emails which makes staff in those positions working harder than ever.

And let's talk about our staff in wage positions. My colleagues in wage positions worry about a layoff due to COVID19. The university is sending students home in November to not return until spring. With many wage employees being on single incomes, working either on or off campus, trying to find affordable/quality childcare and or elder/dependent care, all of these pressures have mentally drained staff. The commitment to everyone that is working through a pandemic should be commended. I am happy to hear the work that departments are doing to ensure as many staff

as possible are placed into other positions to ensure they continue to get a pay check while the students are away. Staff are grateful. Our Essential employees have willingly been here through this entire pandemic. I would love to see more acknowledgement and praise be given from the administration and the entire university for the work of our essential employees who have been put at risk as they clean our facilities, repaint and clean dorms, cook and serve the food, and provided other numerous services to this university in ways that I can't even fathom.

Staff do not have the same autonomy as faculty have, so when emphasis is constantly put on faculty and students, let's not forget the staff and all that they bring to the table. Staff should be recognized, rewarded, and encouraged to continue to do the great work that they are doing. We have staff from all walks of life and each bring a different flavor to our work places. They are essential to Virginia Tech and are a part of what makes Virginia Tech so great.

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.