

Staff Senate Constituency

March 20 & 21, 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. It's hard to believe we are now in year two of this COVID journey that immediately put the world into a whirl wind of change. I would like to share comments with you today on four topics of particular interest to staff. These topics are telecommuting, mental health, diversity, and racism.

For employees, telecommuting during the pandemic has meant continuing to try to balance work and home life. Several issues that continue to come up are homeschooling, child care, mental illness and pressure from job and financial insecurities. Staff Senate hosted Dwayne Pinkney, Kevin Faust, and Brian Garey, to address some staff concerns. Mr. Garey shared the work that has been ongoing with telecommuting and reiterated the fact that permission to telecommute is up to supervisors. Having supervisors approve telecommuting results in inconsistencies in departments across the university – which some staff experience as unfair. This fact has caused upheaval amongst staff. Staff that are already in positions where supervisory practices present morale issues among staff view this as one more issue that will not be addressed. While telecommuting has been great for some staff and staff are grateful, others have felt penalized: having to pay for and install internet, pay extra to increase their internet speed, find workspace at home, and in some cases working while helping their children with homework or caring for elderly parents.

It's not surprising that mental health¹ support is needed now more than ever with so many people being cooped up in homes and having to distance themselves from friends and family. Having Virginia Tech acknowledge their support and offer resources is encouraging.

As the staff representative of Virginia Tech, I advocate for all employees. On the admissions side we are making great strides with our enrollment numbers of underrepresented students. Work is still needed however on assisting our underrepresented, faculty, staff, and students feel included, valued, and treated with equal respect (see Virginia Tech's Principles of Community²). The university needs to continue to build up our diversity in faculty and staff hires in order to help build a community that feels they belong.

¹ March is mental health awareness month and the March 25th session will focus on workplace mental health. The link below has information on how to register and to submit your questions to our three experienced panelists.

<https://vtnews.vt.edu/notices/hr-2021-employee-zoom-workplace-mental-health.html>

² Virginia Tech Principles of Community | InclusiveVT | Virginia Tech:

<https://www.inclusive.vt.edu/Programs/vtpoc0.html>

Recently we are excruciatingly aware of the violence against the Asian community, that has played out worldwide; and we should be aware and acknowledge that Racism is astonishingly high at Virginia Tech. Although we have strategies in place to address racism, we need to continue to ask ourselves: Are we doing enough to make people feel safe and included at Virginia Tech? The caucuses at Virginia Tech, which are comprised of faculty, staff, and students to advocate for particular members of our university community, play an important role in addressing, advocating, and suggesting solutions on ways we can work together to make our work places more inclusive and add value to the missions of the university. As quoted in the Roanoke Times Article, March 23, 2021, *We will build community by seeing each other*³ by the Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) members in Roanoke and the New River Valley, “what we need is to see one another through building community and building bridges. We need to stand up for each others’ rights to live in a just society and a just system free from discrimination and fear. To do so, we must learn to truly see each other.” By participating in these conversations we can make positive strides in supporting a healthy university environment.

As a white woman in a privileged position, I cannot even imagine what my friends, colleagues, community members, faculty, staff, and students of color experience every day in this world where they are not treated with the same respect and care as that of the majority at Virginia Tech. As the great poet and author Maya Angelou has said and bears remembering: “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” We are Virginia Tech!

³ Theodore Lim, Vincent Wang, Nina Ha, Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Bonnie Zare, Carola Haas, Clara Suong, Jim Tokuhisa, OTHERS? (23, March, 2021) *We will build community through seeing each other*. Roanoke Times. (attached to back of this article)

Roanoke Times, March 23, 2021

We will build community through seeing each other

Theodore Lim, Vincent Wang, Nina Ha, Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Bonnie Zare, Carola Haas, Clara Suong, Jim Tokuhisa, OTHERS?

The rise in reports of violent attacks against Asian Americans across the nation are a reminder of the long history of anti-Asian violence in this country. High profile examples of violence and murder, including the recent targeted killings in Atlanta and attacks on Asian elders, such as 84-year-old Vicha Ratanapakdee, are part of a trend of racial targeting that has intensified over the past year as Asians have been scapegoated as being “responsible” for the devastation caused by COVID-19. [Organizations](#) that track anti-Asian hate crimes note that attacks and harassment have been intensified by politically-motivated rhetoric, such as referring to the coronavirus as the “Chinese virus,” and COVID-19 as “kung flu.” However, even with the recent change in the nation’s leadership, these disturbing trends continue and many in our community believe they will persist, given political and economic competition between the United States and China.

Over the past year, we, members of the Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA) community in Roanoke and the New River Valley have experienced considerable anxiety about being targeted in public places, have been singled out for wearing masks early during the pandemic, have been harassed in public spaces, and have worried about children being bullied in schools, simply for being of Asian descent. The past spate of physically violent incidents therefore represent a horrific culmination of stressors of nearly a year of scapegoating for all of the hardships and tensions COVID-19 has brought on our country.

The APIDA experience in the NRV/Roanoke region is distinct from that of the large cities where the high profile acts of anti-APIDA hate have occurred. Unlike in larger US cities that have long-standing racial tensions, particularly between Asian and Black Americans due to injustices fueled by racially exclusionary housing and business lending practices, in this region, Asians are a smaller demographic with different histories. Here, many of us are affiliated with the colleges and universities in the region. For example, in Blacksburg, APIDAs make up approximately 13% of the overall population. However, there is also a history of refugee resettlement in Roanoke and the Appalachian region, and APIDAs have settled in the region for many other diverse reasons. Overall, in the Commonwealth of Virginia, APIDAs are one of the fastest growing ethnic minorities, yet our voices in social matters are seldom heard.

The “model minority myth” designates APIDAs as “honorary whites,” giving most a degree of privilege, and is therefore a status that is accepted by some in the APIDA community. Culturally, the “model minority” designation tends to confirm immigrant values of hard work, persistence, and independence, as well as a deep longing to belong to a society that is a true meritocracy— the “American Dream,” that

tells us that as long as one works hard, anything can be achieved. However, the recent examples of violence show how easily this “honorary” position of perceived safety and privilege can be stripped away and how quickly our community can be used as a scapegoat when politically convenient. This is why it is so important for our community, and for others outside our community, to *reject* the suggestion that the pain of the APIDA community is due to another minoritized group. Whether this be the present growing attention to physical violence against us, historical pains of urban working class communities competing against each other to gain an economic foothold in this country, or in the pitting of APIDAs against other groups in affirmative action in education, we cannot buy into any system based on racial hierarchies. We cannot buy into a system that wedges minoritized groups against each other because this prevents the dismantling of the underlying racialized system. Instead, we reject violence against any minoritized group, and therefore stand in solidarity with those against anti-Black violence, anti-Trans violence, anti-Native violence, and violence against women. If violence—both physical and systemic—against any of these communities is condoned, then we are all at risk.

Instead, what we need is to see one another through building community and building bridges. We need to stand up for each others’ rights to live in a just society and a just system free from discrimination and fear. To do so, we must learn to truly see each other. To support the APIDA community during these difficult times, groups such as the APIDA Caucus (for faculty, students, staff) and Asian American Student Union at Virginia Tech are working to make the APIDA community more visible, and to see our relationships to other communities more clearly as well, starting with the [VT community](#), but expanding beyond to our presence in Roanoke/New River Valley.