

The Virginia Tech Student Experience: Virginia Tech's Next 20 Years



The Virginia Tech Student Experience Task Force Report | January 2015

A Letter to the Provost



January 9, 2015

Dear Provost McNamee:

On behalf of the Virginia Tech Student Experiences Task Force, we are pleased to share this document with you.

Since receiving your charge a year ago, our team of faculty, staff, and students has spent the past year studying the Virginia Tech student experience. This has been an edifying process, largely because of the unfettered commitment of the committee you appointed. We thank you for the opportunity to serve with them, as well the distinct honor it has been to dream about the Virginia Tech we hope to find in 20 years.

As part of our study, the entire team walked the campus, visited classrooms, and toured residence halls, libraries, and other student life facilities. We also requested and received numerous presentations from key Virginia Tech stakeholders and made a conscientious effort to learn more about the financial position of Virginia Tech and the implications of our recommendations given our fiscal context. Our conversations were robust, inspiring, and challenging.

In the end, we believe we have offered reasonable and manageable recommendations with the potential to guide Virginia Tech toward a student experience that maintains our unique strategic advantage as a residential campus. Moreover, our most salient hope is that the Virginia Tech of the future is one that is known for delivering a transformative student experience in which relationships flourish, diverse ideas converge, and people discover a purpose greater than themselves.

In the Spirit of *Ut Prosim*,

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Vice Provost for Undergraduate Academic Affairs

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Introduction: Ensuring a Robust Student Experience

Learning finds its best potential where relationships flourish, diverse ideas converge, and people discover a purpose greater than themselves, leaving little doubt as to why institutions of higher education invest tremendous energy and resources to nurture a sense of place.

Virginia Tech has long been celebrated for the unique experience it fosters. Ask a student or graduate what makes Virginia Tech special and a rich description often follows. Why do alumni return year in and year out to participate in homecoming, attend an athletic event, or simply wander around campus? This, of course, is what people do when their hearts and minds are ripe with memories of life-shaping moments. Traversing the Virginia Tech campus, graduates revisit and celebrate the people and places that helped them find their way in their journey of “becoming.”

Generations of Virginia Tech leaders have carefully crafted the Hokie experience that receives such accolades today. In this 143rd year, an abiding commitment to the future Virginia Tech experience remains unwavering. The university’s recently adopted strategic plan, *A Plan for a New Horizon*, speaks directly to enhancing the student experience. Complementary plans such as the *Academic Implementation Strategy* and the Division of Student Affairs’ *Aspirations for Student Learning* underscore the collective call for ensuring that a robust student experience remains a cornerstone of Virginia Tech. Moreover, the *Principles of Community* compel us to nurture a learning environment where all students can thrive.

To accomplish our ambitious aims, Senior Vice President and Provost Mark McNamee commissioned a year-long task force to study the campus experience and make recommendations to guide decision-making, resource allocation, and planning for facilities especially important to the student-life experience. The Virginia Tech Student Experience Task Force, co-chaired by Vice Provost for Undergraduate Academic Affairs Rachel Holloway and Senior Associate Vice President for Student Affairs Frank Shushok, comprised a broad group of faculty, staff, and students charged with answering the following questions:



1. Why is the residential nature of Virginia Tech important to our future competitive and educational advantage?
2. How can current research on best practices for living and learning inform our development of the Virginia Tech experience?
3. As we consider a new student center, what are the programmatic needs that must be housed within and where should it be located?
4. How should residential living at Virginia Tech look in 20 years?
5. How should Virginia Tech address its aging inventory of residential and learning facilities in order to reach programmatic goals?
6. What should the relationship between the residence halls, dining centers, student centers, and libraries be in order to strengthen our residential campus?
7. How can we plan financially to achieve a bold vision for the facilities that support the Virginia Tech living and learning experience?
8. What are the short-, intermediate-, and long-term strategies the senior leadership of Virginia Tech should pursue in regards to improving our campus experience?
9. How can these strategies be supported and incorporated into future updates to our campus master plan?

The following pages outline the best collective thinking of the Virginia Tech Student Experience Task Force, including our observation that Virginia Tech has a long history of faculty and staff accomplishing much with limited physical and financial resources. Taking this into consideration, it is our belief that Virginia Tech will be best served by giving due attention to the cautionary themes identified, as well as to the imperatives and recommendations for ensuring that a robust Virginia Tech student experience remains a strategic advantage.



Cautionary Themes: Learning from the Past to Guide our Future

In recent decades, the growing profile of Virginia Tech, particularly in an environment of reduced state funding and aging facilities, has resulted in gaps in maintaining the desired Virginia Tech experience. As the task force considered the future, the first order of business was to learn from the past. As a result, the following cautionary themes are presented as key concerns that must be addressed in the short and long term to avoid a significant degradation of the Virginia Tech student experience.

Theme One: The quality of spaces across the campus, and student experiences within them, vary widely, contributing to a widening gap between possible experiences for students and faculty alike.

Students' residence hall assignments, course selections, and majors may produce dramatically different learning experiences. One student may begin her college career in a new, air-conditioned residence hall with ample gathering spaces and opportunities to meet new students. Her first "classroom" experience is in a personal learning space in Cowgill Hall. She then attends a lecture in Goodwin Hall and returns to her residence hall where she finds peers gathered in a spacious and welcoming lobby participating in an impromptu conversation with the faculty principal who will later become a personal mentor. The spaces she inhabits in her day, and the people who occupy them, are affirming and supportive of learning.

Another student may live in a much smaller room in a residence hall built a half-century earlier. Without air conditioning or significant community gathering spaces, his living environment is one that represents mostly a place to sleep. His first class is in McBryde Hall where he sits in a windowless room with concrete block walls in an old chair packed into an uncomfortable space. His second and third classes of the day are also in McBryde Hall. When he returns to his residence hall, his peers have their doors open to create some cross-ventilation and he talks with a few of them as he goes back to his room. While the resident advisor makes him feel welcome, the physical spaces they share detract from his excitement, not to mention his learning. He wonders where all the tuition dollars are going.

Theme Two: Physical segregation perpetuates silos.

The campus has been purposefully designed in zones toward a goal of enhancing operational efficiency and effective delivery of instruction, research, and support services. Within the zones, building occupancy and usage generally reflect an historical academic organization centered on the "department" where whole faculties are located contiguously in a single building. As such, faculty, students, and staff tend to reside and work in buildings dedicated to singular functions or disciplines.



Faculty offices, teaching spaces, and laboratories are organized in districts. As a result, faculty members and students within a college rarely cross the Drillfield to teach in buildings associated with another college. Student affairs professionals infrequently enter academic buildings, further reducing the likelihood of unplanned encounters with faculty colleagues. Similarly, teaching and research faculty have little reason to enter a residence hall unless they have become involved in one of the residential colleges or living-learning programs. Similar patterns define daily interactions across campus.

Theme Three: Inflexible building design and construction standards too often inhibit programmatic performance as new needs emerge.

Building design and construction is a participatory process that reflects an understanding of today's programmatic needs. Envisioning and predicting the nature of future instruction, research, and student support is murky at best, as the pace of new technology and discovery impact future operations. As a result, the useful programmatic life of a building is often much shorter than the physical life of a building.

Institutional building standards frequently make responding to changing programmatic needs cost prohibitive. In many circumstances, the original structural design renders a facility incapable of adapting to changing needs. Thus, buildings become inflexible and challenging to recalibrate to a rapidly changing environment.

Theme Four: Our spaces fail to invite students, faculty, and staff to gather informally outside of the classroom.

Few academic buildings provide informal gathering spaces for students, staff, and faculty. Lobbies and foyers are often small and without furniture. Some faculty offices are too small for more than one student to consult with an instructor. The absence of easily accessible, spontaneous gathering places inhibits the development of relationships among our faculty, staff, and students. The recent Newman Library and Pamplin Hall Atrium projects demonstrate that intentional and thoughtful reconceptualization of space can transform a "dead zone" into a vibrant and productive gathering place for students, faculty, and staff. Even small changes in furnishings can invite interaction. There are many existing spaces that could be transformed with intentional planning and a modest investment.

One of our greatest assets at Virginia Tech is our outdoor space. However, a quick walk around campus reveals both its tremendous potential and the barriers to its productive use. The Hahn Horticulture Garden, the Duck Pond, the Alumni Mall, and our



iconic Drillfield offer spaces for congregation and contemplation. Yet, in other areas of campus, posts and chains flank the sidewalks and the only seating options are concrete walls. The inspirational potential of outdoor art is absent from our landscape and could be a significant asset to our learning environment.

Finally, the community spaces that are most conducive to our relational aims have become so crowded that seats are at a premium. Turner Place, Newman Library, and the Pamplin Atrium are constantly humming with activity. Even at our current enrollment, overcrowding is a significant issue. As we contemplate growing our student body, we must anticipate and increase our environments that contribute to a sense of place and a sense of purpose.

Theme Five: Insufficient attention to the physical infrastructure of student-life facilities risks the erosion of a Virginia Tech strategic advantage.

An essential component of the student experience is the opportunity to develop friendships outside the classroom through co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Virginia Tech students identify "meeting space" as one of their greatest needs. Spaces for student meetings, study groups, and places to rest between classes are all high priorities for students. Maturing institutions naturally evolve an asset portfolio of varied quality. Over time, older buildings accumulate deferred maintenance and become outdated while state-of-the-art facilities are constructed. State support and university support for infrastructure improvements are finite at any given time.

Envisioning the Next 20 Years

These five cautionary themes guide the imperatives created by the Virginia Tech Student Experience Task Force to address the questions posed in our charge. The task force agrees wholeheartedly that the residential nature of Virginia Tech is important to our future competitive and educational advantage. We also agree that Virginia Tech must preserve the residential identity of our campus and continue to house all first-year students, as well as maintain residences for a healthy proportion of returning students.

Imperatives and Recommendations

Each of the five imperatives has associated recommendations that are designated as requiring short-term (one to three years), intermediate (three to five years), or long-term (five to 10 years) strategies.



Imperative I: Virginia Tech must preserve its historical strength as a residential campus and re-conceptualize residence halls as learning spaces with the unique potential to integrate academic and student life.

The community of students, faculty, and staff who gather on campus each year to study, live, and work are central to the Virginia Tech experience. Frequently, residence halls are places where student relationships are initially forged, ideas are explored and challenged, and lives are changed. These residence halls serve as anchors for the students who reside in them, and help create the “sense of place” that makes Virginia Tech so special. As such, residential life must be a robust and foundational component of the Virginia Tech culture in the years ahead. Furthermore, Virginia Tech must seek opportunities to engage commuter students in new and interesting ways that replicate important components of the residential experience.

Recommendations:

1. Adopt a comprehensive residence hall renovation plan, as well as an associated funding model, that re-conceptualizes and restores one-third of residence hall spaces over each of the next three decades — short-term.
2. Commit to a plan that accounts for overall institutional enrollment growth and ensures that at least one-third of the total undergraduate student population is able to reside in on-campus residential facilities — short-term.
3. Incorporate spaces in all residence hall renovations that directly support the integration of academic and student life, including general assignment classrooms, faculty offices, and a faculty residence — intermediate-term.
4. Grow living-learning and residential college programmatic initiatives to involve at least two-thirds of undergraduate residential students over the next decade by promoting benefits and reducing financial barriers (currently 37 percent of the undergraduate on-campus population, including the Corps of Cadets) — intermediate-term.



Imperative II: Virginia Tech will create physical spaces, both indoors and outdoors, which support a culture of community and connection for meaningful interactions and relationships among students, staff, and faculty.

Well-designed and intentional environments provide optimal conditions for relationships to flourish across disciplinary and administrative boundaries, as well as between students, faculty, and staff. A well-distributed repertoire of gathering spaces, classrooms, and inspiring outdoor environments are essential for learning, creativity, and innovation. These environments foster human interaction that provides the foundation for the most transformative educational communities. To that end, contemplative spaces that foster introspection, promote critical thinking, and inspire rich dialogue in every quadrant of campus are essential for Virginia Tech in the decades to come.

Recommendations:

1. Instead of building a new all-encompassing student center, implement a “campus commons initiative” over the next decade that establishes multiple hubs (or neighborhoods) of energy and engagement. Planning and feasibility initiatives should consider re-conceptualization and restoration of existing facilities where possible (e.g., War Memorial Gym, Squires Student Center, Johnston Student Center, etc.) and the construction of a new Campus Commons in underserved university sectors to meet the growing needs of the campus community — long-term.
2. Adopt a landscaping and site improvement master plan that incorporates the expansion of outdoor wireless connectivity, as well as an associated funding plan that enhances the capacity of outdoor spaces to inspire learning and facilitate planned and unplanned encounters — short-term.
3. Expand the incorporation of art and cultural representations into the fabric of the indoor and outdoor campus environment — intermediate-term.
4. Create central gathering spaces for faculty within neighborhoods that encourage and support faculty relationships across colleges and strengthen opportunities to engage in campus life and with students outside the classroom — intermediate-term.

Envisioning the Next 20 Years

Imperatives and Recommendations (continued)

Imperative III: Virginia Tech must renovate spaces with an eye toward flexible use, adaptability, collaboration, community building, and learning.

In a campus environment where most buildings have stood for a half-century or more, a large number of existing spaces must be reimagined, enhanced, and made accessible. Current locations such as libraries, student commons, and classroom buildings should be collectively reconsidered as nodes for engagement. While some spaces will require specialized design and equipment, renovations must emphasize long-range adaptability for multiple purposes because the rapidly evolving educational environment will bring unforeseen needs, which will be revealed as the years unfold. A strategic plan for restoring aged buildings, especially facilities with potential to adapt to long-term needs and advance the aims of the Virginia Tech experience, must be a priority for the Virginia Tech of the future.

Recommendations:

1. Adopt a comprehensive classroom renovation plan, as well as an associated funding model, to reinvent classrooms and offices across campus as inspiring learning spaces that support innovative faculty teaching methods and emerging pedagogies — short-term.
2. Implement a “community life initiative” that takes a comprehensive and holistic approach toward identifying and renovating spaces where gathering, meeting, and studying can occur throughout the campus. This element should agree in mission and spirit with the residence hall renovations plan (Imperative I, page 6) to consistently address adaptability issues within a comprehensive infrastructure — intermediate-term.
3. Invest in the ongoing development of libraries as central hubs for innovative learning, collaboration, and student engagement and explore the option of giving oversight of campus atria to libraries — short-term.
4. Invite broad participation in the planning of renovation processes, with particular attention to flexible, adaptable, and multiple uses of space — short-term.

Imperative IV: Virginia Tech will embrace a campus culture that values faculty and staff engagement with students, and seeks to strengthen an infrastructure that facilitates mentorship, inspiring programmatic initiatives, and practical hands-on experiences to enhance classroom learning.

Particular types of student relationships are understood as especially important to well-being and engagement before and after graduation. The Gallup-Purdue Index (2014), perhaps the most comprehensive study of post-graduate engagement and well-being, reports a strong correlation between these important outcomes and the following six college experiences: 1) students who had a faculty member who helped them become excited about learning; 2) students who had a faculty member who cared about them as a person; 3) students who had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue goals and dreams; 4) students who were active in co-curricular activities; 5) students who completed an internship or participated in job-related learning; and 6) students who participated in projects that lasted beyond a semester. Providing these opportunities is an important part of the Virginia Tech experience of the future.



Recommendations:

1. Encourage all faculty and staff, regardless of role or classification, to participate in the mentorship and education of students, as contributors to this evolving university culture — short-term.
2. Explore avenues for aligning reward structures for faculty and staff to further emphasize the importance of mentorship for students — intermediate-term.
3. Devise a comprehensive plan to guide students toward high-impact educational activities that include: hands-on experiences, involvement in a community where students feel cared for and known, and the increased likelihood of faculty and/or staff mentorship — short-term.
4. Articulate clearly to students the expectations for their participation and engagement in an overall educational experience, and offer tools to support student reflection and documentation of their learning experience — short-term.

Imperative V: Virginia Tech will develop innovative financial solutions to accomplish a strategically prioritized plan of actions recommended for the Virginia Tech student experience.

A strong collection of degree programs with high demand, strong brand recognition, sustainable financial management practices, and resilient academic and student life programs positions Virginia Tech to move forward in these otherwise challenging conditions. The Virginia Tech of the future must be relentless in identifying and funding institutional initiatives with the highest probability of impacting the overall aspirations of the institution, including the overarching aims of the Virginia Tech student experience. Innovative solutions to challenging financial problems will be a hallmark of tomorrow's success.

Recommendations:

1. Study and implement innovative financial solutions that explore and balance the tensions of growth, access, and affordability, and reduce dependence on shrinking state-supported funding — intermediate-term.
2. Create financial support practices that level increasingly uneven educational and student life experiences across the diverse socioeconomic backgrounds of students — long-term.
3. Explore new financial strategies and solutions for funding the Virginia Tech student experience recommendations — short-term.
4. Invest immediately in lower-cost but higher-impact projects that influence the student experience in the present and near-term as well as the longer term — short-term.



Expanding on the Provost's Questions

The overall effort of the Virginia Tech Student Experience Task Force was guided by nine questions posed by the provost. The following section summarizes the responses and, at times, expands on the narrative provided.

1. Why is the residential nature of Virginia Tech important to our future competitive and educational advantage?

The community of students, faculty, and staff who gather on campus each year to study, live, and work are central to the Virginia Tech experience. Frequently, residence halls are places where student relationships are initially forged, ideas are explored and challenged, and lives are changed. These residence halls serve as anchors for the students who reside in them, and help create the “sense of place” that makes Virginia Tech so special. As such, residential life must be a robust and foundational component of the Virginia Tech culture in the years ahead.

2. How can current research on best practices for living and learning inform our development of the Virginia Tech experience?

Three decades of research on student outcomes provides compelling evidence that living in a campus residence, independent of any particular philosophy of residence halls, makes an important difference for students. Alexander Astin’s “What Matters in College?” and Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini’s “How College Affects Students” both summarize many of the differences made by living on campus. Such differences include more participation in extracurricular activities, more frequent interactions with peers and faculty members, more positive perceptions of the campus climate, higher satisfaction with the college experience, greater personal growth and development, more effort and involvement in both the academic and social experiences of the college, and a higher rate of persistence and degree completion. These are student outcomes about which most educators care. The most robust residential environments are those that integrate academic and student life, incorporate faculty, and provide opportunities for mentoring from other students.

3. As we consider a new student center, what are the programmatic needs that must be housed within and where should it be located?

Instead of building a new all-encompassing student center, implement a “campus commons initiative” over the next decade that establishes multiple hubs (or neighborhoods) of energy and engagement. While each “commons” should bring together faculty, staff, and students, as well as cater to the academic, service, and social needs of students, programmatic elements should vary by location.

4. How should residential living at Virginia Tech look in 20 years?

Virginia Tech should commit to a plan that accounts for overall institutional enrollment growth and ensures that at least one-third of the total undergraduate student population is able to reside in on-campus residential facilities. Residential colleges and living-learning programs should be a hallmark of the Virginia Tech residential experience. Residence hall renovations, as well as new construction, should directly support the integration of academic and student life, including classrooms, faculty offices, and a faculty residence. At least two-thirds of undergraduate residential students should be participating in a living-learning program or residential college.

5. How should Virginia Tech address its aging inventory of residential and learning facilities in order to reach programmatic goals?

Adopt a comprehensive residence hall renovation plan, as well as an associated funding model, that reconceptualizes and restores one-third of residence hall spaces over each of the next three decades in a manner consistent with that described above.

6. What should the relationship between the residence halls, dining centers, student centers, and libraries be in order to strengthen our residential campus?

Well-designed and intentional environments provide optimal conditions for relationships to flourish across disciplinary and administrative boundaries, as well as between students, faculty, and staff. A well-distributed repertoire of gathering spaces, classrooms, and inspiring outdoor environments are essential for learning, creativity, and innovation. These environments foster human interaction that provides the foundation for the most transformative educational communities. To that end, contemplative spaces that foster introspection, promote critical thinking, and inspire rich dialogue in every quadrant of campus are essential for Virginia Tech in the decades to come. Since these spaces are of great importance, the assignment of leadership for this effort is important. University Libraries could play an important role in advancing this overall effort.



7. How can we plan financially to achieve a bold vision for the facilities that support the Virginia Tech living and learning experience?

Virginia Tech must discover innovative financial solutions that explore and balance the tensions of growth, access, and affordability, and reduce dependence on shrinking state-supported funding. Moreover, we must create financial support practices that level increasingly uneven college experiences across the diverse socioeconomic backgrounds of students.

8. What are the short-, intermediate-, and long-term strategies the senior leadership of Virginia Tech should pursue in regards to improving our campus experience?

Each of the five imperatives has associated recommendations that are designated as requiring short-term (one to three years), intermediate (three to five years), or long-term (five to 10 years) strategies. Grouped by strategy type, they are as follows:

Short-Term Strategies:

- Adopt a comprehensive residence hall renovation plan, as well as an associated funding model, that re-conceptualizes and restores one-third of residence hall spaces over each of the next three decades.
- Commit to a plan that accounts for overall institutional enrollment growth and ensures that at least one-third of the total undergraduate student population is able to reside in on-campus residential facilities.
- Adopt a landscaping and site improvement master plan that incorporates the expansion of outdoor wireless connectivity, as well as an associated funding plan that enhances the capacity of outdoor spaces to inspire learning and facilitate planned and unplanned encounters.
- Adopt a comprehensive classroom renovation plan, as well as an associated funding model, to reinvent classrooms and offices across campus as inspiring learning spaces that support innovative faculty teaching methods and emerging pedagogies.
- Invest in the ongoing development of libraries as central hubs for innovative learning, collaboration, and student engagement and explore the option of giving oversight of campus atria to libraries.
- Invite broad participation in the planning of renovation processes, with particular attention to flexible, adaptable, and multiple uses of space.

Expanding on the Provost's Questions

Short-Term Strategies (continued):

- Encourage all faculty and staff, regardless of role or classification, to participate in the mentorship and education of students, as contributors to this evolving university culture.
- Devise a comprehensive plan to guide students toward high-impact educational activities that include: hands-on experiences, involvement in a community where students feel cared for and known, and the increased likelihood of faculty and/or staff mentorship.
- Articulate clearly to students the expectations for their participation and engagement in an overall educational experience, and offer tools to support student reflection and documentation of their learning experience.
- Explore new financial strategies and solutions for funding the Virginia Tech student experience recommendations.
- Invest immediately in lower-cost but higher-impact projects that influence the student experience in the present and near-term as well as the longer term.

Intermediate-Term Strategies:

- Incorporate spaces in all residence hall renovations that directly support the integration of academic and student life, including general assignment classrooms, faculty offices, and a faculty residence.
- Grow living-learning and residential college programmatic initiatives to involve at least two-thirds of undergraduate residential students over the next decade by promoting benefits and reducing financial barriers (currently 37 percent of the undergraduate on-campus population, including the Corps of Cadets).
- Expand the incorporation of art and cultural representations into the fabric of the indoor and outdoor campus environment.
- Create central gathering spaces for faculty within neighborhoods that encourage and support faculty relationships across colleges and strengthen opportunities to engage in campus life and with students outside the classroom.
- Implement a “community life initiative” that takes a comprehensive and holistic approach toward identifying and renovating spaces where gathering, meeting, and studying can occur throughout the campus. This element should agree in mission and spirit with the residence hall renovations plan (Imperative I) to consistently address adaptability issues within a comprehensive infrastructure.
- Explore avenues for aligning reward structures for faculty and staff to further emphasize the importance of mentorship for students.
- Study and implement innovative financial solutions that explore and balance the tensions of growth, access, and affordability, and reduce dependence on shrinking state-supported funding.



Long-Term Strategies:

- Instead of building a new all-encompassing student center, implement a “campus commons initiative” over the next decade that establishes multiple hubs (or neighborhoods) of energy and engagement. Planning and feasibility initiatives should consider re-conceptualization and restoration of existing facilities where possible (e.g., War Memorial Gym, Squires Student Center, Johnston Student Center, etc.) and the construction of a new Campus Commons in underserved university sectors to meet the growing needs of the campus community.
- Create financial support practices that level increasingly uneven educational and student life experiences across the diverse socioeconomic backgrounds of students.

9. How can these strategies be supported and incorporated into future updates to our campus master plan?

Individuals responsible for leading campus-wide planning processes such as capital and master planning must be intentional in incorporating these recommendations into the very fabric of institutional planning. As such, an implementation team should be appointed by the provost and president to meet and review progress twice annually.

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