

President's Remarks for BOV Open Session – Monday, 6Nov23

When there are conflicts anywhere in the world, they inevitably impact Virginia Tech through our students, faculty, staff, alumni and partners with ties that span the globe. The terrorist attacks by Hamas in Israel on October 7 brought back painful memories of 9/11 and the Holocaust. I issued a statement on October 11 that condemned the terrorist attacks that intentionally targeted civilians and expressed support for those impacted in Israel, reminding our community of the supporting resources we offer for anyone in our community. That statement did not address what we knew was about to happen – a war between Israel and Hamas, with Palestinians in Gaza caught in the crossfire. The war will no doubt impact the families and friends of members of our Virginia Tech community. To members of our community, please reach out for help if you need it, or even if you just need someone to talk to.

I am proud of our university community for its stand against antisemitism and Islamophobia, or any acts of discrimination against members of our community based on religion, race or ethnicity, national origin or any other protected classes that fall under our Policy 1025. If you feel you have been subjected to harassment or discrimination, please reach out to our Office for Equity and Accessibility, the Dean of Students Office, the Office of the Provost, Employee Relations in Human Resources or any of our Ombuds functions.

The war in Gaza has ignited long-standing conflicts that spill over into the Virginia Tech community and our host communities, including Blacksburg. Understandably, groups of like-minded individuals are peacefully assembling and demonstrating, as is their right. We stand by our [university position in support of free expression and academic freedom](#), even when expressed positions are hurtful to the majority of our community members. We also stand by our institutional right to express condemnation for any expression that, for example, advocates for terrorism, genocide, targeting of civilians, taking of hostages, or the elimination of the right to practice one's religion.

Unlike most types of organizations, institutions of higher education have a central responsibility to promote learning. We cannot fulfill our mission as an academic community without allowing dialog that is uncomfortable. On the other hand, permitting free speech, even hate speech, is not sufficient to declare that we are promoting learning. We have to be active learners. That is why I ask all members of our community to take this opportunity to listen and learn about the history of the region.

In one of the books that I read recently, I learned that a Hokie, Bashar Masri (Chemical Engineering '83), was responsible for conceiving of and building a model Palestinian community - the high-tech City of Rawabi in the West Bank. The author cited this accomplishment as one of the truly impactful acts of self-determination for the Palestinian people. So this age-old conflict is not as remote as it might sound to some at Virginia Tech. Leave it to a Hokie to take on and successfully execute a project that almost everyone else thinks is impossible.

Keeping with the Global theme, provost Clarke, vice president Ghosh and I returned last week from Botswana where we were celebrating the groundbreaking for the Wildlife Forensics Laboratory in Kasane. This lab is the result of a \$2.6M grant from the U.S. Department of State to Virginia Tech and the NGO CARACAL, co-founded by Dr. Kathleen Alexander, the William E. Lavery Professor of Wildlife Conservation in CNRE. His Excellency Dr. Mokgweetsi Masisi, President of the Republic of Botswana, the U.S. Ambassador to Botswana, Howard Van Vranken, and many of the ministers of the Botswana government participated in the two-day event.

You may recall the President Masisi visited Blacksburg in March. His talk stressed the complex interactions between conservation, democracy and sustainable development. The Wildlife Forensics Laboratory will be situated right at the heart of this complexity, providing resources and expertise to fight the illicit trade in wildlife that directly threatens the Botswana economy, creates situations that promote the spread of infectious diseases between wildlife and humans, and impedes sustainable development that is necessary for promoting democracy. Virginia Tech is all about taking on complex problems that require a transdisciplinary approach. This new center will create unique and transformational opportunities for learning, discovery and engagement for our students and faculty.

There is much more to say about the Fall semester so far, but not enough time to cover all of the highlights. Let me mention a few notable achievements this fall:

- In September, we announced a \$50M gift from the Red Gates Foundation to the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at Virginia Tech Carilion to accelerate research in cancer, behavioral neuroscience and cardiovascular science that has potential to translate directly to improvements in human health.
- In October, we were pleased to celebrate the Preston and Catharine White Diversity Scholarship, a \$10M contribution toward the goals of the Virginia Tech Advantage. Preston shared his compelling story about the challenges faced by those underrepresented and underserved in our population, and his family's desire to ensure that the current generation of students at Virginia Tech do not have insurmountable financial barriers in their way.
- Also in October, Linsey Marr was recognized as a MacArthur Fellow, the so-called "Genius Grant" for her work on airborne pathogens and her ability to communicate effectively with the public and policy makers worldwide during the pandemic.
- Extramural research expenditures surged to \$415 M in FY23, a 28% increase since FY21. We have already eclipsed our FY25 milestone for this metric, and our recent awards suggest that we will continue to build momentum. Of all metrics aligned with our aspiration to be a top-100 global research university, extramural expenditures is the one that most captures the extent of our future impact.

- One notable milestone: During the 22-23 Academic Year, we exceeded 10,000 degrees granted for the first time.

Finally, I would like to use this opportunity to celebrate some key individuals who are moving on from decades of service to Virginia Tech.

- We are indebted to Dr. Chris Kiwus for nearly 10 years of outstanding leadership, most recently as VP for Campus Planning, Infrastructure and Facilities. We will miss you, Chris! Thanks to Bob Broyden for stepping in as interim.
- Luisa Havens Gerardo was instrumental in the dramatic increase in Virginia Tech's visibility and appeal to prospective students worldwide, but especially in Virginia. She expertly managed enrollment during the pandemic and helped to establish Virginia Tech as a national leader in inclusive enrollment strategies. We will miss you, Luisa, but wish you the best at UT-Arlington. Juan Espinoza, thanks for stepping up.
- I would like to thank Ken Miller, VP for Finance, for 35 years of exemplary service to Virginia Tech. Ken's experience and wisdom will be difficult to replace, but we are happy for you to have the chance to pursue a successful retirement!
- We are also sad for us and happy for him that Commandant of Cadets, major General Randal Fullart will be retiring next summer. Randy will be the longest serving Commandant in the history of the corps, and I would argue that he has been the most impactful. General Fullhart's legacy is apparent in the transformation of the Upper Quad, but the most important part of his legacy is his impact on the people of the Corps of Cadets, who go on to lead in our military and in civilian roles in the true spirit of Ut Prosim with an emphasis on global ethical leadership.
- And finally, thanks to Dean Alan Grant for his service as dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences for the past 15 years. CALS is a much better College as a result of your steady and determined leadership.

Good luck to men's and women's basketball as we kickoff the season tonight in Cassell and later this week in Charlotte. Go Hokies!