

President Tim Sands
Remarks to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV)
January 10, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today on behalf of the Virginia Council of Presidents. I also bring greetings from Hokies in Blacksburg, Roanoke, the greater DC region, and across the Commonwealth. We just concluded a celebration of our sesquicentennial – 150 years since our founding as Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College, Virginia’s Morrill Act land-grant institution. Very briefly, before I don the hat of the chair of the Council of Presidents, let me mention a couple of highlights for Virginia Tech in its sesquicentennial year, chosen because they relate directly to the priorities of the Council of Presidents:

This past fall, we reached our 2022 milestone of 40% of our entering undergraduate class, including transfers, as members of underserved and underrepresented populations, including veterans, first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented minorities. That’s up from 33% in 2017. Lowering barriers, creating pathways, and supporting our students have made a tremendous difference in the Blacksburg campus environment. And while we’ve made great progress in first-generation and URM enrollment (URM is now over 20% of the entering class), we are still not adequately addressing the financial needs of our lowest-income students. Our annual shortfall in affordability for our approximately 6,000 low-income Virginia students is between \$25M and \$40M. This is one of our two biggest challenges going forward and the subject of a presidential initiative. Virginia Tech is not alone in this regard – with a couple of exceptions, Virginia and Virginia’s public 4-year institutions are falling short in providing affordable pathways for low-and middle-income Virginians. I will have more to say on this topic in a moment.

A second update is our progress in Tech Talent. Virginia Tech is in the process of doubling undergraduate enrollment in computer science, computer engineering, and software engineering. We are ahead of schedule in this endeavor, and new facilities and faculty hires in Blacksburg are coming online just in time.

The signature effort for VT is the Master of Engineering degree, soon to be based in Alexandria at our Innovation Campus. We have about 300 master’s students enrolled in our Falls Church temporary location, awaiting the completion of the first academic building at the Innovation Campus in 2024. The pandemic impacted our initial enrollment numbers, but we are getting back on track. We now have seven 4+1 articulation agreements with Virginia institutions that are helping change the character of computer science and computer engineering master’s programs, shifting from a largely international historical enrollment to 50% Virginia residents, many of whom have earned bachelor’s degrees in computer science-adjacent disciplines. Opening the funnel and actively recruiting Virginians is going to

be a winning formula. With the current layoffs in some of the purely tech companies that over-hired during the pandemic, we expect demand for our unique project-based master's degree to surge. Of course, all our institutions are contributing to Virginia's Tech Talent Investment Program. I think it is one of the biggest and boldest moves anywhere in the world to address a huge talent gap in a very targeted manner.

I could share details of many other updates - including the rebounding of our research operation with extramural expenditures up 14% in FY22 after a pandemic hit in FY21, and the reinvigoration of our Agricultural Research and Extension Centers due to investments by the commonwealth, as represented by the recent opening of the new Seafood AREC in Hampton – but I will stop here and represent the Council of Presidents with my remaining comments.

I would like to briefly address **three** priority issues for Virginia Higher Education: Free Speech and Academic Freedom, Access and Affordability, and Supporting Virginia's Workforce and Economy.

1. Free Speech and Academic Freedom

- The First Amendment right to free speech is not just important because it is a protected constitutional right; free expression is important both in the classroom and on campus because it facilitates hard discussions and builds the capacity in our students to articulate ideas and confront difficult truths.

Perhaps most importantly, free expression helps students learn how to respectfully engage in civil discussion despite deep and sincere disagreements.

Our students, and our society, won't be successful if we stay in our corners and demonize those who disagree as the enemy.

- America's colleges and universities have an obligation to help our students and communities build the skills and perspectives that are enabled by free expression, so our graduates are equipped to bring society together rather than pull it apart.
- Academic freedom is also essential to higher education's mission of learning, discovery, and engagement. Both free speech and academic freedom are essential components of excellence in education and maintaining a successful democracy.
- The Council of Presidents unanimously agreed on a statement expressing our shared priority for advancing free expression on our campuses. We shared that statement in a guest column in the

Richmond Times Dispatch on December 23rd. We unequivocally support free expression and viewpoint diversity as the fundamental basis for both academic freedom and effective teaching and learning. We are bound to uphold the First Amendment and promote this constitutional freedom with our words, policies, and actions.

This work is well underway on our campuses. I'd like to thank SCHEV for convening our institutions with the Constructive Dialogue Institute and my colleagues for engaging the COP with the Bipartisan Policy Center.

- We ask you to support and join us in our pledge to promote and uphold free expression, academic freedom, inclusivity, and an environment that promotes civil discourse across differences. And help us protect these principles when others seek to restrict them.

2. Access and Affordability

- The higher education marketplace is more competitive than ever. College enrollment is down across the country, and universities in other states are competing for our in-state students as well as out-of-state students that are considering Virginia institutions. At the same time, low- and middle-income income Virginia students are finding it increasingly difficult to afford public 4-year institutions, even though we have bent the curve on tuition rates over the last five years or so with a combination of new state appropriations and internal cost savings.
- Virginia has been recognized nationally for its top-performing public higher education sector, but we are not immune from the forces that are depressing enrollment and increasing competition for talent.
- We see two opportunities here. The first is to ensure we are providing opportunities for an affordable education for low- and middle-income Virginians who would like to stay in Virginia. The need here is financial aid – from the Commonwealth, the federal government, private philanthropy, and from institutional sources. We are facing severe shortages of healthcare professionals, teachers, and daycare workers, among others - people who make our communities great places to live, work, and raise a family. We need affordable pathways to these professions. I'd like to thank SCHEV and the General Assembly for making real progress here for FY23-24. We need to do more.
- The second opportunity is to go on the offense to retain mobile talent in Virginia and attract out-of-state talent to Virginia. Increasingly, institutions in other states are offering deep discounts to top-performing Virginia high school students in STEM disciplines. It is becoming common to hear that

Virginia students have offers to enroll at public universities in surrounding states with effective tuition rates that compete with our in-state rates. For the states south of us, they need STEM talent to fuel economic growth in biotechnology, semiconductors, manufacturing, and computer science. The states north of us are primarily trying to fill empty seats for which the marginal cost of providing the education is well below the in-state tuition rate. If they don't fill those seats, these campuses will enter a death spiral.

- Virginia is in the muddled gray area between these two dynamics. Some of our institutions are seeing enrollment drops, and others are seeing growing demand, especially in STEM. But all our institutions are going to be impacted by the rapidly changing enrollment dynamics as competition intensifies.
- I hope we can mutually explore innovative solutions to ensure that Virginia's public universities are nationally competitive for all students in a time of increasing pressure on enrollment. This may be the time, for example, to reconsider the requirement that out-of-state tuition and fees cover 100% of the average cost of providing that education. For some of our institutions, the marginal cost of educating a student is much lower than in-state tuition and fees. For other institutions, recruiting out-of-state students in strategic areas may require competing more aggressively in the net price offered to those students.

3. Sticky Pathways through Work-based Learning

- Once we have students from Virginia or outside Virginia enrolled in our public institutions, we need to ensure that as many as possible stay in Virginia to start their careers. Losing Virginia college graduates in high demand fields limits Virginia's ability to attract new industries to the commonwealth and the capacity of existing Virginia industries to expand. We could end up losing big new opportunities to competing states.
- We need to keep our graduates in the commonwealth by building a pathway that begins on the first day they set foot on a Virginia campus and continues after graduation as they begin a career with a Virginia employer.
- Last year, the Council of Presidents pledged that every enrolled student who desired a paid internship would have one without extending the time to a degree.
- And we need to do this without making these opportunities cost-prohibitive for low-and middle-income students. Part of that pledge is to build these experiences into our curricula so that work-based learning does not extend the time to a degree.

- I'd like to thank SCHEV, the Virginia Chamber, V-TOP, GoVirginia, VEDP, the General Assembly, and the administration for taking this opportunity seriously. The council has been working with the Council of Presidents on critical issues around data and definitions associated with internships. We need to be able to track progress so we can double down on successful approaches and pull back from programs that are not effective.

If we do all three of these right – building skills around having civil conversations across differences, attracting and retaining talent, and lowering the barriers between college and career, we will distinguish Virginia as the leading state for pathways from learning to earning, meaningful careers, and engaged citizenship.