

The VP Is In

February 22, 2012

Last week was the first of three "The VP is In" sessions scheduled for the spring semester and I was joined in the Student Government Associate office by a small group of students. The first part of the conversation was a summary for me of concerns that were expressed by members of the House of Representatives of the Student Government Association. On their list were: expansion of wireless communications, conflicts between pedestrians and cyclists, the need for more blue lights and bike racks, crowding in the dining halls, a suggestion for more cigarette disposal containers, the "Strong Together" initiative, faculty holding students responsible for deadlines even when the Scholar site goes down and is not available, inconsistencies in academic advising, concerns about the class attendance policy, the stadium woods issue and where to put the indoor football practice facility, the desire for a more unified and multicultural campus, interest in even more promotion of sustainability, and basketball seating. As you can see, it is quite an extensive list and it is noteworthy that a number of the items on the list keep reappearing year after year.

Before the article came out the next day in the Collegiate Times about the CollegeHumor.com website identifying Virginia Tech as "third in the country in terms of being a slacker campus," we discussed the fact that a Collegiate Times reporter had interviewed me about the site. There was unanimous consensus among the students that labeling Virginia Tech students as "slackers" is totally inaccurate and not descriptive at all of what our students are like. They felt that our curriculum does not lend itself to this type of description and they noted that the top ten schools on the CollegeHumor.com list happen to be large public institutions with major football programs. There was also strong consensus that the CollegeHumor.com staff had jumped to conclusions based upon the limited perceptions of some people rather than actual data to support such a ranking. Students also commented that they would put the CollegeHumor.com survey in the category of a meme. By the way, that was my learning lesson of the day as I had not heard that term before and in case you have not, a meme is basically a thought pattern that goes viral, usually through the internet, which is more often than not based on sarcastic or inaccurate and invalid information.

We went on to talk about frequent communications between students and parents. I was musing about how when I was an undergraduate in the 1960s, I was lucky to talk to my parents at most once a week, and we generally communicated by U.S. mail letter rather than a telephone call. A quick survey of the students present for the session showed that nearly all of them communicate one or more times each day by phone, text, or email with their parents. Times have changed!

Students talked a bit about powerful classes they have had while here. Two of the students present at the session were especially complimentary of the teaching of Dr. Art Buikema, alumni distinguished professor of biological sciences. They had had him for an honors biology course two years ago and were very grateful for the challenging and inspiring ways in which he teaches that course. They noted that although at the time the course may have seemed especially challenging, in retrospect they expressed much gratitude to him for the ways in which he taught students to think about the connections between seemingly unconnected things.

There were other concerns that day about the Math Emporium, a subject which frequently comes up in our discussions. One suggestion I heard made in the conversation was that the staff there should consider having online videos of faculty lecturing on the particular topic at hand so that those videos could be consulted as supplements to other online work.

We talked next about the use of designated drivers. I have commented before that designated drivers are a mixed blessing: they provide a presumably safe transportation system to those students who have been consuming alcohol, but they also enable students to consume enormous amounts of alcohol. However, I mentioned that the graduate students working in our Center for Applied Behavioral Systems in the psychology department have become quite concerned recently about the blood alcohol counts being observed among the designated drivers themselves. The graduate students there have recently indicated that the designated driver is not necessarily a "sober/non-drinking" person, but may in fact be the "least drunk" of the group. Obviously, this a dangerous and disconcerting situation. Students present suggested that our various drinking establishments downtown ought to consider incentivizing DDs by providing them with free soft drinks.

The session concluded with students asking me detailed questions about the reseating of Lane Stadium, the possibility of a dining center being located off campus (No, we are not considering that!), and an overview of campus construction at the present and in the future.

That's a summary of the latest things on students' minds. I hope some of you will join me to hear what's on the minds of our students at our next "The VP is In" session which will be held on Tuesday, March 20, 2012, at the Graduate Life Center from 3:30 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Here's to a safe and enjoyable Spring Break for everyone!