

The VP Is In

February 20, 2011

While only about eight students were present for last Wednesday's "The VP Is In" session, SGA President Bo Hart tells me that another 35 students were watching and listening to the streaming video broadcast of the session. Some of those students submitted questions on-line.

We spent a significant portion of the time talking about the change in the alcohol culture over the years and we focused particularly on how the shift has been towards consumption of far greater quantities of alcohol and at a far more intense pace. The self-reported data from students collected by our College Alcohol Abuse Prevention Center and the data collected by the Applied Behavior Systems research teams from the department of psychology all point to very serious concerns about consumption levels. Recently, I've been making it a point, in on-on-one conversations with students, to ask them if they would honestly tell me how much they drink "when they go out." The responses I heard last week were: 1) 12 beers, 2) four or five "Rails" (equivalent to somewhere around 16-20 shots of liquor), and 3) 10-12 exotic drinks.

I also have been asking how students got to the point of consuming such large quantities and the responses have varied from I established this level of drinking in high school---with alcohol obtained by fake IDs, through older friends, or supplied by parents!---or I "went wild" once I arrived at Virginia Tech and, since I eat all I want, I drink all I want. I and others continue to be concerned about the erosion of responsible drinking and the negative primary and secondary effects which drinkers, and non-drinkers, are experiencing. One student, now no longer at Virginia Tech due to his alcohol consumption, has been told that he already has the liver of a 45-year-old man.

I wish that there were a magic solution to this issue, but there is not. It is clear that we have major work to do, simply to prevent this problem from getting worse. I look forward to the forthcoming report and recommendations from our Alcohol Task Force.

During the rest of Wednesday's session we talked about the multi-year residence hall renovation program, the nature of off-campus housing, how the housing application process (including the lottery for returning students) works, and how the community can absorb the 500+ students who wanted to live on campus next year but will be unable to due to the one-year net loss of beds from the closing of West AJ and the re-opening of East AJ. Students were excited to share their experiences during Hokie Day in Richmond and their thoughts about where a new Student Center might be located and what it might contain.

When I asked those present and those live streaming what they really like about Virginia Tech, they singled out: the sense of community, the feeling of a Hokie Nation, how we are a large campus that doesn't seem large because we have kept the feel of a small campus, and, finally, you guessed it: the food! Conversely, when I asked what they did not like, you might again guess what came up first: academic advising. The concerns seem to be about some advisers who do not know the answers to questions, who "do not care," who resent having to serve as advisers, and

who have to serve too large a number of students. Just as with our alcohol culture problem, we have a long way to go in trying to provide quality advising to all students and the University, under the leadership of Dr. Daniel Wubah, Vice President and Dean for Undergraduate Education, is working on this, just as we are on the alcohol issues.

The other "don't likes" from Wednesday's session were: Blacksburg weather, parking, the Freshman Engineering Program (especially the first semester's part), and the limited mentoring programs for freshmen by upperclassmen (another program on which Dr. Wubah and his staff are working). We'll hear more about these programs in the months ahead.

That's the overview from the fourth "The VP Is In" session. I hope to see you at the next one (on Tuesday, March 22, beginning at 3:00 p.m. in the SGA Office in Squires) or around the campus, or hear from you by email!

Edward F. D. Spencer
Vice President for Student Affairs
espencer@vt.edu