

An Untapped Resource: Virginia Tech African American Alumni Engagement

Laurie L. Brogdon

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Damion M. Waymer  
Rachel L. Holloway  
John C. Tedesco

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## ABSTRACT

A university has many valuable internal and external publics. It is beneficial for an institution to build, maintain, and leverage its relationships with both internal and external constituency groups. Examining the body of literature on relationship management can provide insight into previously established strategies that yielded positive outcomes and demonstrate the need for additional research about Black alumni, from predominately white institutions, and their feelings toward their alma mater. Relationship management is the notion of public relations as the management of relationships between an organization and its key publics (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). The relationships that an organization has with its publics can impact many things including perceptions about the organization and organizational wealth.

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## INTRODUCTION

Relationship management is the notion of public relations as the management of relationships between an organization and its key publics (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). Relationships are at the heart of public relations (PR). The relationships that an organization has with its publics can impact many things such as organizational wealth. Organizational wealth can be created (or destroyed) through relationships with stakeholders of all kind; therefore, effective stakeholder management is managing relationships with stakeholders for mutual benefit—it is a critical requirement for corporate success (Post, Preston, & Sachs, 2002). Post et al (2002) talked about the value of intangible assets which they called relational wealth.

Public relations contributes to organizational effectiveness by building quality, long-term relationships with strategic constituencies. It helps reconcile the organization's goals with the expectations of its strategic constituencies and helps an organization identify the publics with which it needs relationships with to be effective (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006). PR cultivates relationships with these publics and is effective when it helps to build successful relationships with publics that have value to the organization.

Virginia Tech depends on relationships with its publics. The institution has many valuable external publics, such as state and federal government, corporations, and other colleges/universities. Some of the internal publics include students, faculty/staff, and alumni. It is beneficial for the institution to build, maintain, and leverage its relationships with both internal and external constituency groups. Examining the body of literature on relationship management can provide insight into previously established strategies that

yielded positive outcomes. The following sections provide reasoning for why additional research is needed to examine Black alumni, from predominately white institutions, and their feelings toward their alma mater. Next, previous research in the areas of identification, alumni relations, and relationship management give sound theoretical foundation. Then, a brief overview of the research method and protocol outline the approach. Last, background on institutional diversity issues is discussed.

## JUSTIFICATION

The Alumni Association is a department that is part of the university charged with building and maintaining relationships with alumni on behalf of the university. The university and Alumni Association specifically call for a relationship management approach, when dealing with its publics, through a focus on engagement. Simply put, alumni represent a valuable stakeholder group for Virginia Tech. The individuals in this particular constituency group were once students and they are now ambassadors for the institution in local communities and areas all over the world. There are more than 215,000 living alumni and Black alumni comprise about 6,500 of this total or about 3% of alumni. Irving Peddrew, the first Black student, came in 1957. Dr. Charlie Yates was the first Black graduate of Virginia Tech. The history of Black students at Virginia Tech is still relatively young.

The Office of Alumni Relations exist to build mutually beneficial relationships with all alumni and to engage them with the university. Many Black alumni have expressed the need for more engagement efforts such as annual reunions, Black alumni chapters, and more frequent opportunities to gather as a group. Current engagement

efforts for Black alumni include a Black alumni reunion that takes place about every three years. The reunions have been in place since the 1980's. The reunion is the pinnacle of programmatic efforts for Black alumni, but there is very little activity and/or programs for this group outside the reunion. It is like peaks and valleys with the reunion being the most prominent and significant of efforts. The issue with this current reunion only model is that the same core group of Black alumni attends the reunions, but new (first time attending a reunion) registrants from different class years do not participate at a high level. Reunion registration, from previous years, shows that there is very low participation from 1990s and 2000s graduates. This is problematic because this core group of Black alumni is getting older and burning out. Additional Black alumni volunteers are needed to grow and sustain programmatic and engagement efforts.

Black alumni have attempted to spur efforts in their local communities in the past. A group of Black alumni in the Washington DC and Hampton-Roads VA areas tried to start Black alumni chapters in the early 2000's, but those efforts were seen as promoting segregation and not supported by the Alumni Association. High turnover in the Director of Multicultural Alumni Programs position has impacted continuity and sustained engagement efforts for this group. The group has a strong desire to do more. There is a need to create other ways and activities for Black alumni to be involved, with Virginia Tech and the Alumni Association, because Black alumni participation in existing alumni chapter structures, college and/or department advisory boards, fall class reunions, college Homecomings is low or nonexistent; thus demonstrating that what is currently in place is not sufficient and/or meeting their needs.

Communication or public relations strategies that are tailored for the Black alumni demographic currently do not exist. Programs and events are marketed to the group by sending mass emails under the umbrella of Multicultural Alumni Programs. Black alumni reunion emails are sent to all Black alumni and are not segmented by class, geographical region, and/or other defined characteristics. For the current strategy to work all Black alumni would need to identify with the title Multicultural and/or Black. The Alumni Association feels that it has branded the term “Black alumni” with this constituency which is why we refer to Black alumni and not African American alumni. The issue of branding raises a question around what name or title do Black alumni identify with. Some argue that using race as a way to identify the group deters some, but others are fine with it. There are other communication challenges that are worth mentioning such as the fact that we do not have accurate contact information, email and/or mailing addresses, for all living Black alumni. The Alumni Association estimates that we may reach somewhere between 25% and 50% of all alumni when we send communication. This means that when we attempt to communicate with our Black alumni we are not reaching all of them. The Alumni Association relies mainly on email to contact alumni, print publications and mailings have declined due to costs. Past research conducted by University Relations showed that older alumni tend to prefer print communication over electronic. The office recently incorporated social media including Facebook and Hokie Nation Network (a career and professional networking site for Hokies) in spring 2009, but it is not routinely used to engage Black alumni.

Engaged alumni are more likely to support the university in various ways such as helping to recruit students, mentoring current students, and donating human and financial

resources. Contributions made by private donors increasingly are essential to the daily operations of Virginia Tech because of declining state funding support for higher education. Virginia Tech completed a 1 billion dollar, “Invent the Future”, Capital Campaign in December 2010. There was a 3 million dollar goal set for Multicultural Affairs and that was not met, which is an indicator that a deeper assessment of the relationships between Virginia Tech and multicultural alumni is needed.

Multicultural Alumni Programs was created to engage alumni, from diverse backgrounds, with the university. For two years, I have served as Director of Multicultural Alumni Programs and witnessed first-hand the challenges in engaging alumni, particularly alumni from diverse backgrounds. There is relatively low participation from Black alumni in university and Alumni Association programs and events such as fall reunions, college homecomings, and chapter events. There appears to be a lack of interest and knowledge about institutional programs and efforts. From conversations with highly engaged Black alumni, many indicate that their classmates have not had contact with the university since graduating despite many attempts, by Multicultural Alumni Programs, to reconnect them with the institution. All this leads me to ask, why are some Black alumni disengaged with Virginia Tech? What are the reasons Black alumni fail to reconnect or stay connected with the institution? Are the reasons simple or complex for disengagement? For the purpose of this thesis simple reasons are considered those external to the university such as life issues, career, family, or others obligations. Complex reasons are considered those issues specifically related to the institution or institutional decisions. They include things such as: Virginia Tech’s reputation, campus climate issues, progress toward a more diverse and inclusive

environment, organizational identification, and/or university administration and policy decisions.

A review of relevant literature on alumni relations demonstrates that the majority of research conducted focuses on fundraising efforts and securing financial gifts from alumni. Research into how to get alumni engaged with their respective alma mater has not been developed from a relationship building/management standpoint. There is very little research available that discusses or explores ways to entice racial/ethnic minority alumni, and in particular African American alumni, to get (re) involved and (re) connected to their alma mater. This study will attempt to identify reasons Virginia Tech Black alumni are mostly disengaged from the university and discover what, if anything, can be done on the part of the university to engage this group that historically has been an untapped resource. I will use personal interviews to explore reasons why Black alumni are not engaged with the university. Personal interviews can be used for explanatory research purposes and help answer the why questions. Conducting face-to-face interviews will allow for important observations and follow-up questions to be asked. Since the lack of Black alumni engagement is not a problem isolated to Virginia Tech, but a problem many large institutions face (e.g. predominately white, public, research driven, rural, land-grant campuses) this study can benefit the field by helping to shed light on some general, as well as institutional-specific, reasons for lack of engagement. Furthermore, this study applies to the field of public relations and communication because it can shed light on public relations strategies and best practices in a non-corporate setting with a particular focus on relationship building with disengaged stakeholder groups.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Past research in the areas of identification, relationship management, and alumni relations provides a framework that can be built upon. What constitutes identification and what can cause an individual to identify with a group and/or organization will be explored further.

### IDENTIFICATION

Identification is defined as a psychological orientation of the self in regard to something (as a person or group) with a resulting feeling of close emotional association and has been a subject of interest in the humanities and social sciences since the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Identification is pertinent to this study because it allows researchers to uncover whether alumni feel connected to their alma mater and explore the components (cognitive, affective, and/or behavioral) that constitute identification. The following four sections will give a broad overview of identification theory. First, the origins of the theory are discussed. Second, research on how individuals come to identify with groups is highlighted. Third, social identity theory (SIT) describes the individual characteristics that play a role in identification. Fourth, organizational identification theory (OID) provides more details about how an individual can come to identify with an organization. This information will provide insight into how alumni can identify with a large organization such as their alma mater and why some do not identify.

### Origins of the definition

Identification theory can be traced back to Sigmund Freud's writings. His definition of identification dealt with child development. According to Freud, as a child develops he/she adopts the characteristics of one of their parents and copies the behavior, which he termed identification. The id, ego, and superego are the components that make up Freud's structural model of psyche. The id is the unconscious instinctual part of the psyche. The ego is the organized part and the superego serves as the moral part of the psyche.

Kenneth Burke further built on Freud's work. Burke defined identification as any of the wide variety of means by which an author may establish a shared sense of values, attitudes, and interests with his readers. Symbols, language, and communication are the components that make up Burke's theory of identification. Action is defined as behavior that has meaning and purpose. Motion is behavior that does not have meaning or purpose. Burke's definition of a human being is "a body that learns language thereby becoming wordlings, humans are the symbol-making, symbol-using, symbol-misusing animal inventor of the negative separated from our natural condition by instruments of our own making goaded by the spirit of hierarchy and rotten with perfection" (Burke, 1966 p. 16). What sets human beings apart from other animals is our ability to make a choice. Humans create symbols to name things and communicate. This act of naming things can cause humans to misuse symbols for their own advantage. According to Burke there are many types of symbols including linguistic and nonverbal. "People filter reality through a symbolic screen and language functions as the vehicle for action" (Littlejohn & Foss 2005, p.114). To Burke language is always filled with emotion and is

the vehicle for action because a person's attitudes, feelings, and judgments are conveyed through language. Language and symbols are the things that bring people together through a common understanding which is called identification. In essence language can promote togetherness or it can promote division or separation. Consubstantiality, or communicating through shared meaning, is one way identification is created. As meaning and understanding increases so does identification. It is through this increased understanding and meaning that persuasion can occur. Burke said, "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his" (Burke, 1969, p.55). Identification can, or cannot, be conscious and/or planned.

### Identification in groups

Other scholars have written on identification as it pertains to groups. Tolman (1943) studied identification in groups and offered a valuable way of examining how individuals come to identify with large groups such as a formal organization. According to Tolman there are three interrelated processes by which identification is achieved. First, identification can occur when an individual tries to copy someone, usually an older more envied person, whom the individual wants to be like. For example, when a boy tries to copy or be like his father. Second, identification can occur when an individual feels part of any group. For example, when an individual feels part of or identifies with his/her family. Third, identification can be thought of in terms of when an individual accepts and devotes him or herself to a cause, Tolman also termed this cause-

identification; an example of this identification is when someone identifies with a cause such as anti-war or public health initiatives.

He wrote that ultimately each individual wants to love and be loved by a group and that individual thus ends up taking on the group's cause. Tolman considered group-identification the most powerful. Members of a large organization must be given common features which set them off not from individuals outside the organization, but from other "subordinate" subgroups within the organization. He argued that groups that evoke strong identification have five features or characteristics:

1. A common characteristic which clearly defines or separates the group members from nonmembers
2. Distinctive symbols and rituals which belong to the group
3. A common goal that gives a feeling of a mission
4. A set-up in the group which capitalizes and symbolizes the early family relationship and structure
5. A common enemy

These characteristics are relevant because Black alumni make up a subgroup of the larger alumni group. It is important to examine if individuals within the Black alumni group identify with this particular subgroup and how this impacts identification to the larger alumni body in general.

### Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social identity is defined as the perception of belongingness to a group classification and involves an individual defining him or herself as an actual or symbolic member of the group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Personal identity, or self-concept, and social identity are the two components of social identity theory. Personal identity encompasses characteristics such as abilities and interests. Social identity encompasses salient group classifications (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Individuals classify themselves into

various social groups. This classification allows an individual to locate her/himself in the world relative to others. Social identification allows an individual to psychologically intertwine his or her fate with that of the group; thus, allowing the individual to partake in the experiences of the group and feel its successes and failures.

Social identification literature suggests that distinctiveness, prestige, salience of out-group(s), and factors associated with group formation (interpersonal interaction, similarity, liking, proximity, shared goals, threat, common history, and others) all affect the extent to which individuals identify with the group. SIT also suggests three consequences of relevance to organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). First, individuals tend to choose activities congruent with salient aspects of their identities and they support the institutions embodying those identities. So it is likely that identification with an organization enhances support for and commitment to it. A second related consequence is that social identification affects the outcomes associated with group formation including intragroup cohesion, cooperation, altruism, and positive evaluations of the group (Turner, 1982, 1984). So it can be expected that identification would be associated with loyalty to and pride in the group and its activities. This research is relevant because it demonstrates that if Black alumni identify with Virginia Tech and/or the Alumni Association this can lead to commitment to the organization through supporting activities associated with the organization.

## Organizational Identification (OID)

Ashforth & Mael (1989) argue that organizational identification is a specific form of social identification. When social identification involves a formal organization it is referred to as organizational identification. Literature on group identification suggests four principles that are relevant to organizational identification. First, identification is viewed as a perceptual cognitive construct that does not have to be associated with certain behavior or affective states. To identify, an individual need not expend effort toward the group's goals; rather, an individual need only perceive him or herself as psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group. Behavior and affect are viewed as potential consequences (Foote, 1951). Second, social/group identification is seen as personally experiencing the successes and failures of the group (Foote, 1951; Tolman, 1943). Third, social identification and internalization are not one in the same (Hogg & Turner, 1987). Identification refers to self in terms of social categories (I am). Internalization refers to the incorporation of values, attitudes, and beliefs within the self as guiding principles (I believe). Last, identification with a group is similar to identification with a person.

In addition to four principles, group identification also consists of four critical components. One, identification is a perceptual or cognitive construct that does not require specific behavior or affective feelings. Second, identification is relational and comparative. Third, because of the relational/comparative component it is thought that individuals identify with a group for self-esteem reasons and to enhance it. Fourth, the strength of an individual's identification can be measured in degrees.

A review of relevant identification literature demonstrates that there are various forms of identification that can occur within an individual. This study provides a brief overview of Burke's theory of identification and the relevant components of social identity and organizational identification theories. The following section will highlight the major reasons a solid understanding of relationships and management of those relationships are paramount if the desire is for disengaged publics to become engaged and to identify with the organization. Identification is important to this study because ultimately people support what they identify with. Higher education institutions want alumni to identify with their alma mater because this can lead to support from this constituency. However, a major challenge arises when those publics do not identify with or do not want to be connected with the organization as long as the existing terms of the relationship are in place. A theoretical understanding of relationship management will shed light on these potential public-organizational conflicts.

## RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Public relations is the process in which organizations communicate with publics in different ways in different situations; it is seen as the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization its publics (Ledingham, 2006). Public is defined as a group of people who see they have a common interest with respect to an organization (Botan, 2006). The relationship perspective of public relations suggests that balancing the interests of organizations and publics is achieved through management of organization-public relations (Ledingham, 2006). Ledingham & Bruning (2000) defined organization-public relations as the state

which exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural, or political well-being of the other.

The relational perspective has been applied to many functions including issues management, crisis management, community relations, media relations, and public affairs. Ledingham and Bruning (2000) narrowed the dimension of relationship management to five key dimensions, trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment. Trust is defined as the organization doing what it says it will do. Openness is when the organization shares its plans for the future with public members. Involvement is the organization being involved with the welfare of the community. Commitment is the organization being committed to the welfare of the community. They examined the linkages between the five dimensions and attitudes toward an organization and found that higher scoring of the relationship dimensions correlated with a favorable predisposition toward the organization. The authors argued that the five dimensions influence perceptions of satisfaction with the organization by its publics and found that these dimensions differentiated individuals who stay with an organization from those who decide to leave or who are undecided. They suggested that the goals should be developed around relationships and communication is a tool to help achieve the goals.

Relationship management differs from other PR models in two important ways. First, it changes the focus of public relations away from quantity of messages to quality of relationships between an organization and its publics. Second, it changes the focus away from communication to relationships, with communication being the tool in the creation and maintenance of organization-public relations. Ehling (1992) suggested that the relational approach shifted public relations away from manipulation to the building,

nurturing, and maintenance of relationships. Broom and Dozier (1990) argued that, historically, public relations has focused on communication in terms of outputs rather than relational or behavioral outcomes.

### Relationship management models

Broom, Casey, and Ritchey invited other scholars to take part in the theory building process for a relational approach to public relations. They examined the term relationship and defined it as “the transactions that involve the exchange of resources between organizations and lead to mutual benefit, as well as mutual achievement” (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997, p 91). Their study produced ten conclusions about relationships:

1. Relationships can be studied separate from an individual’s perceptions
2. Relationships are formed when parties have perceptions and expectations of each other, when one or both parties need resources from one another, when one or both parties perceive mutual threats from an uncertain environment, or when there is either a legal or voluntary necessity to associate.
3. Relationships consists of patterns of linkages which allow the parties involved to pursue and service their interdependent needs
4. Relationships are dynamic, complex, always evolving, and can be described at a given point in time
5. Relationships can lead to dependency, loss of autonomy, and achieved goals
6. Relationships have unique and measurable properties that are separate from the participants
7. Antecedents and consequences of relationships have unique features that are separate from the relationship
8. Relationships are built via a mutual adaptation process
9. Lack of a useful definition limits the effectiveness of measuring the concept of relationship
10. Lack of a definition prohibits theory building of organization-public relationships from a relational approach

Antecedents to relationships are considered the cause or reason for the relationship. They can be social and/or cultural norms, collective perceptions and expectations, need for resources, perceptions of uncertain environment, and legal and/or voluntary necessity. The consequences are the outputs that can effect change in the environment and lead to achieving, maintaining, or changing goal states both inside and outside the organization. The model created by Broom et al (1997) used relationship as both a consequence and cause of change. Relationship is defined as properties of exchanges, transactions, communications, and other interconnected activities.

#### Relationship management model 2

In 2000, Grunig and Huang continued to build on the model previously created by Broom et al (1997) by focusing on moving relationships between an organization and its publics from one-way (asymmetrical) to two-way (symmetrical). Asymmetrical relationships are seen as those that are beneficial only for the organization. Communication and feedback flows from from an organization to its publics but not vice versa, from a public back to the organization. Grunig and Huang's model also built of the Broom et al model by providing relationship maintenance strategies dependent upon the type of relationship in place between an organization and its publics. In doing so they stressed the importance of focusing on outcome indicators instead of process indicators such as number of press releases or attendance counts at events. Outcome indicators include things like examining whether target audience groups received the directed message, paid attention to it, understood the message, and retained it. Outcome

indicators would measure if communication resulted in opinion, attitude, and/or behavior change.

Organizational decisions can impact stakeholder groups and have specific consequences because of this the authors argued that the antecedents of relationships are situational just as publics are situational and can change often. Grunig and Huang's (2000) model emphasized behavioral relationships, not just symbolic relationships, and extended the model by moving it beyond one organization and one public, because organizations typically deal with multiple publics with varying interests and conflicting goals. Their model focused on multiple organizations and multiple publics that impact each other and included measures for each concept within each stage. They emphasized the importance of an organization identifying its strategic publics, and developed both short and long range goals to build and maintain relationships with key audiences. The authors re-formulated Broom et al. 1997 model by replacing the middle category of concept with maintenance strategies. Instead of using antecedents that describe the publics with which organizations need relationships, the authors incorporated the strategies used to maintain those relationships, and the consequences or outcomes of those strategies. Grunig and Huang compared antecedents to relationships and used the concept of consequences to explain why people become members of publics. This was a different conceptualization from the earlier Broom et al. model. Broom et al. described antecedents as "sources of change, pressure, or tension on the system derived from the environment".

Broom, Casey, and Ritchey Model:

Antecedents	Concepts	Consequences
Social and cultural norms Collective perceptions and expectations  Needs for resources Perceptions of uncertain environment  Legal/voluntary necessity	Relationships  Properties of: Exchanges Transactions Communications Other interconnected activities	Goal achievement Dependency/loss of autonomy Routine and institutionalized behavior

Grunig & Huang Model:

Situational Antecedents (Behavioral consequences on each other)	Maintenance Strategies	Relationship Outcomes
Organization affects ( $O_1 - P_1$ )  Public affects organization ( $P_1 - O_1$ )  Organization-public coalition affects another organization ( $O_1 P_1 - O_2$ )  Organization-public coalition affects another public ( $O_1 P_1 - P_2$ )  Organization affects an organization-public coalition ( $O_1 - O_2 P_2$ )  Multiple organizations affect multiple publics ( $O_1 - P_1$ )	Symmetrical Disclosure (openness) Assurances of legitimacy Participation in mutual networks Shared tasks (helping to solve problems of interest to the other party)  Integrative negotiation Cooperative/collaboration Be unconditionally constructive Win-win or no deal  Asymmetrical Distributive negotiation Avoiding Contending Compromising Accommodating	Control mutuality (joint acceptance of degrees of symmetry)  Commitment (interdependence, loss of some autonomy)  Satisfaction/liking  Trust Goal attainment (complementary behavior)

The following section will highlight the major reasons alumni are valuable to their organization. As previously mentioned, higher education institutions want alumni to identify with their alma mater because this can lead to support from this constituency; however, this support might only be temporary or fleeting if the organization does not do a good job of first getting the alumni to identify with the organization and second making strategic efforts to engage these publics and further cultivate a relationship with them. Thus, for alumni relations efforts to be successful, management of the organizational-public (that is university-alumni) relationship must be strong. Therefore, there should be systematic plans in place to foster identification with the organization, and once identification with the organization has occurred there must be continual efforts to build the relationship with them and keep them engaged with the university.

### ALUMNI RELATIONS

Alumni provide five types of support to their alma mater: financial, prospective and new students, advice, service, and ambassadorial representation (Mael, 1988). Alumni are an important and valuable constituency yet very little research has been conducted to learn about the factors involved in alumni identification. The purpose of Mael's study was to examine the role of identification as a possible intervening variable between hypothesized antecedents and the outcome behaviors desired of alumni and to clarify some of the correlates of organizational identification. His study applied to both work and non-work settings and was designed to establish generalizable patterns across other types of organizations.

The major findings included evidence that identification is unique from satisfaction. Results demonstrated that identification is associated with a wide range of behaviors which are desirable for the organization including: prioritization of contributions to the institution, sending or intent to send one's child to the alma mater, actively recruiting or encouraging other youth to attend the school, and attendance at alumni and other institutional functions. Satisfaction with the institution's contributions to the alumnus' goals would be related to donations, recruiting, and attendance at school functions.

Mael and Ashforth (1989, 1992) conducted studies to operationalize the concept of organizational identification and test a model of possible causes of organizational identification and some potential consequences. The studies found organizational distinctiveness, organizational prestige, and intra-organizational competition were the three organizational antecedents found to be related to organizational identification. Tenure, satisfaction with the school, and sentimentality were the individual antecedents that predicted organizational identification. Results also showed that organizational identification was significantly correlated with all three outcome indicators (ranking of financial contributions, willingness to advise son to attend alma mater, willingness to advise others to attend alma mater) and the six organization participation indicators (reads alumni magazine, listens to alumni tapes, attends college banquet, attends graduate school dinner, attends alumni study hall, attends special lectures).

The findings suggested that individuals who identify with an organization are likely to support the organization in various ways. Given these findings, this study will demonstrate the importance of organization prestige, distinctiveness, and competitive

excellence is to alumni and can play a role in how individuals identify with an organization. Schools desire a positive relationship with alumni. The ways these relationships are sought, cultivated, and maintained as it relates to minority alumni at a major land grant research institution should be explored further. At this point, it is important to discuss this issue as it relates to diversity at Virginia Tech.

### BACKGROUND

Virginia Tech's diversity issues date far back into history. In 1872, the institution, like many at that time, was a place strictly for white males. Women and minorities were not allowed to attend school until decades later starting in 1921, when the first women were admitted, and 1953, when the first African American student was admitted. Because of this Virginia Tech has a history of exclusion (Campus, 2000). Faculty, staff, and students have endured campus climate issues for many years and some have described the climate as not welcoming (Campus, 2000). Some pivotal markers occurred before the BOV's 2003 decision was made in a private closed door session. In 1996, Virginia Tech incorporated diversity elements into the strategic plan. A racist email was circulated, in 1997, and President Torgersen addressed the campus community and acknowledged that there were serious problems in the climate for diversity. In 1998, a taskforce was created to assess diversity at Virginia Tech and faculty, staff, and students' perceptions of campus climate. In 1999, a Black faculty member was fired after a negative tenure review process, which led to significant coverage in the Collegiate Times newspaper.

In recent years, the issue of diversity has been at the forefront for Virginia Tech. Diversity in higher education has been studied in the context of student and faculty

recruitment and retention efforts. The issue cycle of diversity at Virginia Tech has included public challenges. Some of the media coverage includes a very public decision in 2003 to end affirmative action programs and policies at Virginia Tech (Schmidt, 2003). Most recently, John Rocovich was re-appointed to Virginia Tech's governing body, the Board of Visitors (BOV). Rocovich was the rector of the BOV in 2003 when the board ended affirmative action policies/programs. Declining Black student enrollment and well documented campus climate issues for faculty, staff, and students from a 1998-1999 climate survey are examples of other challenges (Campus, 2000). Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), an external group, challenged the university's stance on incorporating a diversity component into the faculty tenure process; this was highly publicized in industry news sources like *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. These issues have reflected poorly on the university and administration according to some key stakeholders like faculty/staff, students, and alumni.

The university, in order to be effective, has to recognize the historical context of dealing with this particular constituency group and focus on building and repairing relationships before we ask them to engage on any level. The Black history and experience is different. At the heart of this issue is experience. We often speculate, but have very little data and information about the experiences of Virginia Tech Black alumni? This issue forms the ground upon which this research is based. In particular, this study will draw on relationship management as a model that could enhance Black alumni's perceptions and interactions with their alma mater and the Alumni Association.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1: What factors/indicators did Virginia Tech African American alumni identify with as students?
- RQ2: How do Virginia Tech African American alumni feel about their alma mater and the Alumni Association?
- RQ3: What are some reasons some African American alumni are or are not engaged?

## METHOD

This study will utilize an interview and autoethnography method. Babbie (2006) highlighted three benefits of conducting interviews. First, personal interviews can be used for descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory purposes. Second, this method allows for original data collection that describes a large population which cannot be personally observed. Third, this method can also measure attitude orientations in a large population. Autoethnography is used as a method because I have lived experiences as a Black alumna, Virginia Tech faculty member, and current graduate student. This method has been used to explore media portrayals of stereotypes and inner-city crime (Waymer 2009) and racialized and social class standpoints (Waymer, 2008). The autoethnography method requires introspection and for one to recall thoughts, feelings, and emotions to write the experiences as a story (Waymer, 2010).

### Protocol

An application was submitted to the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) and approved in December 2011, prior to the data collection phase of the project. Virginia Tech has approximately 215,000 living alumni; of that number there are approximately 6,500 living Black alumni. Purposive and snowball sampling was used in this study. Purposive sampling was used to identify the initial group of alumni within a certain sample population of engaged Black alumni. There is a core group of Black alumni who have been highly engaged with the university in the following ways: they participate on alumni advisory boards for their college, attend university functions on a regular basis, and/or sit on university boards including the Virginia Tech Foundation

Board and the Board of Visitors. Other highly engaged Black alumni volunteer in their local communities by hosting alumni functions and assisting in recruitment efforts with prospective high school students.

First, a list of engaged Black alumni based on their attendance to Alumni Association events and programs during the last two years. Second, from the initial list of engaged alumni, I asked the group of engaged alumni to recommend other alumni who they know are not engaged with the university and Alumni Association. The referrals were the alumni friends and/or former classmates of engaged alumni, this is where snowball sampling was used. Third, from the referrals a list of disengaged Black alumni was created. Disengaged alumni were contacted by phone and/or email, and asked if they would be willing to participate in a study. Once the disengaged alumnus/alumna agreed to participate a Consent Form was sent via email, online survey.vt.edu link, or fax. Consent forms were returned to the researcher within 48 hours and one-on-one interview were scheduled. The location of the interview varied due to what is most convenient (time and location) to the participant. Phone interviews were scheduled with alumni who lived outside of a five hour drive from Blacksburg.

During the interview phase, participants were asked a series of 5 to 8 questions based on the time allotment. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and recorded with an audio tape recorder. Participants received a debriefing statement after the question portion of the interview ended. Once theoretical saturation had been reached in the subject pool, i.e. no new themes were surfacing, interviews ended. The researcher took interview notes of participant's responses to interview questions. Alumni were asked general demographic questions (such as name, graduation year, gender, major(s),

college(s), student organizations he/she participated in as a student, and if the alum attended another college and/or university other than Virginia Tech) once the designated protocol questions had been completed. Participants were assured anonymity and received a debriefing statement after the interview had ended. Common themes or similar opinions/feedback was identified from the alumni's responses. A set of common themes will then be used to formulate a list of recommendations on how Virginia Tech can build relationships with alumni within this constituency group. Audio tapes and interview notes will be kept in a locked file cabinet at the Alumni Association.

### Participants

Based on the snowball sample, sixteen disengaged alumni agreed to be interviewed. Four graduated during the 1980s; six graduated during the 1990s, and six graduated during the 2000s. One individual attended during the 1990s but transferred to another institution to complete his degree. He is included in this study because the Alumni Association considers an alumnus or alumna to be any student who has attended Virginia Tech for at least one semester. Alumnus JM still identifies with Virginia Tech and continues to support organizations at VT. Five women and eleven men participated in this study. The sixteen alumni interviewed are graduates from the following five colleges; three from the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, six from the College of Engineering, one from the College of Science, five from the College of Business, and one from the College of Architecture and Urban Studies. One alumna received her undergraduate degree from the College of Science and her graduate degree

from the College of Engineering. Fifteen of the participants came to Virginia Tech from areas in the state of Virginia and one alumnus came from New York.

### Data Acquisition and Analysis

Behavior and relationship served as dependent variables. Identification served as the independent variable. Identification was measured by asking:

1. How do you feel about Virginia Tech?
2. Do you consider your feelings to be positive or negative?
3. Do you like Virginia Tech?
4. How do you feel about the Alumni Association?
5. Do you like the Alumni Association?

Behavior will be measured in the following ways:

1. Do you attend Virginia Tech programs/events either locally or on campus?
2. How often do you attend Virginia Tech programs/events?
3. When was the last time you attended a Virginia Tech program/event and was it on campus or somewhere else?
4. Do you attend Alumni Association programs/events?
5. How often do you attend Alumni Association programs/events?
6. When was the last time you attended a Virginia Tech program/event and was it on campus or somewhere else?
7. Have you had any interaction with prospective high student who have applied or plan to apply to Virginia Tech in the past two to five years?

8. Have you had any interaction with current a Virginia Tech student, in a mentoring or advising role, in the past two to five years?
9. Have you had any interaction with your department and/or college since graduating?

Interview data was transcribed into a 189 page Microsoft Word document. The interviews were listened to repeatedly to unearth emerging themes. The interview data was analyzed using a thematic narrative analysis because the purpose of this project was to capture, and then make sense of, disengaged Black alumni's stories. Humans tell a variety of stories including stories of triumph, perseverance, defeat, and persecution. Simply put, to be human means to tell stories (Fisher 1984, 1985). Stories can serve a greater purpose than simply recounting events; rather, they can be used as an effective tool to illuminate various aspects of a culture. By using narrative as an interpretive method one can achieve a clearer understanding of the culture that produces the narrative. Narratives, which are far from being inconsequential stories, "give collective social life meaning [and] enable us to understand the actions of others" (Desantis & Morgan, 2004, p. 321).

As I analyzed the interviews, I paid close attention to differences and similarities across alumni cohorts. Thus, comparing the 1980's cohort to the 1990's and 2000s cohort allowed for the opportunity to see if the reasons Black are not engaged are similar regardless of the decade or timeframe that they attended Virginia Tech. For organizational purposes graduates were grouped together by decade to allow the reader to see a natural progression in graduation years.

## INTERVIEW RESULTS

The following section is a summary of the interviews conducted with 16 Black alumni and is provided to allow readers the opportunity to read about the different experiences of each alumnus/alumna.

### Interview 1: Alumnus DD Class of 1984

Alumnus DD started college at a HBCU then transferred to Virginia Tech. His decision to come was influenced by Calvin Jamison and Glen Valentine, two Black Undergraduate Admissions staff members. Alumnus DD remembers unyielding support from faculty and staff. Black sororities and fraternities provided opportunities for Blacks to hang out together during his time as a student. Virginia Tech is a legacy in his family; two of his brothers also went to the school. He wanted his daughter to attend Virginia Tech, but she did not want to go because she felt it was not diverse enough. He has positive memories of being a student. Socially it was an adjustment for him to connect with other Blacks because he was not at Tech freshman year. Virginia Tech prepared him well academically and he got a good quality education. Financially it was a strain for him to attend VT. Alumnus DD feels connected to the Alumni Association through communication he receives (newsletters, emails, and webpage). He feels less connected to Virginia Tech, now than in previous years, because of geographical distance and family/work commitments. He is not very active but his heart and spirit are there. He remembers the 2003 BOV decision and its impact on how the school was perceived. The current Black student enrollment numbers are not good. He attends sporting events and wears VT paraphernalia to demonstrate his school spirit. As a student VT did not do a good job of engaging him, as an alumnus he feels the efforts are good. Alumnus DD

recognizes that VT is a hard place for Blacks to accept due to lack of cultural options. Facebook has helped him reconnect with old classmates and he would like to see the university and the Alumni Association use this communication tool more. He would choose Virginia Tech again.

#### Interview 2: Alumnus MJ Class of 1986

The time and context of the 1980's influences how Alumnus MJ feels about Virginia Tech. Black administrators played an important role in building community for Black students and helped them to have a cultural identity. Current Black student enrollment numbers are bad; therefore, Virginia Tech needs to incorporate different recruitment strategies. His academic experience was a challenge, but he felt well prepared because of an advanced high school curriculum. While at VT, he got academic help when he needed it. He enjoyed his academic and social experience. Alumnus MJ is not involved with the Alumni Association or university, outside of attending sporting events, but feels connected. He attends Black alumni events and prefers these types of activities because he feels comfortable in the environment and will know the people who attend. Alumnus MJ put a lot of blood, sweat, tears into getting his degree. He allocates his company's matching fund contributions to a HBCU, which he did not go to, and not his alma mater. Alumnus MJ would choose VT again.

#### Interview 3: Alumnus RB Class of 1986

Alumnus RB spent his freshman year at a community college and then transferred to VT. It was a struggle socially and academically for him. He needed help academically, but did not seek out help. Instead he opted to "tough it out" which is why he would have liked to have someone from the university proactively reaching out to him

on a consistent basis. The outreach from the school was there at the beginning and end of his college years, but not in the middle. Overall he describes his experience as positive because he chooses to focus on the 90 percent good and not the 10 percent bad. Socially the transition was difficult because he encountered racism and negative situations.

Blacksburg was not a diverse area while he was a student; as a result he had to defend himself in tough racial incidences and developed coping mechanisms to deal with these situations. He got a good quality education and put a lot of blood, sweat, tears into getting his degree. One faculty member was very instrumental to his life and time at Virginia Tech and he formed bonds with students in his major. Alumnus RB has a sense of pride about going to VT and getting an Engineering degree because Virginia Tech is recognized and respected. Black student enrollment was low when he was a student; VT needs to step it up and recruit more diverse students. The university should embrace diversity to be involved in the globalization and changing trends of the world. He attends sporting events and follows athletics. Alumnus RB likes the camaraderie amongst Hokies. He feels connected to the university and Alumni Association, but is not actively involved with anything outside of sports. He visits campus when he travels to the area for work (bookstore, academic department, Macados, Squires) about once a year. He wears VT paraphernalia and Saturday is Hokie day in his house. The university and Alumni Association should continue its efforts to engage more Black alumni because it is “our university too”. He would like to attend both general Alumni Association and Black alumni events and wants to be more involved. Alumnus RB would choose VT again.

Interview 4: Alumna ML Class of 1989

Alumnus ML feels like the Black community at Virginia Tech has changed, the community feels different to her now. The Black community was tight knit when she was a student because there were not many Black students when she was there. There was an unwritten rule that Blacks spoke to other Blacks when they would see each other on campus. When she visits campus she does not see this tradition still in place.

Academically it was not difficult for her, she majored in Math. She had a good support network in place academically because Black upperclassmen helped younger students out. Socially the Black fraternities and sororities supported each other and helped bring the community together. Virginia Tech is a legacy in her family; her older sister also went to VT. Calvin Jamison and Glen Valentine, two staff people in Undergraduate Admissions, helped the Black community stay together. She feels connected to the Alumni Association through Black alumni events and prefers to attend Black alumni events rather than general Alumni Association events. She had a few negative racial issues such as when her advisor told her not to apply to graduate school because she was not smart enough. She felt those comments were racially motivated because she had good grades and had succeeded at Virginia Tech. To her, being an alumna is about getting a good education. Virginia Tech is recognized and respected. Overall, she does not have negative feelings toward the university or Alumni Association and would choose VT again.

1990's

Interview 5: Alumnus DC Class of 1998

Alumnus DC liked the fact that Virginia Tech focused on technology and this is what drew him to the school. He was not highly engaged as a student because he felt there was nothing for him to be engaged in. He was the only Black person on his residence hall and felt he had to constantly defend himself in heated race discussions because of it. There were so few Blacks on campus, when he was a student, and as a result Black students stuck together. Alumnus DC felt there were no specific programs for Black students such as cultural and social activities. The academics side of his experience was good, but he wanted more socially. He did not have many dating options on campus and had to go off campus, to other colleges and universities, to find a larger dating pool. He does not feel connected to the university or the Alumni Association. Alumnus DC is proud that he went to Virginia Tech because the school is recognized and respected. To him, being an alumnus means he made it through and graduated from Virginia Tech. This is a great accomplishment for a Black male. Alumnus DC has never been back to campus because he doesn't know anyone. He went to George Washington for graduate school. He feels more connected to that school because he receives a lot of communication from them and there are a lot of local events for alumni to participate in. George Washington consistently reaches out to their alumni and asks them to be involved; as a result of his connection to the school he gives money to GW and not Virginia Tech. After he graduated, he felt Virginia Tech made no effort to reach out to him. He would like for Virginia Tech to use Black alumni to help connect with current Black students on campus. Alumnus DC would choose VT for the academics, but would prefer to attend a school that better meets his academic and social needs.

#### Interview 6: Alumna JR Class of 1998

Alumnus JR describes her student experience as “eat or be eaten” and felt it was a struggle. It was tough for her academically; she never knew what to do to be successful in college or who to go to for help. She did not have enough access to her professors to get the help she needed. Her older relative also went to VT. She pledged Zeta Phi Beta sorority. Her experience at Virginia Tech made her stronger; she knows how to interact with all kinds of people as a result of going to Virginia Tech. Blacks hung out together in the dining halls. The Black community was tight knit and when you saw another Black person you spoke. Being an alumna is about having connections to other people and for her it meant she overcame. She is not involved with the Alumni Association or university personally, but she recruits on behalf of her company on campus. Alumnus JR never felt a part of Virginia Tech and has no true connection to her alma mater. She remembers being the only Black person in a classroom of 500. Black alumni efforts are piece meal and appear not to be supported by the university. She thinks VT should have a structured system and dedicated staff to work with Black and Multicultural alumni.

#### Interview 7: Alumna MB Class of 1998

Alumna MB liked the camaraderie and close knit friendships she developed in school. There were so few Blacks on campus and they stuck together. She remembers large classes of 500 students. The dining halls were important and served as a gathering place for Black students. She did not like feeling like “such a minority.” The connection with her academic advisors and professors was non-existent. She needed tutoring and academic help but did not have anyone she felt comfortable going to for help. Alumnus MB recommends that Virginia Tech have more diverse faculty/staff and advisors in the classrooms so that Black students can have someone to connect to. She did not see the

university do programs and activities for Blacks; instead it seemed like those efforts were only done by Black faculty, staff, and student organizations. She does not feel connected to VT, but feels a sense of pride because she got her degree from a good school. Alumna MB is disappointed about the Black student enrollment numbers and feels the university is not serious about increasing diversity because the numbers have consistently remained low. She wants the university to admit there is a problem with diversity and work harder to resolve the issues. Virginia Tech is a legacy in her family; two of her sisters also attended the school. Alumna MB feels that watching or attending sporting events is supporting the university and prefers to attend Black alumni events. Career mentoring and information is what she wanted more of when she was a student; as a result of not having that need met she is interested in helping current students explore career options in banking. She does not receive communication from the university, but does receive emails from the Alumni Association. She would not choose Virginia Tech again because it was not a very diverse environment.

Interview 8: Alumnus RW Class of 1996

Alumnus RW had a great experience and would “absolutely” choose VT again. He is very proud to be a VT alumnus and was the first in his family to go to college. VT is a recognized and respected school. He enjoyed his experience at Virginia Tech because he had a good support network of friends and faculty on campus. He is interested in starting a community organization that helps students pay for school.

#### Interview 9: Alumnus GB Class of 1995

Alumna GB remembers the faculty helping him through a difficult time in his college experience. He had to take time off from school for personal reasons; and the faculty members worked with him to keep him on track for graduating. The most important part of Virginia Tech is the community. He would like to see a partnership, between Virginia Tech, alumni, and alumni's companies, be leveraged for current students' benefit. Alumna GB loves and feels connected to VT. He is a fan of Facebook and would like the university and Alumni Association to use social media more to reach alumni.

#### Interview 10: Alumnus JM Class 1999

Alumnus JM feels Virginia Tech is a great academic school, but it does not have a lot to help Black students develop outside the classroom. He had to leave campus in order to have a complete college experience. There was a close knit Black community, during his time, because there was so few of them on campus. Blacks spoke to each other. He respects VT's history and tradition, but points out that the tradition left out Blacks. He built a lot of good friendships and his alumni connection to Virginia Tech is through those friendships. He transferred to the University of Maryland to complete his degree and had a great student experience there. His student experience at VT consisted of "lots of peaks and valleys". His car was vandalized and the word "nigger" was spray painted on his car while it was parked on campus. There was no preparation for him going from an urban to rural setting. Due to the student demographics of the classroom he felt there was no balance in thought or perspectives inside the classroom. Despite his overall negative feelings about his student experience he does remember the importance of one faculty member, Dr. Bev Watford, who took the time to support him academically.

He pledged Phi Beta Sigma fraternity. The pride he carries for VT is through sports. The University of Maryland reaches out to him and contacts him regularly, something Virginia Tech does not do. He wants VT to admit they have a diversity problem and come up with real solutions. The university is not serious about diversity and things for Blacks are basically fluff. Alumnus JM was recruited to VT to play basketball and feels there are huge discrepancies between how Black athletes and Black non-athletes are recruited to the school. He would not choose VT again.

2000's

#### Interview 11: Alumnus MG Class of 2006

Alumnus MG's student experience worked in two phases. The first two years he kept to himself and it was "ok". In the second phase, he was involved in student organizations and exposed to key people and this made his last two years better. During his junior and senior years he saw another side of the university as a result of being exposed to university leaders. He was a student when the BOV ended affirmation action in 2003 and remembers the public outrage. Important programs designed to support minorities were eliminated after the BOV decision, some of which he was involved in. Virginia Tech prepared him well academically for the workforce. Socially his experience was ok, but recalls that his freshman roommate had never talked to a Black person prior to meeting Alumnus MG. The Black Cultural Center was a place of refuge for him and other Black students. Alumnus MG feels a sense of pride about having gone to VT. He does not feel as connected to Virginia Tech as he would like to feel. He has different feelings toward VT than majority alumni have. Alumnus MG has an older relative that

went to VT and feels his experience as compared to his relative is night and day. His experience as an alum has been non-existent and not much of an experience. There has not been much outreach from the university to Black alumni, asking them to get involved. He would like for young alumni to be used more to help bridge the gap with current students on campus. Alumnus MG mentioned giving and stresses the importance of the university building a relationship with him now before he starts to climb in his career and make more money. He does not feel connected to the Alumni Association. Alumnus MG feels that VT is run by “a bunch of old white men” who do not understand the needs of students of color. He feels the university tries a general approach to engaging Black alumni that does not work. There is a lack of communication from the university and VTAA to Black alumni; he does not feel informed about what is going on at the university.

Interview 12: Alumnus KD Class of 2007

Alumnus KD was very involved with student organizations; he pledged Iota Phi Theta fraternity. He feels very attached and connected to VT and part of something special. Alumnus KD feels a sense of pride about being an alumnus and is still engaged with the on campus student organizations he was a member of as a student. He gives money directly to those student organizations he is an alumnus of. Alumnus KD feels like he left a legacy at Virginia Tech.

Interview 13: Alumnus LK trends:

Alumnus LK really enjoyed her student experience. She was a resident advisor, orientation leader, and participated in study abroad. Virginia Tech is a different atmosphere now than when she went to school; Blacks spoke to each other when she was a student. More work is needed to build a more inclusive environment on campus. Virginia Tech needs to embrace diversity more wholeheartedly if it wants to keep up with its peer institutions. She recruits at Virginia Tech on behalf of her company and is interested in helping students pursue public policy work and careers in government. Additional efforts are needed to engage Black students and alumni; more of an investment is needed. Virginia Tech needs to change the recruitment strategies in order to increase the number of Black students at VT. She feels a sense of pride about being a Virginia Tech alumna and wants to be more involved with both the university and Alumni Association. She would like more information about what the Alumni Association does and offers. The university should communicate more with Black alumni.

Interview 14: Alumnus JD Class of 2000

Alumnus JD enjoyed the MBA program at the National Capital Region center. The program had good professors and classes, but he expected to see more Blacks in the program. He would choose VT again. He went to Hampton University for his undergraduate degree and is more involved with that school because they focus on helping the community. He wants to be more involved with the Virginia Tech Alumni Association.

#### Interview 15: Alumnus DA Class of 2007

The first two years of Alumnus DA's college experience was a transition. It was tough academically and the Engineering program was challenging. He did his graduate degree at the University of Maryland. He does not see a lot of events for Black alumni and wants more engagement from the university and the Alumni Association other than events around football. To him, being an alumnus is about getting a good education. He tries to be a VT ambassador to other minorities students interested in VT. The school has a good reputation and is a credible school. Hokies have camaraderie, but he is not sure if Black alumni leverage their networks and help each other out like White alumni do. He does not see any strategic vision from the top down as it relates to diversity efforts at Virginia Tech. VT operates in silos. He is not sure if it is worth his time to invest in Virginia Tech; he does not want to invest time and resources into VT and diversity efforts if ultimately nothing is going to change. Virginia Tech's diversity efforts are fluff and for show. Deep down nothing has changed as it relates to diversity. There is no communication from the university and the Alumni Association to Black alumni. A "good ole boy network runs VT".

#### Interview 16: Alumna SK Class of 2004

Alumna SK enjoyed her college experience. She did not like the limited opportunities and activities for Blacks, but her social experience was good. Blacks spoke to each other when she was a student. Alumna SK loves VT and feels part of the university. She likes the camaraderie of the Hokie alumni network. Her degree means something because Virginia Tech is recognized and respected. She does not feel a real connection to the Alumni Association, but has attended two Black alumni reunions. She prefers activities targeted for Black alumni.

These brief summations of the interviewees and their perspectives are provided so that readers can at least identify in some form with the characters as their stories are shared via this research project. Consistent trends that were brought up in three or more interviews, by alumni, were identified as a major trend.

## NARRATIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANTS' STORIES

On this continuum of experiences, the group of alumni who seemed to have the most positive memories and affection toward the university is the 1980s graduates. Despite some challenges and/or negative situations they by in large still feel positive about Virginia Tech, their experience, and what they gained from going to school here. I would classify the 2000's graduates as in the middle of the continuum, most have positive affection toward the university and desire more tangible outcomes and benefits of being an alum i.e. more networking opportunities and to be used more to help bridge the gap with current students. The majority of graduates from the 1990s is on the other end of the continuum and has more negative memories and less positive affection toward their alma mater. It is in the 1990's when the expectations changed. Black students at Virginia Tech during this time expected the university to play a larger more visible role, in building a campus climate that was conducive to the success of all students, particularly minorities, but felt that was not the case. The students from the 1990's wanted and expected to go to college in an environment that was more diverse and had more Black students, faculty, staff, and administrators. What the institution had done on the diversity front for the 1980's graduates was not enough to meet the needs of 1990's graduates. The level of expectation about what role Virginia Tech should play changed as society was changing. Those students wanted more and as a result of not getting more they now harbor resentment and bitterness toward their alma mater. They do not understand why Virginia Tech did not recruit more students of color, support them throughout their student experience, and continue a relationship with them post-graduation.

Research conducted with 16 Virginia Tech Black alumni revealed eye opening insight into their perceptions of and feelings toward their alma mater. The following trends were identified if five or more alumni mentioned the topic during an interview. The following themes were consistent throughout the interviews and are organized by those memories and/or experiences that relate to the alum's time as a student and those that relate to their time as an alumnus/alumna.

### STUDENT EXPERIENCE

#### Being a Minority is a Battle

A consistent theme that emerged throughout the 16 interviews was the experience was not easy. The words challenging, struggle, and difficult were used by the alumni to describe their academic and/or social experiences. Alumna JR said, her entire time at Tech she felt it was "eat or be eaten." She felt alone and isolated in her classroom experience. Being an alumna of Virginia Tech, for her it meant she overcame. Alumnus JM summed up his feelings about his student experience when he said, "A lot of peaks and valleys, but I never felt like I ever had a victory or got a break." This theme carried all the way through to a graduate from the 2000s. Alumnus DA said, "The school is definitely not for everybody, you can easily be broken mentally." The message that he tries to carry back into the black community to younger kids is that "I graduated from a predominately white school, I made it, and so can you. It was a struggle, but I made it." The quotes reference war metaphors that seem to capture the experiences of Black students at VT, as a minority you are in a war zone and the mentality is to survive. The irony is that this is a military school with a Drillfield and Corps of Cadets.

### Connection as a student

Dr. Robert Franklin, President of Morehouse College said, “Graduates get their degree and go, but alumni get their degree and pay it forward.” Engagement starts long before an individual walks across the stage to receive his/her diploma. The experience an individual had while he/she was in school is probably the largest indicator of how engaged an alum will be with their alma mater post-graduation. The student experience impacts how an individual perceives and feels toward her/his alma mater. The experience includes inside the classroom or academics and outside the classroom or social. Social experiences include cultural aspects, campus climate, leadership development, and participation in student organizations and other areas of interest. Some described the academic transition as difficult, even though many felt they were adequately prepared to enter college from a rigorous high school curriculum. Some of the alumni felt their academic needs were not supported throughout their college years by professors, teaching and graduate assistants, and/or advisors. Many mentioned not knowing who to turn to for academic help. Many had no connection with their academic advisor or professors and felt Virginia Tech abandoned them during their school years.

Alumna MB said, I definitely didn't particularly care for the academic advisors. I just felt like they were more connected to White students. I never had a connection with my academic advisor and it was like she didn't give a damn that we didn't connect. She just signed off on whatever I put on that piece of paper I was going to take. She barely even looked at it. She never made any recommendations; she was just a signature to get me through each year. I think it was bad that I never felt connected to my advisor.

Some feel that the university should have made a more proactive effort to reach out to them all the way through college. One alumnus felt that Tech did a good job of reaching out to students on the front end when a student first enters as a student, but that academic support tapered off and was relatively non-existent in the middle and towards the end.

Alumnus RB said, I know in terms of the initial reach out and contact I did have that, but in terms of after you get started and you're studying, it would have been nice if somewhere in the middle of the quarter of the semester somebody called to say hey let's meet, let's talk, let's see how it's going. It's sort of like hey we're here if you need us and that's pretty much it.

#### The Power of a Caring Mentor: The Importance of Black administrators, faculty/staff

Many of the alumni interviewed mentioned the importance of having Black faculty and staff on campus. Majority faculty and staff also positively impacted the lives of Black students. One alumnus who feels no connection to Virginia Tech, outside of sports, spoke highly of a Black faculty member who served as a mother figure to him and other Blacks in the College of Engineering. The alumnus vividly recalls that his experience in his Engineering best team, a small group of students that matches upperclassmen with freshmen, were some of his more memorable moments at school. He was appreciative that the faculty member took a proactive and active role in his academic development before he ever came to campus. He remembers being paired with upperclassmen during the summer before freshmen year. The matching of freshmen with upperclassmen automatically helped to ease his transition into a new environment. The relationship started out as purely academic and blossomed into a social group and network. Alumnus JM said, "She was the reason my mother felt comfortable letting me

come to Virginia Tech.” Black alumni now want to return the favor and serve as mentors for current Black students, as a result of their relationship with a Black staff member during their time as a student.

Alumna LK said, For students who are interested in working in public policy or working on Capitol Hill, I definitely want to be involved to share with them what my experiences were and to be a resource to them.

Administrators played a vital role to Black students by helping to build community and instill a sense of “cultural pride.” During the interviews alumni asked about former Black administrators and strongly recommended having more Black administrators on campus because it helps to have people who looked like you available to advise and support students throughout your career.

Alumna MB said, I think Virginia Tech could work on increasing the numbers of diverse faculty and staff. Make it a point to have more diverse staff there and that will help the students because at least we feel like we could make some type of connection with the academic advisors and the instructors. In my department, there wasn't a single Black instructor, TA, or counselor, nobody in my whole area, not that I was aware of and I was there for what four and half years.

As an administrator, this role is very important and can also be very taxing and draining. You feel a sense of obligation to help current students who look like you, but making yourself available can be time consuming. Supporting students informally, when it is not a part of your job, is difficult. There are student group meetings and programs every night of the week. So balancing this demand requires you to work your normal 8-5 job and then make yourself available to students who are seeking administrators from similar

cultural backgrounds outside the classroom because there are so few black faculty and staff in the classroom for them to identify with. What I have personally witnessed is that the “minority tax” comes into play each and every day. As a minority faculty/staff/administrator you are expected to participate in activities that may not have anything to do with your job because there are so few to represent and participate. What ends up happening is that you are asked to sit on committees or participate in various things because you are a minority and you burn out.

So few of us:

Black alumni always talk about the low Black student enrollment. These low numbers resulted in different feelings. On one side of the spectrum, having so few Black people on campus created a sense of community for some. On the other side, the low enrollment numbers created a sense of bitterness and resentment toward Virginia Tech in some alumni. Time and again, it was echoed that because there were “so few of us we all stuck together.” Low Black student enrollment impacts so many things in and out of the classroom. As a Black student you can go through your 4+ years and never take a class with another Black student. You could also go through your 4+ years and never have a Black professor or advisor. This is the reality of being a Black student at a predominately white institution. Socially it impacts things like access to cultural things that reflect and represent your needs and interests. It impacts your social life and dating options. All of these things significantly impact your happiness; thus, can impact how you feel about the environment.

One positive that resulted from having low enrollment numbers is that Black alumni largely remember their experience with a close knit group of friends. Because

Black students may not have gotten interaction with other Blacks inside the classroom they created this community outside the classroom however they could by visiting other schools that offered social activities for Blacks. Alumni DC and JM hung out at HBCU's and attended their Homecomings and stepshows. Another way Blacks created community outside the classroom was by congregating in informal settings such as the Black Cultural Center, residence halls, and dining halls.

Alumna JR said, You went to Dietrick at a certain time, you went to Owens at a certain time, and you went to Hokie Grill on a certain day. You knew this was when the Black people were going to be there so that's when you went. You knew you didn't go at 5pm you went at 7pm.

The dining halls were very important. Many Black alumni have fond memories of hanging out in front of Dietrick. The 90's graduates remember eating in room B, which stood for black. Black students ate in a certain spot at a certain time every day of the week. They spent hours together in the dining halls. This interaction provided a sense of normalcy where they could be amongst people like them for a few hours of the day.

Many of the alumni talked about the benefits of attending a PWI rather than a HBCU. The alumni interviewed felt that a HBCU would have offered a more supportive and welcoming environment for them. HBCU's have better social and cultural things in place, but Virginia Tech is stronger academically. Virginia Tech's academic reputation and quality of education was a benefit of attending a PWI.

Alumnus MG said, When I look back at going to Virginia Tech I am thankful for the fact that it really prepared me for life outside. That is one thing I don't think some kids that go to HBCUs get. They get support in school, but when it comes

to getting out it's an adjustment, considering they have to work with a lot of different people and know how to deal with white folks just to put it bluntly.

They have to catch up whereas that's something we leave understanding.

Another alumnus echoed a similar sentiment.

Alumnus KD said, Not to downplay HBCU's but I felt like I got more from Virginia Tech than if I would have went to Hampton or Morehouse because of the kind of representation of the world that was at Virginia Tech. So I felt very prepared. Like I say, I wouldn't take back any of my experiences at Virginia Tech, the bad ones especially, because they really prepared me for what I'm dealing with now in life and my career.

Fraternalities and sororities in the 1980's and 1990's was a staple of the Black community on campus. The fraternities/sororities helped bring the Black community together through social activities including parties and stepshows. Seemingly, the groups got along and worked well together. The presence of these groups and the activities they provided was for the most part the only time that Blacks had the opportunity to come together with each other as a whole.

What causes some resentment is the fact that we were forced to create this community for ourselves. Some majority students and faculty/staff take for granted that everywhere they go the environment is full of people who look like them, it is automatic. They do not have to work to be around people like them on campus, something that is certainly not the case for minorities. When I hear majority people ask, "What is the big deal, what is wrong with our current Black student enrollment numbers," it angers me. They do not understand the impact that low enrollment numbers has on the experience

and development of young Black adults. I think some people do not understand why this matters because no matter where they go they are the majority. What is normal to them can be very isolating to others. Being a minority sometimes results in having your voice, opinion, and needs ignored or overlooked. As a student, I came to resent the fact that no one seemed to care that there were so few Black students going to Virginia Tech. This resentment was echoed by many Black alumni. If you get a group of black alumni together the first question we will ask about is the current Black student population. Black alumni do not understand why the numbers remain the same and in some years decline.

Recruitment and admissions strategies impact the Black student enrollment. Alumnus JM talked about the disparity in recruitment practices between Black athletics and Black non-athletes coming to Virginia Tech. He argues that Black athletes get specialized and personal contact when they are being recruited to play sports. Alumnus JM was recruited to play basketball at Virginia Tech. This same targeted effort is not in place for Blacks who are not athletes. I agree with Alumnus JM because I have witnessed these efforts first-hand as my boyfriend in college played football at Virginia Tech. He was an All-American Black athlete and I was a regular student. If Virginia Tech approached recruiting Black non-athletes with the same vigor they put forth into recruiting Black athletes I believe our enrollment numbers would be higher than 4%. Black athletes get personal visits to their homes from coaches, they are brought on campus to view facilities and watch games, coaches meet with their families and attend the high school student's games. In some cases the athletes are brought to campus a semester early to allow them time to adjust to college life. They have personal tutors,

study halls, and organized social and academic activities throughout their college years. Academic advisors are in place to walk them through their class selections. I sat through many meetings with my boyfriend as his academic advisor went over his grades and progress toward graduation. In fact, his academic advisor met regularly with his professors. Professors sent regular progress reports into the advisor. Multiple people are monitoring the student athlete's grades and progress. I know many athletes who were interested in other areas outside of sports and these things were arranged for them to participate in such as internships or other career exploration opportunities. Yet the Black non athlete gets far less than this. I recognize that there is a difference between how athletes in general are recruited and how students in general are recruited. I highlight this example because Virginia Tech does not have a problem recruiting the general white student; it does, however, have difficulty recruiting the general Black student. Thus, it makes the point that Virginia Tech does not have a problem recruiting top Black athletes, but has problems recruiting Black non-athletes all the more relevant. Hence, in this case I believe we could learn some valuable practices from our friends in Athletics. Indirect and impersonal recruiting strategies do not work for some racial/ethnic minorities, first generation, and low income students. This is best demonstrated by the influx of Black students who came to Virginia Tech in the early 1980s. The reason they came was because two Black Admissions counselors went out to them, spent time with their families, and brought them here to campus. Every 1980s alumni I interviewed mentioned the impact that Calvin Jamison and Glen Valentine had on their decision to come here. What we are currently doing is not working and continuing to try to spin and cover up the real problems only angers Black alumni.

Four of the alumni interviewed were legacies, had other siblings or family members who also attended Virginia Tech either before or after them. Alumnus DD and his brother are VT graduates and both wanted their children to attend Virginia Tech. Alumnus DD brought his daughter and niece to visit campus. His daughter did not want to attend Virginia Tech because she felt it was not diverse enough and that there were not enough Black students. This sentiment, though it did not emerge with high frequency, still warrants mention. Parents can desire their children to want to attend Virginia Tech, but they cannot in full faith force their children to endure an environment that does not appear to be supportive, welcoming, and inclusive, regardless of how much Hokie Pride they might have or how much they value their educational experience.

#### Student Organizations and Student Leaders

The 2000's graduates were the most engaged in student groups. They were involved in special interest student organizations, such as Black Organizations Council (BOC) and Black Student Alliance (BSA), and academic or in major student organizations, such as C squared, a computer science student organization. Alumni from all 3 decades were members of Black Greek Letter fraternities and sororities. Some were resident advisors, orientation leaders. Alumna LK participated in study abroad as an undergraduate student. Two of the 2000s graduates were members of Student Government Association (SGA). I noticed that graduates who were active in “mainstream” student organizations, or those that were broader in focus and incorporated a blend of student representatives from various backgrounds and constituencies, were exposed to a different side of the university. The two SGA Black alumni still for the most part feel connected to the university. They have interacted with the university since

graduation in various ways and are open to being more involved. Alumni who were involved in student groups such as Black Organizations Council (BOC) or Black Student Alliance (BSA) enjoyed that experience but I did not see that involvement in these groups correlated to a greater sense of connection to the university as a student and/or alum. All 16 alumni interviewed attended BOC and BSA programs and events, but the alumni who served in leadership positions within student organizations tended to have more positive feelings toward the university. Alumnus MG said he was the only Black student in SGA, at the time, and because of it he was asked to head up diversity efforts.

#### Community vs. individualistic

The 1980's and 1990's graduates used the words tight knit and small community to describe the Black community at Virginia Tech during their time. This was not echoed by the 2000s graduates. The 1980's Blacks were very close and have maintained that cohesiveness throughout the years. Black Alumni event registrations show that 1980's graduates register and attend in significant numbers. Seven of the sixteen alumni talked about how the Black community today is much different than years past when they were students. Alumni from the 1980s and 1990s brought up the unwritten rule that has been passed down but lost somewhere in more recent years. The tradition of Blacks speaking to each other on campus was very important in earlier class years.

Alumna ML said, I think it's definitely different from when we were there. When we were there in the 80s, we were pretty tight knit. Everybody spoke to each other even if you didn't know them. I remember when I went back to campus, for the 2007 Black Alumni Reunion, it wasn't that same feeling.

A graduate from the 1990's also talked about a perceived change in the Black community on campus.

Alumnus JM said, No seriously I don't think the atmosphere at Tech now is like what it was when I was there in the 90s. When I walk on campus now, they don't speak. The Black people don't speak. They don't speak and that's kind of our (Black alumni's) fault for not passing that down. Because there's no alumni connection our history and traditions don't get passed down to the next generation. The older Black alumni can't tell the new ones you see another Black person you speak.

Two alumni from the 2000s mentioned this tradition, one alumna started college in 1998 and the other alumna started in 2000, which may explain why they were aware of this tradition, while the other four alumni from the 2000s did not mention this tradition. I remember as an incoming freshman two of my older sisters, who are also VT graduates, told me to be sure I spoke to any and every Black person I encountered on campus. To my surprise when I got to campus there were very few Blacks who spoke to me so this tradition has seemingly been lost somewhere in the early 2000s. Black alumni are sad that this tradition has not carried on. When they come back to campus, they point out how different campus feels to them and that the sense of community amongst Blacks has been lost.

#### Being a minority in a majority environment: Feelings of isolation

When you are a minority in a large majority environment you experience and feel many things that majority individuals are not even aware of. The reality of this situation is that some Blacks endure racism and discrimination. Half of the alumni interviewed,

eight, personally experienced racism, discrimination, or other racial incidences when they were students at Virginia Tech. Another alumnus did not personally experience it, but said he knew friends who did endure these types of situations. Some of the situations they talked about include having the word “nigger” spray painted on his car outside his residence hall.

Alumnus JM said, I remember the day I decided not to come back to Tech. I remember walking to my car, looking around, and I said to myself I’m not coming back. I literally looked around and it was like a moment, an epiphany, and a moment of realization. I looked around and said this is going to be my last time here; I didn’t come back for years. I had my car vandalized. I came outside and in red paint “nigger” was spray painted on my car. My 1995 Altima had been vandalized, boy I loved that car. I went to the administration, wrote something to the newspaper, and nothing ever happened.

Having to deal with racist people in and outside the classroom, being told not to apply to graduate school because you are not smart enough, having to defend yourself because you are the only Black student on your hall, living with a roommate who has never spoken to a Black person before, and being the only Black student in a class of 500 students are real situations that happen.

What I have noticed is that administrators typically may not ever hear about these situations unless they somehow are escalated to the point that the Collegiate Times newspaper covers it. It is usually not until a racial incident is public, like racist or derogatory words being spray painted on public property that people in power hear about it. They may not hear the day-to-day situations such as being called racial slurs when

you walk on the Drillfield or having racist words written on your dart board outside your residence hall room. I started college in the year 2000 and personally experienced the previously mentioned two incidences. Although the experiences of Black students today are nowhere near what our first Black students experienced, these types of situations still occur on our campus today, whether administrators choose to accept that or not. Being a minority is not easy and what can anger someone who has experienced a situation like this is being expected to just forget and act like it never happened. We are so content to tolerate unwelcoming situations that racism and discrimination, at times, flies under the radar. When we do not take a stand against this we send a message that it is okay to let these things happen. We leave our students vulnerable to intolerance with little protection and safety. This can result in students and alumni harboring negative feelings toward the university that is supposed to provide a safe and welcoming environment for all. The last major student campus climate survey was done in the 1990's and the results showed that students of color described the environment as unwelcoming (Campus 2000). Somewhere there is a disconnect between how minority populations feel about the university and how administrators think minorities feel about the university. And it is not just students who feel this way. Minority faculty members are twice as likely to leave the university as our white counterparts. A current review of Black student participation in student organizations and other activities reveal that these numbers are also declining. For example, Black Greek Life at Virginia Tech in the 1980's and 1990's was stronger, had more numbers and a greater presence on campus, than it is today. When I was a student leader I was often frustrated when Black students did not show up to programs and events. What I heard from my friends was that "I cannot wait to get out of this

place.” Every weekend my Black friends from urban areas left campus as quickly as they could to go home. As a student, I never understood this, but now that I am older I do. Being a Black student in a majority white environment is draining and at times uncomfortable. I can walk from one end of campus to the other and it is highly likely that I will not see another Black face. Black people want to be around other Black people and we should not have to justify why we feel this way.

So as a Black student you are in this type of environment for four or more years until you get your degree or go someplace else to graduate. As an alumnus/alumna, the tide changes and you no longer have to be in this type of environment. You can participate in various organizations that have a more diverse and representative population. An alumnus/alumna does not have to spend their time participating in alumni events that mirror the white homogenous environment that was in place when we were students. So we don’t, instead we volunteer and serve in places where there are others like us.

### ALUMNI EXPERIENCE

Nine themes emerged that relate directly to the alumni’s experiences since leaving Virginia Tech. The themes encompass alumni’s feelings and perceptions about Virginia Tech and/or the Alumni Associations.

#### Sense of belonging and connection

Many Black alumni had a desire to feel wanted, valued, and respected by Virginia Tech but feel that need was not met. Alumnus JM talked about deep down inside feeling like the university really didn’t want him to be here.

He said, “Does the school make me feel better about being a Hokie? Probably not because I kind of already know they didn’t really want us there. It’s kind of like, you don’t have to call me a nigger to my face, but I know you saying it.

Alumna JR described her feelings about sense of belonging when she said, “Tech never owned me or wanted to make me feel a part of the school, once you leave that is it. Nobody made a proactive effort to reach out to me.” Some Black alumni feel that Virginia Tech did not want them or care about them as students. They in turn carry these feelings over and this aids in a huge sense of distrust toward Virginia Tech. From our perspective it felt like Virginia Tech did not want us to be here because what we saw was low numbers of other students like us, low numbers of Black faculty, staff, and administrators, and few programs and efforts in place to support us while in school. So this signaled to us that our needs were not important enough for the institution to do something about it. Then, we hear the university try to justify why the current efforts in place are the “best” they can do and it makes you think do they really care at all. We see a university that is exceling in every area, but diversity. Virginia Tech constantly improves in research rankings, recognition, accomplishments in and out of the classroom, and sports. A university of this size and stature can do better in the diversity area when we stop making excuses and focus on new and innovative solutions. No more words are needed; it is time for action and a real commitment from every level of the university. Black alumni want Virginia Tech to be successful, adapt to the changes in society, and include them in the process.

## Trust

Some Black alumni do not trust Virginia Tech and more specifically senior administrators because they feel that everything is for a show. They feel Virginia Tech has demonstrated very little to no action, substance, or proven results as it relates to diversity efforts; and do not see visible tangible buy-in from the top down.

Alumnus DA said, Feeling a connection is hard. It's hard because you want to feel that appreciation and see that Virginia Tech values diversity, but you don't. If I see President Steger behind this initiative, he's doing a roadshow and engaging all of the minority alumni, ok then I can see it's coming from the top. I could see leadership engage in the strategic goal of diversity, but I'm not seeing that. I'm seeing Laurie out here initiating this, trying to move this forward, but it's not strategic from the top of the organization.

Many alumni want Virginia Tech administrators to be honest and stop trying to cover up a major problem. 1990s graduates referred to this "fluff" as a huge problem and this is one of the main reasons they choose not to be active with the university.

Alumnus JM said, Until you get administrators there to admit there are problems then they are not serious. We are not stupid. All of this to me like that whole thing you just described about the Black Alumni Reunion is great, but it's all fluff and a smoke and mirror to the real history. Until you get Steger, or one of them cats, to say there is an institutional diversity problem here I don't feel like Virginia Tech is serious about dealing with these issues. You telling me you can't get 500 Black students in a freshmen class!

When asked what it would take to move past this, two alumni point blank said, "They need to apologize first and admit there is a problem." They compared it to an Alcoholics

Anonymous nine step recovery program where the first step is realizing and admitting there is a problem. Then, they want Virginia Tech to come up with solutions and ask Black alumni for their help in resolving recruiting and climate issues for Black students. Alumnus DA feels there is no strategic vision from the top down as it relates to diversity; therefore, he feels it is not worth his time or resources to invest in an organization that does not value diversity, something he is a huge advocate for in his personal and professional life.

Alumnus DA said, My parents have been to my graduation at Virginia Tech and my graduation at the University of Maryland. Even though the graduation at the University of Maryland was in the fall, the speaker of the university ceremony was a Black lawyer. The individual who spoke at the School of Engineering commencement ceremony was an Asian woman. When you see that sort of push for that diversity, when you see those kind of things, and that melting pot integrating together I ask, Why is it a school like Virginia Tech not doing that and why do they not want to? And that's really what the world is for me, I feel more a part of Maryland because of that kind of environment I want to be in. I want to be learning from all these different cultures. I want to see these older alumni reaching back and bridging that gap. That relationship has been built where you want to do stuff for the school; you feel a part of something. You want to go to graduation and get goose bumps when you see the students coming across the stage. You see the next generation of Terps and you see how much that brand means. Tech, I don't really see that difference. You see a school that's just

turning people in and out and not really receptive to helping us stay engaged. It's a two-part relationship with alumni, especially with Blacks.

To Black alumni it seems like the university does not support diversity, specifically as it relates to Black student and alumni, because it has always been up to Blacks to organize, take care of, advocate on behalf of, and support ourselves. Three Black alumni talked about how any programs, events, initiatives for Blacks were organized and supported by Blacks themselves. Alumna MB said, "It was like Black programs were only put on by the Black Student Alliance or Black faculty. You never heard about just the university in general or non-African American Associations doing anything." Alumna JM said, "Do something so it's consistent. That is why it looks like Virginia Tech doesn't care about Black people because it's nothing consistent. It's just these piece meal things strung together." Some feel it is the administration's job and responsibility to engage Black alumni not our job to engage ourselves. Two common perceptions held by Black alumni are Virginia Tech administration is not genuine about increasing diversity because it fails to admit the problem and ask for help. The university gives lip service but does not put action behind the fluff in words. Alumnus DA does not see that type of value placed on diversity at Virginia Tech.

He said, At Tech the school just churns out graduates, but there is no relationship building. Tech's model is until you can pay to be at the table then you aren't going to have a seat at the table, part of that good ole boys club. At Maryland you don't have to pay to be at the table. It is a two way relationship, Black alumni want to see some results and I don't see any from Tech as it relates to diversity.

In summary, some Black alumni feel that Virginia Tech does not actively support initiatives for Blacks with resources, strategic vision, or visible buy-in.

#### Connection to the university and Alumni Association

Alumnus DD feels connected to the Alumni Association through communication he receives. He said, “Like I said, through electronic email and the internet you guys do a very good job of keeping us connected and up to date to see what’s going on. I’m more in tune.” He feels less connected to the university due to geographical distance and work/life demands. He is not active with either the university or the Alumni Association but said, “my heart and spirit are there.” Alumnus MJ feels connected to the university because he put a lot of “blood, sweat, and tears into getting his degree.” He feels connected, to both the university and Alumni Association, and attends sporting events and Black alumni programs/events. Alumnus RB feels connected to the university and Alumni Association but is not actively involved with either. Alumna ML feels connected to the Alumni Association through Black alumni events. She feels connected to the university, but is not actively involved in any way. Alumnus DC does not feel connected to the university or Alumni Association and is not active with either. Alumna JR does not feel connected to either the university or Alumni Association. She is not involved with the university or Alumni Association on a personal level, but she does recruit on behalf of her company at Virginia Tech. Alumna MB does not feel connected to either the university or Alumni Association and is not involved with either. Alumnus RW and GB feel connected to both, but are not active with either outside of sports. Alumnus JM does not feel connected to either and is not active with either outside of sports. Alumnus MG does not feel as connected to the university as he would like to feel. His experience

as an alum has been “non-existent and not much of an experience.” He has not been highly involved with either, but has attended some Black alumni events in the past. Alumnus KD feels very attached and connected to Virginia Tech and the Alumni Association; and has participated in university and Alumni Association events in the past. Alumnus LK feels connected and apart of both and has attended some Black alumni programs and events. Alumnus DA does not feel a part of or connected to either the university or Alumni Association; he has participated in Black alumni events before. Alumna SK loves Virginia Tech and feels a part of the university, but feels no true connection to the Alumni Association. She has participated in Black alumni events previously. Alumnus JD feels connected to both the university and Alumni Association. He has participated in Black alumni events before.

My main reason for doing this research was to learn why some Black alumni are not engaged with the university and/or Alumni Association. The reasons I heard include, both simple and complex reasons as discussed earlier in this paper. Some Black alumni do not feel connected and are not active because of geographical distance between them and the university. Life demands including family and career obligations were also listed as reasons. Then there were more complex reasons for their lack of connection and activity such as disappointment with the university’s track record with diversity, low enrollment numbers of Black students, and feeling like the university did not truly want them here as students. Some alumni feel that neither the university nor the Alumni Association has extended a hand or invitation asking them to be involved in meaningful ways. Several mentioned a lack of outreach to Black alumni from the university. The following chart is a visual chart that summarizes Black alumni’s involvement levels.

No.	Alumnus/Alumna	Feels Connected/ Part of Virginia Tech	Feels connected/ part of Alumni Association	Is involved with or participated in University programs/events	Is involved with or participated in Alumni Association programs/events
1	Alumnus DD Class of 1984	Yes	Yes	Yes (sporting events)	Yes (Black alumni programs/events)
2	Alumnus MJ Class of 1986	Yes	Yes	No	Yes (Black alumni programs/events)
3	Alumna ML Class of 1987, 1989	Yes	Yes (through Black alumni programs/events)	No	Yes (Black alumni programs/events)
4	Alumnus RB Class of 1986	Yes	Yes	Yes (sports)	No
5	Alumnus DC Class of 1998	No	No	No	No
6	Alumna JR Class of 1998	No	No	Yes (for work only)	No
7	Alumnus JM Class of 1999	No	No	Yes (sports)	No
8	Alumna MB Class of 1997	No	No	Yes (sports)	No
9	Alumnus RW Class of 1995	Yes	Yes	Yes (sports)	No
10	Alumnus GB Class of 1996	Yes	Yes	No	No
11	Alumnus MG Class of 2006	No	No	Yes (sports)	Yes (Black alumni programs/events)
12	Alumnus KD Class of 2007	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
13	Alumna LK Class of 2005	Yes	Yes	Yes (for work)	Yes (Black alumni programs/events)
14	Alumna SK Class of 2004	Yes	No	No	Yes (Black alumni programs/events)
15	Alumnus JD Class of 2000	Yes	Yes	No	Yes (Black alumni programs/events)
16	Alumnus DA Class of 2007	No	No	No	Yes (Black alumni programs/events)

Half of the alumni interviewed specifically said they prefer to attend and participate in programs and events for Black alumni. These eight individuals said that general alumni programs and events are less appealing to them because when they attend they do not see other Black alumni. Attending general alumni programs and/or events is just like being back in school and in an environment where there are so few Blacks.

Alumnus MJ said, It goes back to having a forum that I am comfortable in. I love and feel connected to Black alumni events because when I go I will see the people I knew and went to school with. I don't have that feeling when I go to general alumni events where there may only be one or two people of color. People want to hang out with the people they know. General alumni events don't appeal to me. If you want Black alumni to give money to VT then you have to provide opportunities and venues where they feel comfortable.

The reason you attend alumni events is to see the people you were close to and have bonds with.

Alumna ML said, I think if it had not been for the few weekends that we had for the Black Alumni, I probably wouldn't do anything. Because it's such a predominately white school, you feel lost once in it. So I think that Black alumni events are definitely needed to kind of pull us together. It's really nice to see everybody and I like the way they do it with all Black alumni and not by class because that way you see everybody.

For some Black alumni they feel they only get this through attending Black alumni programs and events. The other eight alumni said they would attend both general Alumni Association and Black alumni programs and events. This is important because it is vital

to make the case for why we need focused programs and events. Without these targeted programs we stand to lose, in this case, half of the participants when you do not offer these types of programming efforts. So when I hear people say, “Why do we need Black or Multicultural alumni programs and events” my answer has been and will always be so that we can be around people who we bonded with during our time at Virginia Tech. There is comfort in being with an in-group. We need specialized alumni programs for underrepresented groups or we risk not meeting the needs of all our alumni. Shouldn’t we want to meet the needs of our stakeholders?

#### Camaraderie and Alumni Networks

Twelve of the sixteen Black alumni interviewed talked about the camaraderie and network of Hokies everywhere as a benefit of being an alumnus/alumna. They spoke of meeting random Hokies in the train station, grocery store, work, and other places.

Alumnus DD said, I was in Union Station and had a Virginia Tech hat on. This old White guy came up to me and said I didn’t know there were any Hokies in DC. I just looked over and I was like yeah there are a few of us here. He comes over, starts a conversation, and gives me his card. He graduated in 1961. I had a very nice conversation with him and his wife. I know they would not have walked up to any other random Black person in Union Station and say anything to them, but because we both went to Virginia Tech he gave me his card and told me to stay in touch.

Some alumni feel they have directly benefited from being a Virginia Tech alum through having career opportunities from other fellow Hokies. Alumnus DC said, “I got this job because the person who interviewed me was another Hokie. He told me that the reason

he interviewed me was because I went to Virginia Tech.” An interesting note came from Alumnus DA who commented on the large network of Hokies, but felt that Black alumni do not know how to leverage the Hokie alumni network as much as White alumni. Black alumni wear VT hats, shirts, etc and decorate their offices with Hokie memorabilia as a way to demonstrate their school pride. All the alumni interviewed said they were proud to be Virginia Tech alumni because it meant they had “survived, endured, shed blood, sweet, and tears.”

#### Giving/ Development references

Ten of the sixteen alumni interviewed mentioned some aspect of Development or giving without ever being asked anything remotely dealing with this topic. What I found is that Black alumni are not opposed to giving to their alma mater, but they will not give when they feel the money is not needed, not being used to support what they are passionate about, or give when no relationship has been established with them over a period time. Alumnus MG said, “You know, I kind of thought to myself, if you don’t set up a relationship with younger alumni, don’t come to me later when I have money because I would feel used at that point.”

#### The idea that attending sporting events equals being an engaged alum

Another interesting trend that surfaced is the idea that attending a sporting event equals being an active and involved alumnus/alumna of the university. Eight of the Black alumni interviewed are not engaged with the university or Alumni Association outside of sports. Alumnus JM said, “Any pride I carry for the Hokie Nation through sports, which has been frustrating anyway, but do I feel any attachment as an alumni to the school, no.” When Alumnus DD was asked if he has participated in any university or

alumni programs and/or activities in the past year he said, “I came back for the UVA game last year and attended the Boise State game up here in September. I don’t get back to campus as much as I would like, but my heart and spirit are there.”

Alumnus RT said, I have a bond even though I may not attend functions or anything like that. I feel like I am still a part of Virginia Tech. The last time I was on campus was probably 2000. I went to a football game and that was like the only time I actually saw Michael Vick play in person. But yeah it’s been like 2000 since I’ve been there but you know the attachment is there.”

One alumnus is not interested in supporting anything dealing with sports and said, “Football takes place one day of the week, I want engagement the other six days. Is that too much to ask for?” I would argue that we should want more from our alumni than just attending sporting events. This led me to think, what do we consider to be model alum behavior? I know many “model” alumni and they are considered to be some of our best alumni because they are the most involved in various facets of the university. They sit on advisory boards, attend university and Alumni Association programs and events, give time and money, have close ties to their department and/or college, mentor current students, and network with other alumni. Never have I thought an alumnus/alumna who only supports sports is a model alum. Quite honestly if they are just attending a game but not touching or interacting with other areas of the university, what is the benefit to the university/Alumni Association minus a transactional ticket sale? Sporting events are entertainment. How does this add value to the overall mission of the university? In our line of work we often count and measure alumni participation. I think it would

beneficial, and interesting, for the university and Alumni Association to define what exactly we want from our alumni.

### Communication

Communication was a topic that surfaced in several interviews. Some Black alumni feel they do not receive information from the university and/or Alumni Association. They talked about not feeling connected to the university because they do not know what is going on in Blacksburg. Some feel social media tools like Facebook and LinkedIn should be used more by both the university and Alumni Association.

Alumnus GB said, You know going back to the issue of engagement, I think that can be approached in a couple of ways. The reason that we're probably engaged with some people that we knew back then is because of Facebook... so I guess you would have to ask the question to the Alumni Association, what is Facebook doing that you're not doing?

### Perceptions

Some Black alumni feel the university and Alumni Association are not proactive in getting Black students and alumni involved before leaving and/or graduating.

Alumnus JM said, I don't even think Virginia Tech knows you exist after you graduate. Take for example at Maryland, as you're walking across the stage, the Alumni Association is waiting for you at the end of the stage. At least, they're getting your name and number and offering you ways to stay connected. That's just information gathering at that point, but at least they have a way to keep in touch with you. They have an email, a phone number, and an address so within those five years after graduating they keep you connected. They are letting you

know what's going on. You know what's going on and you still feel a part of the university, like you never left. Tech never did that, like once you leave Blacksburg that is it. There's absolutely no outreach, no thank you for the 10, 15, 20, 30, 40 thousand dollars you spent here.

Six of the alumni interviewed said when they graduated neither the university nor Alumni Association reached out to them. Some do not receive correspondence from the university and/or Alumni Association; thus, they perceive that neither cares about them. This perception is a good example of why we need a strategic, consistent, and organized approach to engaging this group where relationship building is at the center.

Several of the alumni were not sure what the Alumni Association does or what is the benefit of them investing their time into being engaged with the Alumni Association. Younger alumni in particular, 1990s and 2000s graduates, want more tangible benefits for their time and financial investments. When he was asked to rank his level of involvement with the university and/or Alumni Association:

Alumnus DA said, Probably like 2-3 not because I don't want to it's just that I don't see the value in it. Where am I going to put my efforts in? Is it building my career? Building the minority story at Virginia Tech? My value is building my career and life. I don't know the value in me doing things for Tech. It would be on the priority list if I saw a strategic vision coming from the top. There's nothing wrong with the grassroots approach, but at the same time you need that backing from somebody who can make the decisions. But if Virginia Tech does not care about that why invest my time. They don't care about the minority

graduate. It's almost like they're forced to say, ok you got in, do your thing, after that we don't care.

It was apparent that some Black alumni feel Virginia Tech values majority alumni more and the reason is because they perceive that the university and Alumni Association invests more money into engaging this group. Several alumni talked about how Black alumni programs and events seem "piece meal, only supported and organized by Black alumni themselves and not the university." Some perceive that Black alumni programs and events are not financial supported by the university; thus, there is no consistency in efforts for this group.

#### Public Issues and its impact on Black alumni

The Board of Visitors 2003 decision to end affirmative action at Virginia Tech was brought up by three alumni. This decision still does not sit well with some Black alumni.

Alumnus DD said, When that decision was made I remember hearing all the press coverage on the radio stations in this area. A lot of people were saying negative things about Virginia Tech. Reverence Al Sharpton called for a boycott and a sit-in.

For some the BOV's decision to end affirmative action programs at Virginia directly impacted them.

Alumnus MG said, I think it was probably a little challenging from a support standpoint when you would want to seek help. When I was there, I'm sure you remember when they had the big BOV controversy. It took away a lot of the programs that were set up for us. That was a challenge because there was one

great program I was in. I don't know if you remember the Focus program for Business students. That was a really good program and they kind of dropped the ball on that one after all that stuff happened. That was kind of tough because I think when you go to a PWI, you need support and for a lot of us it was one of those things where you've never been in an environment with that many White people and where it was so few of us.

Negative public diversity issues can cause individuals to question whether or not Virginia Tech truly values diversity, equality, and inclusion. The past section has summarized consistent themes that emerged from the interviews. Next, how this study applies to theory will be covered.

## THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study makes two key contributions to the theoretical framework of identification. First, Black alumni cognitively identify with Virginia Tech, but the behavioral and affective consequences of identification are low and in some cases not there. For example, several of the Black alumni are proud to VT alumni and identify with being Hokies; yet, they are not actively involved with the university on any level. Second, most Black alumni strongly identify with the Black alumni subgroup. For example, Alumni ML and MJ said if it were not for Black alumni programs and activities they would not participate at all. Burke's theory of identification informed this study because it distinguishes between action and motion and posits that individuals come to identify with things through shared meaning and experiences. It is through similar experiences that Black alumni identify with other Black alumni. This subgroup of the larger Virginia Tech alumni group is defined by common culture, background, lived experiences which led to a shared experience amongst the group. Throughout the sixteen interviews, Black alumni used similar language and symbols to create a common story. For example, the words struggle, difficult, and challenging were used to describe their student experience. Black alumni are looking for action, defined as behavior that has meaning and purpose. An example of meaningful behavior would be if Virginia Tech increased the number of Black students enrolled and graduating from Virginia Tech.

According to Tolman (1943) identification can occur when an individual feels part of any group. Members of a large organization must be given common features which set them off not from individuals outside the organization, but from other subgroups within the organization. He argued that groups that evoke strong identification

have five features or characteristics: 1) A common characteristic which clearly defines or separates the group members from nonmembers; 2) Distinctive symbols and rituals which belong to the group; 3) A common goal that gives a feeling of a mission; 4) A set-up in the group which capitalizes and symbolizes the early family relationship and structure; 5) A common enemy

In the case of this research race/ethnicity and shared history are the common characteristics that define the group members. Black alumni make up a subgroup of Virginia Tech alumni. They have distinctive symbols and rituals such as the tradition that you always speak to other Blacks on campus. The common goal is to help the next generation of Black students be successful and enjoy their experience at Virginia Tech. The 1980s and 1990s alumni spoke about the tight knit Black community where upperclassmen helped freshmen out. This is reminiscent of a symbolic family relationship and structure. The common enemy seemingly is the university administration that does not support increasing diversity in meaningful ways.

### Social Identification Theory (SIT)

Social identity is defined as the perception of belongingness to a group classification and involves an individual defining him or herself as an actual or symbolic member of the group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Social identity encompasses salient group classifications (Tajfel and Turner, 1985). Individuals classify themselves into various social groups. This sense of belongingness is strongest with the category of Black alumni. In the case of group identification with Virginia Tech the results vary by

experience. Some graduates from the 1990s and 2000s have a lower level of identification or sense of belonging to Virginia Tech than alumni from the 1980s.

Literature on group identification suggests four principles that are relevant to organizational identification. First, identification is viewed as a perceptual cognitive construct that does not have to be associated with certain behavior or affective states. To identify, an individual need not expend effort toward the group's goals; rather, an individual need only perceive him or herself as psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group. Behavior and affect are viewed as potential consequences (Foote, 1951). Second, social/group identification is seen as personally experiencing the successes and failures of the group (Foote, 1951; Tolman, 1943). A critical point to note is that identification can be measured in a matter of degrees. The current research supports the first two principles of organizational identification. From the interviews it is apparent that Black alumni cognitively identify with Virginia Tech. For example, When Alumnus RT was asked if he feels connected or part of Virginia Tech he said, "I mean as you can see from the wall I would say that I have a bond even though I may not attend functions or anything like that I feel like I am still a part of Virginia Tech." They identify or consider themselves to be Virginia Tech alumni and associate with being Hokies through academic accomplishments, sports, reputation, or other things associated with the university. They personally experience the successes and failures of Virginia Tech. For example when the sports teams are successful, Black alumni identify with being part of the university. They also identify with the university in times of tragedy such as April 16<sup>th</sup>. The behavioral and affective consequences of identification are lacking for black alumni. They do not associate behavioral consequences such as attending and supporting

Virginia Tech programs and events and/or alumni relations efforts, outside of sports, with being a prerequisite or necessary for being an active “model” alumnus/alumna. So the results in part answer my original question of why are some Black alumni not engaged with the university.

SIT also suggests three consequences of relevance to organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). First, individuals tend to choose activities congruent with salient aspects of their identities, and they support the institutions embodying those identities. So it is likely that identification with an organization enhances support for and commitment to it. A second related consequence is that social identification affects the outcomes associated with group formation including intragroup cohesion, cooperation, and altruism, and positive evaluations of the group (Turner, 1982, 1984). So it can be expected that identification would be associated with loyalty to and pride in the group and its activities. Ultimately what all of this leads to is individuals support what they identify with. Alumni who identify with the university support the institution in various ways. This is evident in the current research conducted.

Some Black alumni identify more strongly with the racial/ethnic subgroup to which they belong, Black alumni, than with the university. Half of the Black alumni interviewed identify with and feel more connected to programs, events, and activities dealing with Black alumni/students. Their greatest concerns and interests are in issues dealing with issues that relate to Black alumni and students. This is why historically Black alumni will attend a Black Alumni Reunion and not their college Homecoming or a class reunion in the fall. If we applied this theory to research results it would support my

initial thought that some Black alumni do not identify with the university to a high degree but instead identify with the subgroup of Black more strongly.

Individuals tend to choose activities congruent with salient aspects of their identities, and they support the institutions embodying those identities. So it is likely that identification with an organization enhances support for and commitment to it. This would lend support to why it is important for Virginia Tech to change how it is perceived in the realm of supporting diversity and Black alumni efforts. Some have less positive feelings toward the university because they perceive a gap between their expectations of how the university should approach diversity efforts and what the university is actually doing to meet certain goals. Some Black alumni feel they do not share common goals with their alma mater as it relates to increasing diversity at Virginia Tech and in particular as it relates to the increased enrollment of Black students. The commitment from this group has been low and I argue this is the case because Black alumni perceive their interests and needs are not congruent with their alma mater's because they are not being met by the university.

The current research lends further support to identification theory and more specifically social and organizational identification. The interviews conducted with Black alumni also support Mael and Ashforth's studies on alumni relations, and functions as a second component of this study. In 1988 Mael conducted a study that demonstrated identification is unique from satisfaction. The graduates from the class of 1980 best demonstrate this point. All of the 1980's graduates seem relatively satisfied with their overall experience yet they do not strongly identify with the university. Two of the four graduates said they more strongly identify with Black alumni and activities related to this

group. The other two have been relatively unengaged with the university and Alumni Association for a number of years. Alumnus RB was active soon after he graduated, but his strength of identification has lessened in more recent years. The cognitive association with Virginia Tech is there, but the behavior is not.

Identification can lead to several desirable behaviors for the organization including prioritization of contributions to the institution, sending or intent to send one's child to the alma mater, actively recruiting or encouraging other youth to attend the school, and attendance at alumni and other institutional functions. The group of Black alumni interviewed by in large do not identify with Virginia Tech and the proof is that they do not participate in the behaviors mentioned above. This clearly distinguishes engaged Black alumni from those who are not. Engaged Black alumni do one or more of the previous behaviors consistently. Virginia Tech's distinctiveness or reputation and prestige was a consistent trend found in the all the interviews and further supports Mael and Ashforth's 1992 study. Tenure, satisfaction with the school, and sentimentality were found to lead to organizational identification. From the current research conducted, the graduates from the 2000's seemed to have a strong level of satisfaction with Virginia Tech because four of the six were happy with the university's contribution to the alum's goals.

Alumni who do not identify with Virginia Tech and/or the Alumni Association to a high degree require a different type of relationship with the university. I believe what is missing from Black alumni engagement is a focus on relationships and the need for relational public relations. The university and Alumni Association should incorporate a strategic focus on building, repairing, and maintaining relationships with Black alumni.

This management approach focuses on the quality of relationships between an organization and its publics. Two-way communication is necessary if Virginia Tech seeks to build trust and transparency with Black alumni. Broom et al (1997) wrote about ten important aspects of relationships all of which can provide insight into how Virginia Tech can build mutually beneficial relationships. One of the most valuable aspects of the relationship management research is the notion of moving past process indicators to actual outcome indicators. Process indicators are things such as the number alumni events and/or programs and simple attendance accounts. Outcome indicators move beyond that surface level to concentrate on attitude and behavior change. Without attitude and behavior change we are simply participating in a lot of motion and no action, as defined by Burke. Doing things as we have always done this just for the sake of appearance is not only a waste of resources but a waste of time for the university and our alumni. We can no longer afford to do things only in the university's interest and forsake the needs and interests of our Black alumni.

For many Black alumni their strongest affinity is to the Black alumni subgroup and not to their class year (class reunion activities); college, or other (chapters) general Alumni Association programs and activities. These broad or general interest activities are not of great interest to us because they put us back in an environment where we are once again the overwhelming minority, just like during our time as an undergraduate/graduate student. These types of environments are not always inclusive and welcoming because they lack cultural, social, and personal aspects that reflect them and meet their needs (to be around others in our in-group) to be around those we have bonds and close relationships with.

## PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Engagement is defined as an emotional involvement or commitment, a promise, obligation, or other condition that binds, an appointment or arrangement. If Virginia Tech desires its alumni to be engaged with the institution shouldn't it be willing to give what it is asking for? If the university is not willing to make a commitment, how can we expect our alumni to do it? When someone thinks that Black alumni focused programs and events only separates or divides Blacks from the larger alumni group, I argue that it does the exact opposite. Having concentrated programs and events takes the general Hokie alumni experience and makes it so Black alumni can enjoy their own Hokie experience in a way that meets our need; thus, creating mutually beneficial environments and relationships between Black alumni, the Alumni Association, and university. For example, the Corp of Cadets eat, sleep, and live mainly in their own group and has separate programs and events for that alumni population.

The following are recommendations, based on a synthesis of the interview data, for the university and/or Alumni Association when it comes to engaging Black alumni.

	Low Involvement (engagement)	High Involvement (engagement)
Low Connection	<b>Building and/or Repair Strategies for Disengaged Alumni</b>	<b>Building Strategies</b>
High Connection	<b>Building Strategies</b>	<b>Maintenance Strategies for Engaged Alumni</b>

## ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The goal is to have more Black alumni in the high involvement-high connection category. This would be the group of engaged or model alumni. They are already involved with the university and Alumni Association in meaningful ways and maintaining that sense of connection would consist of recognizing these individuals for their service. These alumni can also be used to represent the needs/interests of the larger group to important university officials and be used to reach out to other Black alumni who are have little or no connection and involvement with Virginia Tech. It is important to increase the number of Black alumni in this group so that the individuals in this group are not overtaxed and asked to contribute large amounts of time that they may or may not have.

Alumni who feel a low sense of connection and are not highly involved are disengaged and require more communication, education, and cultivation on a consistent and frequent basis in order to build a relationship with them. Communication and engagement strategies for this group should be multi-faceted and include things such as: personal visits, monthly communication and follow-up via email, phone calls, and programs. They should be invited to alumni programs locally where they live and on campus so that commitment is demonstrated and there are considered and met. These alumni should have contact with highly engaged alumni, university faculty/staff, current students, and administrators so they can see the tangible impacts of their involvement and why it is needed. This group needs to be informed and educated on current university policies, procedures, and programs. Some alumni in this group may not trust the university and/or have had negative student and/or alumni experiences; therefore,

relationship repair strategies may be needed. Virginia Tech will need to be specific and define how Black alumni can be involved and the reasons why. This information should be communicated to them directly because taking a passive approach and waiting for alumni in this group to reach out and be involved will not work. Virginia Tech and the Alumni Association should communicate how a relationship with the university benefits the alum, i.e. communicate how the relationship is mutually beneficial.

Alumni who feel highly connected but have low involvement with the university and Alumni Association also require specific relationship building strategies focused on education, communication, and direct appeals for participation. They feel a strong connection to Virginia Tech, but may not know how or where to be involved. This group also needs education on current university programs, policies, and activities. Once they are educated this group can be used to build relationships with other Black alumni in their local and regional areas.

Alumni who feel a low connection but are involved are those alumni who do not interact with the Alumni Association. They are involved in other aspects of the university such as their department, former student organization, or fraternity/sorority. They feel connected to Virginia Tech but not necessarily the Alumni Association. They may not be aware of the Alumni Association or know what the organization does or offers. To engage this group the Alumni Association would need to first identify these individuals and the types of programs/activities they are already involved in and tap into that resource to see if future collaborations can take place. Examples of these types of already existing programs include the annual Overton R. Johnson stepshow in the spring

and sporting events. Many Black alumni attend these programs, but do not interact with the Alumni Association directly.

Learn the audience you are dealing with by listening and partnering with the group. Invest in research that identifies the needs, interests, and values of this group. Study the group of Black students, alumni, faculty, and staff and its cyclical impact on each other. We have examined the groups as separate for too long, but this does not allow one to see how each group impacts the other and to what degree. Do things that are of interest to Black alumni because if they do not attend certain alumni programs and activities, such as chapter events, it is a good indicator that the program does not interest individuals in this group. The following five recommendations are based on the five dimensions of relationship management: trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **INCORPORATE** a direct, personal, and targeted approach to everything dealing with us from alumni relations, student engagement, recruitment/retention, and giving.  
  
Broad and general appeals and interaction do not make us feel valued. This would demonstrate that Virginia Tech is serious and committed to engaging Black alumni.
2. **INVEST** and have people (staff) that understand the needs of this group. In particular, the institution should invest the resources; time, money, staff support, to engage this group and support the staff charged to do this instead of merely hiring Blacks to try and give the picture that diversity is supported yet the positions are not funded properly; thus, limiting the impact and results that staff members can bring about. Ultimately, Black alumni want to see the population of Black students, faculty, staff, and alumni on campus grow.
3. **BUILD** a Black Alumni Network with the goal in mind to have this network sow into making the experience of the next Black student/alumni base meaningful and different from a lot our experiences. That will be our greatest contribution to Virginia Tech and it will pay dividends! Changing the negative perceptions, attitudes, feelings that exist within this demographic would in turn impact attitude and behavioral outcomes. This would be priceless! The institution may see a greater financial return from Black Alumni when we truly feel we are part of the university and valued.

RELATIONSHIP FIRST! Recognize that our value and potential is in our ability to impact outcomes (behavioral and attitude change) and not just in our wallets. This could be a tangible example demonstrating that Virginia Tech is ready and willing to be involved with the group in a way that is mutually beneficial. Practice proactive, active participation with the group instead of a passive and reactive approach.

4. **CREATE** a relationship that is built on TRUST, TRUTH, & TRANSPARENCY. Trust and openness are two of the five relationship management dimensions. For example, this could consist of Virginia Tech saying “We are content with the 4 percent Black student enrollment. We do not feel it is critical to increase this number because of x, y, z. We are more focused on x, y, z.” Virginia Tech should be honest with how it views the Black alumni population and what it wants from the group, if anything.
  
5. **COMMUNICATE** more - For example, reach out to alumni before they graduate and leave campus in May. Inform them on the benefits of being involved with the Alumni Association and what opportunities are available in their local areas through multiple channels and not solely rely on email blasts. Recognize that alumni like to receive information through various channels. If we do not incorporate a multi-faceted communication plan we risk not engaging a broader cross section of the alumni base. Communication strategies that work for some groups may not work for Black alumni. Incorporate communication strategies that are convenient, for our alumni, and

informative. Be conscious of the visual images and work to make sure they reflect Black alumni and their contributions to the university.

## LIMITATIONS and FUTURE RESEARCH

One limitation of the current research is that the original sampling population of engaged alumni did not produce enough names and contacts of disengaged Black alumni. I had to contact alumni within a certain geographical region of Northern VA, Washington DC, and Southern Maryland area via email and ask if they would be willing to participate in the research. Originally, I wanted to use a referral system, but that did not work. A second limitation is that I had to select alumni within a certain geographical area due to the time and travel costs restrictions. At first, this study was going to examine trends between a group of engaged Black alumni and a group of disengaged Black alumni, but the data from the disengaged group was rich enough that I decided not to incorporate interviews with engaged Black alumni. The initial study was limited to Black alumni, only one underrepresented population as defined by federal definitions. Future research can be extended to examine how other underrepresented alumni populations feel about their alma mater including; Hispanic/Latino, LGBT, and Native American alumni. Studying a group of individuals that share a common characteristic can allow for similar trends within the group to be identified and then examined across multiple populations.

As previously mentioned, a natural progression of this research would be to conduct interviews with a group of engaged Black alumni and compare the trends between the engaged and disengaged groups. It is also worth studying further if Black students/alumni who participate in student organizations where the demographic makeup is majority White has different perceptions of the university versus those Black students/alumni who choose to be involved with special interest groups that represent their cultural backgrounds.

Another option for future research would be to study a cohort of Black alumni in a longitudinal study. The population could be surveyed during their senior year or college and at different points in the future, perhaps at the 1, 3, 5, 10, and 20 year post-graduation marks, to determine how alumni's feelings about the university evolve over time. Do their feelings become more or less positive/negative or remain the same as they age? Another option for future research would be to examine if alumni who attended Virginia Tech as graduate students only feel differently than alumni who did their undergraduate degree at Virginia Tech. An interesting factor that surfaced in this study is the fact that there are alumni who attend classes at other campuses. Future research could examine if there are differences between alumni who studied at different campuses and alumni who studied at the Blacksburg campus. What type of connection does this alumni population have? This study can also be furthered by taking a step back to examine what the Alumni Association can do to better engage all students, and in particular students of color, and acclimate them to what it means to be a "model" alumnus/alumna of the university before they graduate.

This study demonstrates the power of caring mentors and how it positively impacted how students of color felt about their experience while at Virginia Tech. Black alumni can play a larger role in the university by serving as mentors and career resources for current students. Additional research is needed into the communication strategies that work best for engaging certain diverse alumni populations because we know that the methods currently in place are not reaching and resonating with some. It would be beneficial to study how Virginia Tech and the Alumni Association should to communicate to its alumni of color. Many of the alumni interviewed, particularly from

the 1990s and 2000s class years, feel they do not receive enough communication from the university and do not know what is going on at Virginia Tech. These comments demonstrate the need for our communication strategies to be examined. Future research can be done to determine what communication methods work best, i.e. what strategies help Black alumni feel informed about the university and alumni efforts. Communication is essential to effective engagement; thus, warrant further examination.

## CONCLUSION

Even though these findings and recommendations are based on interviews with a select (small) group of Black alumni, I feel they are representative of how a larger segment of Black alumni feel toward their alma mater. In this respect, this study has demonstrated in a modest sense the importance of identification theory and relationship management in engaging Black alumni. Previous research on Black alumni engagement is limited; therefore, this study is a starting point that demonstrates the need for additional research. Alumni have been studied from a philanthropic or giving standpoint, but the engagement standpoint is missing. This research seeks to demonstrate that without building a relationship with Black alumni the likelihood of yielding support, financial and/or human resources, from this population is slim. Institutions of higher education should first focus on building and strengthening relationships with its Black alumni because it is our responsibility to all the stakeholders we serve. Considering the needs of Black alumni in balance with the needs of the institution will demonstrate a commitment to the group.

Reaching out to Black alumni is not only the right thing to do, but it has the potential to make good business sense. The demographics of the world are changing and it is projected that by year 2050 people of color will be the majority and no longer the minority. As the country's population changes so too will our alumni base. If we do not find a way to engage this group we risk losing potential donors, volunteers, and advocates. Black alumni engagement is a topic that has not been studied. I argue that this engagement has largely been missing and institutions of higher education have skipped over this critical component on the way to seeking philanthropic support. The

relationship building with this constituency group has not been mastered because by in large Black alumni have little, different, and/or no connection to their alma mater. If colleges/universities expect Black alumni to give then a new approach is needed. Our one size fits all Development, Admissions, and Alumni Relations models fail to recognize and understand the core values of Black alumni and has not yielded significant results. For the sake of institutional advancement colleges/universities will have to learn how to better meet the needs of all its constituencies. Approaching a Black alumnus/alumna the way you approach a majority alumnus/alumna will not work because our experience with the institution and background are different. Capturing our affinity will take a more concerted and honest approach.

## AFTERWORD

Burke said, “You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his” (Burke, 1969, p.55). That is the purpose of this research, to help Virginia Tech better understand its Black alumni, how we feel about our alma mater, and why we feel this way. More than anything, the 16 interviews with Black alumni demonstrate that even within this one constituency group there are a range of experiences, feelings toward the institution, and attitudes reflected. I have often compared Black alumni’s experiences to a continuum ranging from strong love to strong dislike. What I learned is that dislike may not be the best word to describe their feelings; a better word may be disappointment. I am leaving this process more inspired to do the work that I was hired to do because never at any point in an interview did it appear that there was nothing Virginia Tech and /or the Alumni Association could not do to strengthen relationships with this alumni base. The takeaway is that historically the university may not have done all the things right to meet the expectations of individuals in this group, but that is not a reason to give up and not properly engage Black alumni. It is important to spend time with these individuals, listen to their feedback, and come up with ways/solutions to build the type of relationship that is mutually beneficial for both parties.

Too often, universities/colleges rely on an impersonal approach to fundraising with minorities and as demonstrated before this does not work for us. Two of the Black alumni already give, but Alumnus MJ gives money to another university and Alumnus KD gives money directly to his on-campus fraternity. Because Alumnus KD gives his money directly to the chapter he does not receive gift credit. I know several other Black

alumni who belong to Greek organizations and do the same thing. This type of giving is not built into our traditional giving models and is not recognized or counted. What we hear is that Black alumni don't give to their alma mater when in actuality this is false. We give but we give in ways that don't fit into traditional fundraising models. What this signals is that Black alumni are aware of Development and fundraising, but there is little education, relationship building, or cultivation efforts with this group that will yield significant return. No investment equals no return and money does not equal relationship.

As, I close I want to share just a few of my personal reflections: If I could scream anything from the mountain top it would be "Yes Black students encounter racial incidences that no one ever hears about." I have had White students and faculty members look at me funny as if to say "How did you get in here, on affirmative action?" This environment does not support the whole life of an individual—the minority individual. To me personally, there is a lack of ethnic restaurants where I wish to dine, social/nightlife venues for a young black professional are non-existent, beauty and personal care products and services are hard to find, and overall there are few things here that reflect and meet my "cultural" needs broadly defined. Given these constraints that I willingly accept, I am always perplexed as to why majority people cannot grasp why it is important for minorities to have people, places, and things around them that reflect them and their interests.

To this day, I am not sure if some people understand what it means and feels like to live in an unwelcoming environment. Maybe some do not know because they do not hear about such an environment. Out of sight (or hearing) out of mind, I guess. But as an

administrator, I have sat through countless meetings where other administrators bring in minority students and ask how their experience has been at Virginia Tech as a minority. Seemingly, this has become an automatic question because I seriously doubt the administrators really want to hear the experiences of all students, especially the ones who have complaints about the university, Blacksburg, and their climate. Typically, what happens is when administrators meet with students of color they meet with student leaders or the top surface layer from this population or they meet with students whose home environments mirror the demographic environment presented in Blacksburg. These, however, are not a representative sample to question. The person who is involved or the person who is “accustomed” to being a minority and is “comfortable” in these situations, when highlighted, is often used to mask or even downplay the fact that race indeed matters. Black students and other minorities are constantly forced to blend into an environment instead of being encouraged to discover, embrace, and celebrate who they are as individuals and as a collectivity. There seems to be very little flexibility from others (majority students and administrators) to truly learn and respect differences. But I still have hope and believe in the power of serving others, Ut Prosim.

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## APPENDIX A INTERVIEW NOTES

### 1980's

Interview 1: Male Alumnus DD Class of 1984 (transferred from a HBCU)  
Major: Political Science

Question 1: Tell me about your experience as a student

Alumnus DD 1984 remembers his student experience as being very positive. The thing he enjoyed the most was the seemingly “unyielding support from faculty and staff”. He transferred to Virginia Tech from St. Paul’s, a historically black college/university (HBCU) in Lawrenceville, VA. Alumnus DD grew up in Lynchburg, Virginia. Most of his high school classmates either went to the University of Virginia or Virginia Tech. His guidance counselor advised him to go to a HBCU. He started college at a HBCU, but both he and his parents felt a “mainstream” or predominately white institution would better prepare him to enter the workforce.

Calvin Jamison played an important role in him coming to school here. Calvin Jamison worked in the Office for Undergraduate Admissions during this time period and recruited several black students from his high school. His two younger brothers also attended school at Virginia Tech and a legacy was created in their household. It was financially difficult to attend Virginia Tech. At one point during college both of his parents got laid off.

He never lived on campus, because transfer students could not live on campus during that time period, and regrets not having that experience. When alumnus DD first got to Virginia Tech it was difficult to connect to other blacks. Socially it was an adjustment for him. The black fraternities and sororities were thriving and it was through their parties and programs that he got acclimated to the social scene here. He enjoyed hanging out with the fraternity and sorority members and they all got along well. He thought about pledging Omega Psi Phi, but he had a lot of friends in Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity. He talked about the year when the Kappas pledged a large line of about 19 people his junior/senior year. The culture of blacks started to change toward the end of his time in school. The younger classes ‘85, ‘86, ‘87 came in with a renewed vigor. He remembered War Memorial gym and playing basketball there. He attended Black Student Alliance (BSA) programs. One challenge that he brought up dealt with the lack of transportation. The Blacksburg Transit was not in place yet and it was hard for him to get back and forth to campus.

Alumnus DD has only positive feelings toward Virginia Tech. Virginia Tech helped him grow as a person and academically. He is a high school teacher and feels that his education prepared him to enter the workforce. He enjoyed his academic and social experience. Virginia Tech was not a huge cultural shock to him because his hometown had a similar demographic makeup as Blacksburg. He went to a majority white high school and was accustomed to this type of environment. He would choose Virginia Tech all over again.

Question 2: Now that you have graduated, what do you think about Virginia Tech?

He does not feel as connected to the university now as in previous years and much of that is due to geographical distance from campus and life demands. This lack of connection to his alma mater is due to the fact that work and raising a family consumes his time. It was hard for him to stay connected after he had kids. The drive back to campus takes about 5 hours and it is challenging for him to carve out that time from work and family. His spirit is still with Virginia Tech and he wears Virginia Tech paraphernalia often. Living and working in the Washington DC/Maryland area has helped him maintain his school spirit. There are a lot of alumni and fans in the area.

He is a high school football coach. His goal is to expose high school inner city kids to Virginia Tech. He mentioned working with Josh Morgan, a former VT football player from his area. He said, "I would like to see more kids from this area at least consider Tech". Both he and his brother wanted their children to go to college at their alma mater. He brought his daughter and niece to visit the Virginia Tech campus, but neither wanted to go to school here. His daughter did not want to attend because she felt it lacked diversity. His daughter said, "Dad I've never seen so many white people. Where are we?" He tried to persuade his daughter but she chose another school. His daughter went to school in the Washington DC area and wanted to go to a college that was as diverse as her high school.

The internet and email have helped to keep him connected. He attended the Black Alumni Reception for the Boise State football game in September 2010. Alumnus DD really enjoyed attending the reception because it brought old friends back together. At the reception, he connected to old friends who live in the area locally. He was not aware that some of his college classmates were even in the area. He and his brother came back to campus for the Virginia Tech versus the University of Virginia football game in November 2010.

Question 3: Now that you have graduated, tell me about your experience as an alum

Alumnus DD feels apart of the Alumni Association through the communication, including the Alumni Association webpage, emails and magazines, he receives. The older that he gets the more he wants to remember his college years. He has not attended many Alumni Association programs and/or events because work and family commitments take up most of his time. On a scale from 1 to 10, (1 = not involved at all, 10 = very involved, attend 5 or more university events in a calendar year), he rated his level of involvement with the university and the Alumni Association as a 1. He and his brother tailgated with white classmates, who they went to high school and college with, when they came back to campus in November 2010 for the Virginia Tech versus University of Virginia football game. He feels that because he is a Virginia Tech alumnus that he has an automatic connection with people he has never met or interacted with. He told the story of being in Union Station and meeting and having a conversation

with a white couple (class of 61) because the man recognized the VT hat and started a conversation with him. He feels the Hokie Nation is very close and that the couple would not have had that conversation if DD was not an alumnus.

Question 4: Do you think Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging (i.e. building relationships/meeting the needs) of Black alumni (as students and as alumni)?

As a student, he did not see a lot of evidence that the university, on a broad or administrative level, was doing a good job of engaging black students. He did feel that the people he interacted with on a daily basis did a better job of engaging him as a student. People have asked him if he encountered racism while attending Virginia Tech and he didn't; but, he knew that it happened and that other black students did experience it. He remembers the 2003 Board of Visitors decision to end affirmative action and the public outrage. He has met a lot of students and alumni, from urban areas, who had/have issues with Virginia Tech and the lack of diversity.

He said, "I have met a lot of African American students, ex-students, and alumni who come from urban cities. They don't like it and they complain about it. I ran across some people who are like, I went to down there for a year and I transferred out of there. You know and I know that it is real. Even my daughter had issues with going to school in a place that doesn't have access to metro, cultural things, and the likes".

Question 5: Is there anything else you would like to mention that we have not covered today?

Alumnus DD knows that it is hard for Blacks to embrace Virginia Tech and the Blacksburg area. He has witnessed the difficult transition that some experienced. He applauds the Alumni Association for trying to engage Black alumni and wants to get more involved now that his kids are grown. He and his brother have made a vow to visit campus once a year. Alumnus DD feels that Black alumni can do more to be involved and need to make the effort. Academically, Virginia Tech gave him all the skills to be competitive in his career field. He thoroughly enjoyed his experience, it was a struggle but he liked it.

Interview 2: Male Alumnus MJ Class of 1986  
(also went to Penn State for graduate degree)  
Major: Aerospace and Ocean Engineering

Question 1: Tell me about your experience as a student

The things that are most memorable to him are greatly influenced by the time and context of the 1980's. There were very strong university officials who made black student life very comfortable and enjoyable. People like Glen Valentine and Calvin Jamison, who worked in Undergraduate Admissions, and Barbara Pendergrass, who worked in the Dean of Students Office, supported the academic and social lives of black students. The roles they played drove the black community to have a strong sense of its self. He said, "Having a strong black community made assimilation and joining the university a good experience. Black students, during this time, had a strong cultural sense even though Virginia Tech was mostly white". The administrators helped students find and have a cultural identity. Without this assistance from administrators black students would not have known how to create a meaningful social and cultural experience as a minority in a majority environment. He said, "The black administrators helped the black students leverage their cultural experience to have a good Hokie experience".

The current black student enrollment numbers are of great concern to him and other black alumni. It signals to him that Virginia Tech has lost something in the recruitment process which has led to a decline in the number of African American students. He said, "We should examine what things (programs, people, and policies) we had in place before and why they worked". He went to Norview High School in Norfolk, VA. In his senior class about 12 other students decided to attend Virginia Tech. He recommends using current black students to recruit from their high schools and areas as a way to help Virginia Tech attract more black students. He remembers participating in something similar when he was an undergraduate student. Calvin Jamison and Glen Valentine, from the Office of Undergraduate Admissions, invited him to come and speak to students back in the Norfolk area when he went home for breaks. He isn't sure how much of this is currently going on.

He vividly remembers the recruitment process that he went through when deciding which college to attend. The University of Virginia (UVA) hosted a dinner in the Norfolk, VA area and he enjoyed going to this event. UVA representatives introduced high performing undergraduate students from his area to the prospective high school students they were trying to recruit. He feels that it is important to pair prospective students with university officials and representatives because it demonstrates the universities commitment to the students and families. Relying on informal student networking to help with the recruitment process may not be enough to convince the student and parent; therefore, university officials are needed. Another recruitment strategy would be to have Virginia Tech set up focus groups with local middle schools students to help them understand what courses are needed in high school to prep for college. He isn't sure how many schools and guidance counselors are working with middle school students to guide

them through this process. He feels Virginia Tech should be doing this type of outreach with middle school kids.

He started the interview talking about his recruitment memories because he feels it is vital. The key is having black university administrators in place to help the black students carry on and survive in a tough environment. Having strong and visible black administrators on campus gave black students a cultural foundation to identify with. He does not think he would have enjoyed going to Virginia Tech without this example, leadership, and encouragement from Black faculty administrators. It helped strengthen and maintain the black base.

He enjoyed his social life and academic experience at Virginia Tech. The academic experience was indeed a challenge and an interesting experience. He took advance placement calculus in high school and that exposed him to the intense rigor that he needed when going to Tech. He expected the academic side to be challenging, but felt well prepared for the transition into the college learning environment. He remembers being told that if you didn't get into Engineering coming in, you could take general courses and re-apply to the department. He knew friends who had to do this and did not get in. The academic support was good and he got help when he needed it. He didn't network with professors much and would recommend current students take advantage of this resource more than he did. Alumnus MJ would go to Virginia Tech again and advises others to consider applying to the school.

Question 2: Now that you have graduated, what do you think about Virginia Tech?

He will always feel apart of Virginia Tech and still wears his class ring. Alumnus MJ said, "A lot of blood, sweat, and tears went into getting my degree and ring". He feels apart of it in that he talks about his alma mater and feels like he is a Hokie, but does not attend university or Alumni Association programs/events.

His company has a matching contribution program and he allocates his money to Virginia State, not his alma mater. He gives his money to a HBCU to honor his sister, it is her alma mater, and because he feels historically black colleges/universities need the money more than Virginia Tech. He feels that historically the university has focused on engaging only those who give a lot of money. He said, "If we gauge those by their ability to give as a way to be apart of Hokie Nation then that Nation will be much smaller".

Question 3: Now that you have graduated, tell me about your experience as an alum

For alumnus MJ, it goes back to having a forum that he is comfortable in. He loves, feels apart of, and connected to Black alumni and things for this group. He personally prefers events and programs targeted for black alumni because it provides him the opportunity to

be around people that he knows and went to school with. When he attends general Alumni Association events he does not see people he knows or has a connection with. He said, "People want to hang out with the people they know. If you want Black alumni to give money to VT then you have to provide opportunities and venues where they feel comfortable".

He considers the university and Alumni Association to be one in the same. The Alumni Association is simply an arm of the university. On a scale from 1 to 10, (1 = not involved at all, 10 = very involved, attend 5 or more university events in a calendar year), he rated his level of involvement with the university and the Alumni Association as a 1 or 2. His top reasons for not being involved include location and life factors such as time commitments to family and work. To alumnus MJ, involvement in alumni event consists of sitting on boards/committees and going to meetings.

He said, "It is just like being involved with a fraternity and/or sorority in regards to the amount of time it takes to be a good volunteer. It is like having another job and people have life factors that prevent them from taking on those additional responsibilities. I don't have the time to be involved".

He attended the Black Alumni Reception in September 2010, the Virginia Tech versus Boise State football game, and the Virginia Tech versus Alabama football game in August 2009. He is not involved with the local alumni chapter where he lives.

Question 4: Do you think Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging (i.e. building relationships/meeting the needs) of Black alumni (as students and as alumni)?

Virginia Tech did a good job while he was a student and he has been happy with what he has seen regarding Multicultural Affairs and the university. He is pleasantly surprised at the progress the university has made. Twenty years ago he would not have thought there would be a Black alumni organization. He feels that these efforts designed for Black alumni are necessary in order to get more alumni from this group to be involved.

The differences in how 1980s and 1990s graduates feel toward Virginia Tech may have to do with affirmative action. The 1990s graduates reaped the negative impact of changes in the understanding and appreciation of affirmative action. In the 80s the university and the world had a different appreciation and value for equaling the playing field. For the 90s black graduates it was a different environment regarding affirmative action. History demonstrates why there is a need for targeted efforts when economic and equality issues still persist in society today.

Interview 3: Alumnus RB Class of 1986  
Major: Materials Engineering

Question 1: Tell me about your experience as a student

Overall his student experience was an enjoyable one. He spent one year at a community college before transferring to Virginia Tech as a sophomore. The academic transition was challenging. He feels a sense of pride about going to Virginia Tech. In his junior year he declared his major, Materials Engineering. He socialized and built relationships with the students in that major. The memorable thing he remembers are the bonds he had with other students. Some of the challenges of going to school at Virginia Tech centered on being a minority in a majority environment. He talked about the low enrollment numbers of African American students when he was a student and the numbers today. He said, "The enrollment of African Americans at Tech it was low to be frank. Certain people in the community feel that the school needs to step it up in terms of our minority enrollment and minority involvement in the university". He wants Virginia Tech to have a larger minority population and presence. He said, "Tech needs to embrace diversity because of the global market and we need to be competitive in that arena". Alumnus RB would choose to attend Virginia Tech again.

He was ok with the social aspect of attending college later in his college years as a junior/senior. Initially, it was tough on the social front because he transferred in after his freshman year. Although he bonded with some classmates there were still other social challenges he endured. He said, "The reality is that Blacksburg is not a very diverse area and as people of color you learned how to deal with people who were not open to diverse people, it made you stronger. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger". He had to deal with tough racial situations and had to create coping mechanisms to survive. He tried to stay positive although he was disappointed in the reality that some people were not open to accepting different people. There were negative incidences and occurrences where he experienced racism and discrimination. He said, "There was good and bad. Sometimes you see the 10% bad instead of focusing on the 90% good". He refuses to focus on the 10% bad and wants to focus on the 90% good

He talked about the tough academic environment at Virginia Tech. He was a smart kid but had some academic challenges. He had to adjust his study habits. He said, "You have to recognize that you are competing with the best of the best. You go from being a big fish in a small pond (high school) to being a small fish in a big pond (Virginia Tech and college)".

He had great memories of a professor who impacted his life and experience at school. Matt Lavin really helped alumnus RB, took him by the hand, and encouraged him. This professor taught Materials Engineering and was one reason alumnus RB chose the major.

Question 2: Now that you have graduated, what do you think about Virginia Tech?

Alumnus RB feels apart of the university. When he graduated he was more involved with the local alumni chapter. As of recent, he has not participated in university and/or alumni programs and feels bad that his level of involvement has declined over the years. He tracks Virginia Tech's athletic events/accomplishments and usually attends a football and/or basketball game about once a year or every other year. He likes getting the college newsletters and seeing research accomplishments and news.

Yes he feels connected. His wife often compares Virginia Tech to a cult because she is amazed at how committed VT alumni and fans are. For example, when the couple goes grocery shopping random people they do not know come up to them and carry on conversations because alumnus RB is wearing a Virginia Tech hat.

He said, "Even though Tech is a huge school, there's still for whatever reason a sense of camaraderie in that if you see a fellow Hokie or see someone from Tech you just go up and talk to them. I like that sense of community ..... So I like being an alumnus of Virginia Tech".

Alumnus RB talked about the benefits and challenges of his college experience.

He said, "The benefits you really don't see until you graduate. There are a lot of blood, sweat, and tears that go into earning your Virginia Tech degree. There is a significant amount of recognition and accomplishment in going to Tech especially having an Engineering degree". He felt it was tough and challenging especially when it came to academics.

Question 3: Now that you have graduated, tell me about your experience as an alum

Alumnus RB does feel connected to the Alumni Association, but feels bad that he has not been engaged. He talked about his friend/classmate who does not feel connected to the university or Alumni Association. RB commented on the fact that more black alumni have to do better because historically the weight of moving black alumni issues and concerns forward has fallen on the shoulders of a concentrated few. He said, "You need to really kick people in the butt and say look this is your university".

He served on the Industrial Engineering alumni advisory board and visits campus once a year when he travels through to Bristol, Virginia on business. He does not notify anyone (in his department or the university) when he is on campus, but likes to visit buildings like Holden Hall where his department was located at during his time as a student. On a scale from 1 to 10, (1 = not involved at all, 10 = very involved, attend 5 or more university events in a calendar year), he rated his level of involvement with the university and the Alumni Association as a 6.5. He went to 1 football game, Boise State, in September 2010 and wants to go to a basketball game. He visits campus at least once a

year and averages about 3 events/interactions with the university per year. He loves to read university publications, department newsletters, and the VT Magazine. He visits the Hokiesports.com webpage regularly. He would like to attend both (general Alumni Association programs/events as well as and those targeted for Black alumni). He would like that melting pot interaction and wants to be open to everybody. Saturday is Hokie day in his house and he wears his hat and sweatshirt as his way of demonstrating school pride. He said, "I still feel a great sense of affinity for VT".

Question 4: Do you think Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging (i.e. building relationships/meeting the needs) of Black alumni (as students and as alumni)?

He said, "This is an area that needs improvements". He felt that the reach out came at the beginning and maybe the end of his time at Virginia Tech. "It was more like hey we're here if you need us" instead of having someone proactively and consistently reach out to him all throughout his college career. He thinks it would have helped to have someone from the university check on him. He did not proactively seek this help out on his own, but opted to tough it out.

As an alumnus, he feels that things are getting better, but additional efforts are needed to engage black alumni. He wants the university to do more in this area so that current Black students, especially males, can see that they have a place at Virginia Tech and that Black people before them made it through.

Interview 4: Alumna ML Class of 1987 and 1989  
Major: Undergraduate Degree Math, Graduate Degree Industrial Engineering

Question 1: Tell me about your experience as a student

Virginia Tech has definitely changed since her time as a student. The black students were very tight knit in the 1980's. When she visits campus it does not feel like the same black community as when she was in school. During her freshman year the older black students helped the younger ones out academically. The sororities and fraternities worked together and supported each other. If one fraternity or sorority had a party then the other ones supported it and did not have multiple parties or events on the same day. She pledged Delta Sigma Theta and participated in the Black Organizations Council (BOC). Alumna ML said, "The black community in the 80's was more like a family atmosphere"

The academic part of college was not difficult for her. She was undecided on a major when she came to Virginia Tech, but ended up majoring in Math. She enjoyed her major and math classes were good.

Alumna ML grew up in VA Beach area prior to entering her freshman year. Her step-father was in the Navy and her family moved around when she was growing up. Her high school was like Virginia Tech as far as the demographic makeup, it was majority white. Her older sister went to Virginia Tech as well. She would choose Virginia Tech again and advise others to go to school here. She said it has changed now but Calvin Jamison and Glen Valentine, Undergraduate Admissions counselors, really helped keep the black community together

Question 2: Now that you have graduated, what do you think about Virginia Tech?

She has positive thoughts about Virginia Tech and thinks it is a good school. She has attended two Black Alumni reunions in 2003 and 2007. She tried to come back for the Virginia Tech vs. Virginia football game in November 2010, but could not make it.

Question 3: Now that you have graduated, tell me about your experience as an alum

To her being an alumna means she got a good education "Virginia Tech is respected". The cost was reasonably good and she got a solid technical background and skill set. If it wasn't for Black Alumni events she would not attend alumni programs.

She said, "I think if it hadn't been for the few weekends that we had for Black alumni I probably wouldn't do anything. Because it's such a predominately white

school you feel lost once in it. So that's definitely needed to kind of pull us together".

Question 4: Do you think Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging (i.e. building relationships/meeting the needs) of Black alumni (as students and as alumni)?

As a student she had a few issues like the time when she applied to the graduate program at Virginia Tech. Her advisor told her not to apply because he didn't think she would get in. Another example is in some of her math classes she felt that some grading practices were unfair at times, but couldn't prove it.

The Alumni Association emails have helped her stay informed about what is going on. She is not highly involved because her life is busy with kids, life, and work. Overall she has no negative feelings toward the university or the Alumni Association. She recommends having a Maryland/DC Black alumni chapter because it is hard for alumni to travel back to Blacksburg especially.

## 1990's

Interview 5: Alumnus DC Class of 1998

Major:

Question 1: Tell me about your experience as a student

Alumnus DC liked the technological aspect of going to school at Virginia Tech. Students in the Engineering department were required to have a computer. Other schools did not require their students to have computers, but advised them to utilize computer labs on campus. He liked Virginia Tech's focus on technology.

What he did not like about going to school at Virginia Tech was being the only black guy on his hall. He felt like he always had to defend himself and encountered many race discussions in his residence hall that would become "heated". He lived in Barringer Hall freshmen year, Pritchard, and West AJ before moving off campus.

He grew up in a small town in Chesapeake, VA, a small farming community. His high school was mostly white so he was prepared for the same type of environment/demographics that were in place at Virginia Tech.

Yes he would choose Virginia Tech again because of the academics, but from a social standpoint he would choose another school that had more black students. His brother and sister went to HBCU's. Alumnus DC spent his weekends at his sibling's HBCU schools and attended their Homecomings. He described the Homecoming at Tech as one that catered to white students. He was a member of the National Society of Blacks in Engineering (NSBE). Outside of doing school work and participating in NSBE he felt Virginia Tech did not have other things for him to do socially. He described his academic experience as great, but wanted more socially. He did not have many dating options on campus and had to spend time at Radford to find black women to date because there were so few at Virginia Tech.

The Donning of the Kente graduation ceremony started at the end of his tenure at Tech, but felt that this effort was too late in your college life to make any difference in building a stronger connection between the student and the university.

Question 2: Now that you have graduated, what do you think about Virginia Tech?

He is very proud that he went to Virginia Tech, particularly being a black male that made it through, but does not feel apart of the school. He commented on how much he hates it when he wears a Virginia Tech hat or shirt and people ask him "Did you go there or are you just a fan". People automatically assume that because he is black he did not go to Virginia Tech. He has not been active with the school or the Alumni Association because

he does not feel a connection. He has never been back to the Virginia Tech campus since graduation. He does not go back because he does not know anybody there.

Question 3: Now that you have graduated, tell me about your experience as an alum

Alumnus DC went to George Washington for Graduate School and feels more connected to that school. He feels more connected to GW because he receives a lot of information from them. The school offers a lot of events and programs for their alumni to participate in locally. He said, "There are constant social events happening". George Washington consistently invites alumni to socials, lectures, and asks alumni to help mentor students. He gets monthly communication from George Washington. Current GW students call and ask him for money, to support George Washington university initiatives, and he does. He is happy that the Virginia Tech Alumni Association is doing things targeted for Black alumni and feels this is a good start. He prefers to attend Black Alumni events over general Alumni Association events. He would like to attend alumni programs that take place on campus and locally close to where he lives. On a scale from 1 to 10, (1 = not involved at all, 10 = very involved, attend 5 or more university events in a calendar year), he rated his level of involvement with the university and the Alumni Association as a 0. He feels that George Washington is successful because their alumni office contacted him about coming to speak to current students.

Question 4: Do you think Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging (i.e. building relationships/meeting the needs) of Black alumni (as students and as alumni)?

Black students stuck together when he was a student. He is not sure what more Virginia Tech can do to get more black alumni to feel connected as students and alumni. As a student, you are primarily there to get a good education, but that is not the totality of your experience. You would like to have a good social experience and have the opportunity to develop as a person. Having so few black students on campus impacts your ability to build community with others who are like you. Once you graduate that is it, there is no real connection. He said, "Tech has so many old white people who are not in touch with younger people, particularly black people"

Interview 6: Alumna JR Class of 1998  
Major: Management

Question 1: Tell me about your experience as a student

Her most memorable moment happened two months into her freshmen year. She was taking a Calculus class and got an F grade. At that point, she was unsure if she would make it to graduation. It was a changing moment for her and put things into perspective. It made her think college was different. Virginia Tech was a different experience and not like high school. A family member, and VT alumnus, recommended that she take advantage of professors' office hours. Everything was a learning experience. Her entire time at Tech she felt it was "eat or be eaten". She felt alone and isolated in her classroom experience. Older professors were more intimidating and less helpful to her.

She said, "I know it was like 500 students in there but I just never felt like I had access or enough access to the professor to ask my questions so I kind of felt like ok, now I have to figure this out on my own or go to someone else. I think that's the biggest deterrent for being African American because you don't have that comfort because you honestly don't know. Depending on what your background is, you don't feel comfortable raising your hand in a room of 500 people. In the back of your mind you are thinking is this question stupid to ask or will they think I'm stupid for asking this question". It seemed like nobody was ever concerned with what she was doing. There was not counseling or good advising for her academic process. She said, "She experienced adversity in her academics.

Outside of the classroom her experience was also different. Her family wanted her to go to a HBCU to get a black experience. She became more "Black" at Virginia Tech and developed a great sense of "Black Pride". As a minority on a majority campus she longed and wanted more cultural, academic, and social experiences that represented black people and our experience. She socialized mostly with other black students. She said, "If you saw a Black person on campus you spoke". She talked about being in Blacksburg, a small town, and hanging around with "townies" who were African American in an effort to being around more black people because there were so few on campus. She is a member of Zeta Phi Beta sorority and pledged her junior year. She participated in Black Student Alliance (BSA) and made a point to join black student organizations. Dietrick, Owens, and Hokie Grill were important places on campuses that Blacks hung out at. She thinks she would choose to go to Tech undergrad but would go to a historically black school for graduate school.

She said, "The mentality of black students is to get your degree and get out because the environment is not conducive to meeting the needs of the whole black student experience. It is not a warm and fuzzy feeling walking across the Drillfield and never seeing people who look like you".

Question 2: Now that you have graduated, what do you think about Virginia Tech?

She never felt apart of the institution or a connection to the school. She loves the school but does not feel connected to it. The only time she felt connected was when she had a Black female professor for a Black history class. Another positive was when she took Nikki Giovanni's poetry writing class. She cherished the opportunity to have a world renowned writer read and grade her work. She did not truly appreciate the significance of having Nikki Giovanni teach her until after she had graduated. In her opinion, Virginia Tech did not do a good job of building a relationship with her as a student.

She said, "Tech never owned me or wanted to make me feel apart of the school, once you leave that is it. Nobody made a proactive effort to reach out to me. The reason why African American alumni do not give money is because we feel no connection to the school".

She feels that Virginia Tech made her stronger and appreciates her experiences because it taught her how to deal with different and challenging situations. She does not think about the bad times i.e. the times when she was the only black person in a class of 500 people. She is realistic about the world and what it offers. She is proud that she earned her degree despite the challenges.

Question 3: Now that you have graduated, tell me about your experience as an alum

The biggest thing about being an alumna is having connections to other alumni. There are a lot of other Hokies at her job and in the area. It means a lot to her to be a Virginia Tech alum. She said, "Honestly, it means a lot because it meant I overcame. No matter what happened you know I overcame and I finished in four years".

She remembers being told at Freshmen Orientation to look to the right and left and that some of the people you saw would not make it to graduation.

The local alumni chapter appears to be supported by the university in a consistent way whereas Black alumni things seem to piece meal. Black alumni programs are separate from the institution, to her, because there has not been a consistent coordinated effort. It seems like the efforts are always done by black alumni themselves and not by the university.

She feels nothing toward the Alumni Association; she knows that it exists but does not think about it. She has signed up for the National Captain Region alumni chapter listserv for networking but does not feel apart of the chapter of the Alumni Association. She attended the 2007 Black Alumni reunion and is more inclined to attend Black alumni or Multicultural alumni functions than general alumni functions. Pamplin College of Business events are of interest to her also. On a scale from 1 to 10, (where 1 = not involved at all, 10 = very involved, attend 5 or more university events in a calendar year),

she ranked her level of involvement with the university as a 7 because she recruits at Virginia Tech on behalf of her company. Personal her level of involvement with the university and the Alumni Association she ranked as a 1.

Question 4: Do you think Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging (i.e. building relationships/meeting the needs) of Black alumni (as students and as alumni)?

No there needs to be a structured system, everything is always piece meal. The university should dedicate a staff person to get something together and maintain it that is targeted for black or multicultural alumni.

She said, “Do something so it’s consistent. That is why it looks like Virginia Tech doesn’t care about Black people because it’s nothing consistent. It’s just these piece meal things strung together”.

Alumnus JR describes her student experience as a struggle. She feels that she gained a solid education. It was the other things outside the classroom she was unaware of and wanted more exposure to. She said, “There needs to be a course or something that helps expose black students to what is available to students like Career Services and cultural opportunities.”

Interview 7: Alumna MB class of  
Major: Hospitality and Tourism Management

Question 1: Tell me about your experience as a student

Alumna MB enjoyed the camaraderie and close knit friendships she developed during college. Black students hung out together because there were so few of them. Her memorable moments and/or places include walking across the Drillfield, the dining halls, and going to class. She remembers sitting in a room of 500 students and feeling like a number. She said, "I did not mind large classes because I did not want the professors to call on me". Going to the dining hall was like a who's who event.

She said, "We would sit in Dietrick and eat for hours every night, just hanging out. I liked the routine of college. Every weekend you went out Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights and then you went to class. Being in the dorm was fun too. I will always remember sitting and talking with my girls in West AJ".

She did not like feeling like "such a minority".

She said, "It was just ridiculous the amount of White people that were on campus compared to Black students".

Classes like Accounting and Finance were difficult and she did not who to go to for tutoring.

The relationships she had with academic advisors were not strong.

She said, "I didn't particularly care for the academic advisors. I just felt like they were more connected to White students. I never had a good connection with my academic advisor and it was like she didn't give a damn that we didn't connect, so she just signed off on whatever I put on the piece of paper I was going to take. She barely even looked at it. She never made any recommendations. She was just a signature to get me through each year. I think it was bad that I never felt connected to my advisor. I didn't make any efforts because I was a student. I guess I didn't really know how or maybe I didn't care either. I think I cared, but I just didn't know how".

She would not choose Virginia Tech again.

She said, "I would definitely want to go to a school where there was more representation of Blacks. I would want to go to a school that I felt actually cared about having a diverse group of students and a school that actually put forth effort and made it be known that they care about diversity". She grew up about 1.5 hours away from Blacksburg and did not feel like she went away for college.

She would have liked for the university, professors and TA's, to reach out to African American students to set up tutoring and mentoring. Alumna MB wanted Virginia Tech to take a more active role in helping students with career planning and put on more programs, speakers, and cultural shows.

She said, "It was like black programs were only put on by the Black Student Alliance or Black faculty. You never heard about just the university in general or non-African American Associations doing anything".

The university should do more financial counseling.

She said, "A lot of Black people just couldn't afford to go to school. Each year, people would just like not return. And you'd be like what happened? They'd be like oh I didn't have the money. Maybe they should cut down on some of them numbers and help more students financially that go there".

She recommends that Virginia Tech work on increasing the numbers of diverse faculty and staff.

She said, "Make it a point to have more diverse staff there and that will help the students because at least we would feel like we could make some type of connection with the academic advisors and the instructors. In my department, there wasn't a single Black instructor, TA, counselor – like nobody in my whole department that I was aware of for the four and half years I was there".

Question 2: Now that you have graduated, what do you think about Virginia Tech?

She does not feel connected to Virginia Tech and is not actively involved in anything with the university.

She said, "I don't feel totally disengaged. I do feel a sense of belonging because I went there for four and a half years and got an education there. I am an alumna of Virginia Tech, so there's a certain sense of pride that comes with that".

When asked if she disliked her alma mater her response was insightful.

She said, "It's not so much dislike, I'm disappointed because I have been out of school for 13 years and I just don't feel like anything has changed. There is a struggle with diversity and a struggle with the population of Black students. It is hard for me to understand why a university that large with that type of funding can't do better. I just feel disappointed that they're not taking it serious enough. The university at this point it just doesn't care because if it cared, it would do something about it. I mean you would just offer more acceptance letters to

increase your numbers. There are certainly qualified students out there. So it's not a matter of lowering your standards. It's just a matter of trying to do what's right. It's certainly not a like for the university, but I feel disappointed".

She feels like she supports the university when she attends football games and watches games on television because it helps ratings.

She said, "I also support the university by letting people know I went to Virginia Tech. I'm not going to say I'm an active promoter, but I don't deny going to Tech. I do have a certain amount of pride towards the university and people who know me know that. So that's my small way of supporting. Now am I supporting the school financially or with my actual time no. I'm not close to Tech geographically. I'm not sure how I can support, I don't know about a lot of events/programs".

She does not receive communication or information from her college, but does receive emails from the Alumni Association. Her two sisters, who are also VT alumni, provide information about to her about alumni programs and events.

She said, "I don't really read all the emails, but some I do read. Some of the events/programs don't work with my schedule and some just don't interest me".

She is more interested in attending Black Alumni events/programs.

She said, "I would have more interest in attending events where African Americans were going to be involved or participating because a part in me I don't want to participate in general events that is available to anyone. The reality is that there are so many freakin' white alumni it would feel like the same as when I was in school. So I would prefer to do stuff where Black folks are involved".

Question 3: Now that you have graduated, tell me about your experience as an alum

Being a Virginia Tech alumnus means having pride about earning her degree.

She said, "I'm not sure if being a Virginia Tech alumna means anything really, I mean I'm proud to say I went to Tech. I'm proud to say I went to Virginia Tech. I'm very happy that I have my degree for that. I'm appreciative. So I guess it just means that I'm very happy to have been afforded an opportunity to get an education. I appreciate the opportunity because the reality of the situation is the school didn't have to accept me so I guess I'm glad that I was one of the very few. Tech has become more of a well-known university. When I go places people know Virginia Tech so I like that fact".

She is not actively involved with the Alumni Association, but has considered it. Alumna MB would like to be more involved an attend things for Black alumni. She is interested

in supporting current Black students and participating in networking/career events. On a scale from 1 to 10, (1 = not involved at all, 10 = very involved, attend 5 or more university events in a calendar year), she ranked her level of involvement with the university and the Alumni Association as a 1.

Question 4: Do you think Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging (i.e. building relationships/meeting the needs) of Black alumni (as students and as alumni)?

She does not feel Virginia Tech does a good job of supporting blacks. She said, “They do a very poor, below standard job of engaging black students”. When she graduated she did not hear from Virginia Tech.

She said, “I think they miss an opportunity when the university doesn’t connect with alumni right after graduation. It is hard to reconnect once you have been out of school for several years. If the university wants you to be connected they need to reach out sooner”.

Her ideas about how the university and the Alumni Association can better engage Black alumni include the following.

She said, “Virginia Tech should make a specific appeal and ask black alumni for their help and for them to get involved. They need to be a mature institution that can say when it has messed up, own up to some mistakes, and ask for help from their alumni”. Both the university and the Alumni Association should put on programs that Black people actually want to attend. Set up a structured mentoring program that pairs black alumni and black students in similar career fields together”.

She feels that there is an overall institutional lack or neglect in the area of diversity.

She said, “Virginia Tech should consider shifting funding from other areas to diversity efforts. I understand that Tech can’t support everything, but if Tech values something it needs to put up some money and support it”.

Interview 8: Alumnus GB Class of 1996; Alumnus RW Class of 1995  
Major: Art; Accounting

Question 1: Tell me about your experience as a student

Alumnus RW:

Alumnus RW's college years were the greatest of his life. He went to Freshmen Orientation and met many new people. College was the first time he had to meet new people and adjust to having freedom. His first week on campus, he remembers going around buying stuff and filling out credit card applications in front of the bookstore to free gifts. Originally he is from the Front Royal, which he described as a small and close knit community, and lived in Pritchard Hall. Pritchard was very much a community to him. He said, "Everybody hung out and went everywhere together". Virginia Tech was not a culture shock for him because Front Royal had a similar demographic makeup as Virginia Tech. He did not encounter any issues.

He did not join student organizations because he parents advised him that he was there for one reason, to focus on his education. Although he did not join in a leadership role he did attend Black Student Alliance (BSA) and Black Organizations Council (BOC) events and activities. He remembers going to football/basketball games and concerts and comedy shows hosted by the Black Student Alliance. Alumnus RW would "absolutely" choose Virginia Tech again. His first choice was UVA but now he is glad that he went to Virginia Tech. Faculty played an important role in his college career. He talked about one semester when he did not have enough money to buy all his books. The professor copied the book materials for him so he could keep up in class.

Alumnus RW and Alumnus GB were roommates in college and have known each other for 20 years.

Alumnus GB:

Alumnus GB is from the Suffolk, VA area. His most memorable moments centered on the freedom he felt while being in college. His freshmen year was totally different than how his parents raised him. He said, "If I wanted to do it I did it. I really lived up my freshman year".

Academically his needs were met. At one point in college, he went through some family issues and had to take some time off from school. His professors still reached out to him and kept him on track. Yes he would choose Tech again. He said, "There was more good than bad and I have no regrets about being at Virginia Tech". The most important part of Virginia Tech is the community.

Both Alumni GB and RW participated in Intramural sports. They would have done in college more if they could do it all over. Their friendship got off to a rocky start as freshmen, but they have remained best friends since college. Alumnus RW said, "We all hit the wall in college and your friends are those who help you get through the hard points". They met two younger black male students, in Pritchard Hall, when they were upperclassmen. In this case the two freshmen reached out to them because they were

viewed as the two older brothers. Alumnus RW said, “The freshmen reached out to us because we were the only other black guys on the hall. We showed them the ropes and how to have fun”.

Question 2: Now that you have graduated, what do you think about Virginia Tech?

Alumnus RW has a bond with the university even though he does not attend functions. He feels apart of Virginia Tech and is proud to say he graduated from Virginia Tech. He said, “The fact that the university has grown and developed athletically and academically is exciting”. When he was deciding on a college to attend the sentiment was that UVA was a better school than Virginia Tech. He said, “Those who did not get into UVA went to Tech. Tech was considered less prestigious than UVA back in the day, but now that’s not the case”.

Alumnus GB mentioned the April 16th tragedy and how he felt connected to the situation because he lived on the hall in West AJ where the first shooting took place. He talked about the emotions of going through that tragedy from an alumnus’ perspective.

Both of them would love to visit campus. The last time either one of them was on campus was probably about 2000 for a football game. Alumnus RW said, “The attachment is there. All the people we went to school with all love Virginia Tech. The ones from the 90s are just as die hard and attached as the 1980 graduates”.

Question 3: Now that you have graduated, tell me about your experience as an alum

For Alumnus RW, being an alumnus is having a sense of accomplishment and pride. He was the first one in his family to graduate from college and has an extreme sense of school pride. Co-workers in his office come to him for advice when they are thinking about sending their children to school at Virginia Tech. He tries to recruit students and get more kids to go to Virginia Tech.

For Alumnus GB, being an alumnus is attached to the rich history and legacy of Virginia Tech.

Both of them have that sense of belonging and feel connected to the university.

On a scale from 1 to 10, (1 = not involved at all, 10 = very involved, attend 5 or more university events in a calendar year), Alumnus RW ranked his level of involvement with Virginia Tech and the Alumni Association as a 3 or lower. Alumnus GB rated his level of activity with the university and Alumni Association as a 1.

According to Alumnus GB, family obligations and physical distance are the biggest reasons he is not involved more. He said, “Once you move further and further away it is harder to travel back to campus for programs and events”. He doesn’t have the time to participate in alumni programs when they are not located close to his home. Alumnus

GB and Alumnus RW would like to attend general Alumni Association events and Black alumni events.

Question 4: Do you think Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging (i.e. building relationships/meeting the needs) of Black alumni (as students and as alumni)?

Alumnus RW has a vision to develop a program to help kids get into college. He envisions a community organization that would help fund kids educations who cannot afford to pay for college. Career Services was instrumental for alumnus RW and how he found his first job.

Alumnus RW said, “Everybody treated you the same, people really didn’t see color. No matter where you go to college, you need to go to. Everybody should have the opportunity to have a college experience and the sense of freedom”.

Alumnus GB said, “Virginia Tech epitomized Dr. King’s dream of that melting pot”. He recommends having more family events that take place locally. It is easier for alumni to attend something in Northern VA than to go back to Blacksburg for events. The opportunity to have alumni stay in old (dorms) residence halls and do things that they did in the places they used to hang out in during college is most appealing to him and would draw him back to campus.

For Alumnus GB, the issue of engagement is about convenience. He is still engaged with people from high school and college through Facebook. Alumnus GB asked, “What is Facebook doing that the Alumni Association is not”. The university and Alumni Association should offer multiple events at the same time throughout the year to capture the greatest number of alumni.

Alumnus GB recommends developing a mentoring program. The program would operate by leveraging Virginia Tech alumni and their companies to identify co-op, internship, and career opportunities for students. He feels that alumni can help leverage corporate partnerships for the benefit of students.

Interview 9: Alumnus JM Class of 1999 (transferred to University of Maryland)  
Major: Computer Engineering

Question 1: Tell me about your experience as a student

The first thing he noticed about Virginia Tech was the academic reputation. He felt it was a good school as far as education and academics. There were not a lot of resources available to help him develop outside the classroom. Alumnus JM transfer to the University of Maryland to finish his undergraduate degree. When he compares his student experience at Virginia Tech and Maryland, he liked his time at Maryland because the school had the resources and opportunities that helped him develop as a whole student in various areas of his life. He liked Virginia Tech's campus, history, and tradition. He respected the traditions, but pointed out that the history and traditions do not include or respect Blacks. He said, "It ignores us". When he first got to Tech he noticed how few blacks there actually was.

Alumnus JM said, "Less than 1,000 black students out of a total student population of 25 to 30,000 students is not good. But I'll say this; we've got a sense of community because we were so small we all knew each other we all spoke. At other institutions, the black people don't speak to each other, we did. We all knew each other, which I don't think Virginia Tech ever capitalized on as far as an alumni base. And the reason why I think they didn't capitalize on that is because they don't really care".

His experience outside the classroom was limited because there was nothing in Blacksburg for him.

He said, "Not much to do, if you really wanted to go shopping you had to go to Roanoke. If you really wanted to get any other collegiate experience, you had to go to Radford, Hollins, or Roanoke College. But if you really really wanted a good experience you would ride down to North Carolina A&T. This is what a lot of students had to do or you just go home every weekend. You just leave campus every week and that's no fair way for any student living in the middle of nowhere to spend their collegiate life. You've got to create an atmosphere outside of the classroom for students to grow, learn, love and have fun. After a while you feel as though you've done everything you can do. If you don't have a good support system as far as your friends you're by yourself".

He is still close with the friends he made in college. Alumnus JM was a member of Black Student Alliance and Phi Beta Sigma fraternity. Memorable places on campus include Dietrick dining hall, the Black Cultural Center, and Sharkey's downtown Blacksburg.

He would not choose to attend Virginia Tech again. Virginia Tech is a good school for students interested in playing sports. Otherwise, he would advise the average Black student (non-athlete) to go somewhere else. He remembers the day he chose to leave

Tech. One day he came out of his dorm and had the word “nigger” was spray painted on his car. He went to the administration, wrote letters to the school newspaper, and decided not to finish his degree at Virginia Tech. Overall, his student experience was not good. He said, “A lot of peaks and valleys, but I never felt like I ever had a victory or got a break”.

Academically it was challenging for him. He said, “You are constantly on because Engineering is so driven and as a black student I had no outlet for fun on a social level”. He described the demographic makeup of Virginia Tech as appalling. He came from a big city, New York and Richmond just prior to his college career, and there was no preparation for going from a large urban city to a small rural setting. He said, “There was no help with transition and Tech is a place that can drive you crazy”. The lack of diversity at Virginia Tech directly impacted the dynamics inside the classroom. Alumnus JM felt that there was no balance or diversity in thought perspectives inside the classroom.

Question 2: Now that you have graduated, what do you think about Virginia Tech?

Alumnus JM does not feel connected to the university. His participation has consisted of supporting athletic events. He attended the Virginia Tech versus Boise State football game and other Hokie sporting events that take place in his local area.

He said, “If it wasn’t for Phi Beta Sigma and Greek life I would have no connection to Virginia Tech. I go back every year for the Overton R. Johnson stepshow, which is named after one of our brothers. They finally got smart and put the Black Alumni Reunion on the same weekend since most alumni that come back are Greek anyway”.

When he walked across the stage at the University of Maryland’s graduation the Alumni Association was there to greet him when he crossed the stage. Maryland got his contact information right after graduation and made a proactive attempt to reach out to him quickly. He doesn’t think the Maryland Alumni Association is as organized as they could be, but feels that Virginia Tech never reaches out to him.

He said, “I don’t even think they know you exist when you leave Virginia Tech. Once you leave Tech there is nothing, no thank you for the 10, 15, 20, 30, 40 thousand dollars you spent here. I mean you got Nikki Giovanni on campus, one of the most world renowned poets and writers and nobody knows that. Why doesn’t Tech showcase that and let that help them recruit more black students”.

Question 3: Now that you have graduated, tell me about your experience as an alum

When asked what does it mean to him to be a Virginia Tech alumnus:

He said, "What does it mean, it means nothing. Any pride I carry for the Hokie Nation is through sports which have been frustrating anyway. But do I feel any attachment as an alumnus to the school, no. I arrive on campus maybe once a year and they won't know that I'm back".

On a scale from 1 to 10, (1 = not involved at all, 10 = very involved, attend 5 or more university events in a calendar year), he rated his level of activity with the university as a zero. He does not receive any information from the university or the Alumni Association. He tried to update his contact information but didn't know how.

He would prefer to attend Black Alumni events. His feelings toward the Alumni Association are less positive because he and a group of other Black alumni, in the Northern VA area, tried to start a Black Alumni chapter, but were told no.

He said, "All we heard was no. I felt like saying F\*\* you. I already didn't like ya anyway that pissed me off even more. Who are you to tell alumni they can't start a group that was only trying to help the university recruit more black students and alumni".

He is not sure if there is anything the Alumni Association can do at this point to get him more involved.

He said, "To be honest with you, I'm not even sure. My alumni connection is with the people I went to school with, who I talk to now. Does the school make me feel better about being a Hokie, probably not. Because I already know it's kind of like you don't have to call me a n\*\*\*\*r, but I know you are saying it".

He wants President Steger and other university administration to come out and admit that Virginia Tech has a diversity problem.

He said, "They need to admit there are problems and then come up with some solutions. It has to start with the institution. Money talks and the institution has to put some money behind the words".

He came back to Blacksburg the weekend of the Black Alumni Reunion in March 2010 to attend the Overton stepshow, but did not participate in the reunion.

He said, "You have to recreate the atmosphere of what it was like when alumni were students on campus". This would involve activities around the Black Cultural Center and Dietrick dining hall. Tech is not for Black people and the events for black people are basically fluff".

Question 4: Do you think Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging (i.e. building relationships/meeting the needs) of Black alumni (as students and as alumni)?

He said, “No look at the recruitment of black athletes versus that of a regular black student and you will see the disparity in recruitment strategies. Mike Vick got a personal visit to his home and the university paid for him to come visit the campus. The regular student with a 4.0 doesn’t get anything. If you really want to make a change then you have to admit you have a problem. It is the institution that creates a sense of being an alumnus, Maryland does that and Virginia Tech does not. It starts with the institution and goes down to the people. Everybody wants to feel like they are apart of something special. People want to feel apart of a winning team, but outside of sports the institution does not make me feel connected. Until the university makes some significant strides in increasing black student enrollment black alumni are going to have negative feelings toward Tech”.

Virginia Tech has a problem recruiting and keeping black students. He described the campus atmosphere as very different now than when he was a student.

He said, black students don’t even speak to each other now and it’s kinda black alumni’s fault because we haven’t helped pass this tradition down to the next generation”.

Alumnus JM said one of the most insightful things his father ever said to him was about integration and its impact on Blacks and Black culture. His father described integration as a negative for blacks because in it we lost our sense of cultural identity. Shared experience only works when both sides have a strong sense of self. Blacks have been stripped of our history, culture, and identity throughout history. Predominately white institutions do not create the space for Blacks to learn our history. At a predominately white institution Blacks have no way of learning about history and traditions unless you actively go outside the university and seek it.

He makes a point to talk to black students when he comes back to Blacksburg in an effort to find out how they feel about the current status of Blacks at Virginia Tech. He finds that Black students are not as close to each other as when he was a student.

He thinks that 90s graduates are different from 80’s graduates for several reasons. A major reason is the rise of hip hop and other cultural changes in the 90’s.

He said, “I am Hip Hop and what that means is I had a different view on life. I didn’t need a sense of community; I felt I had to do it on my own. My mentality was to go to school and do me. I wasn’t worried about blending into Virginia Tech and losing my identity”.

He feels that the 80s graduates did not pass history down; therefore, he has no connection with the generation before him at Virginia Tech.

He said, there was no history passed down from the 80s to the 90's, so the 90s focused less on community and more on individual survival".

He compared his experience at Virginia Tech to when he was at Maryland by saying, "I went to Virginia Tech but I became a man at Maryland. Maryland provided experiences outside of the classroom and many avenues for me to develop as a person". What made the difference at Maryland is that the school reached out to him and pulled him in, something that he feels Virginia Tech did not do. He was supported by the university and given the opportunity to do programming as a student such as organizing campus speakers, concerts, and fraternity activities. These leadership opportunities helped strengthen his skills and abilities. He said, "Tech never recruited me for these things, I am much more of a Terp than a Hokie".

His student experience at Maryland was great and his overall experience at Virginia Tech was poor. One positive memory that he does have, about his time at Virginia Tech, deals with a particular faculty member. Dr. Bev Watford was his mother in Engineering. Dr. Watford organized a "best pair" team that pairs upperclassmen with freshmen students. He liked the fact that before he ever stepped foot on campus he was already paired up with a student that was assigned to help him academically. He feels this pairing of students should be done in every major.

He said, "Dr. Watford is the reason my mother felt comfortable letting me go to Tech. That was my best experience and I still remember my "best team. We did everything together; it started off strictly dealing with academics and expanded to a social network. You had somebody to lean on and I loved this model".

He said that socially there was nothing for Blacks in Blacksburg and he felt isolated. He knew students who started the same year he did, but dropped out and went other places because of the isolation.

He said, "People didn't leave because they couldn't survive academically; they just felt like they had no friends and were alone. You need a balance between academics and a social life; you need this at a place like Tech".

He feels that schools in more diverse areas, such as Maryland, are better for minorities because you can find your niche and other people like you in and out of the classroom. He said, "When you have a community outside of the classroom it makes all the difference to your happiness and social wellbeing".

## 2000's

Interview 10: Alumna SK Class of 2004

Major: Interdisciplinary Studies (Black Studies and Psychology)

Question 1: Tell me about your experience as a student

She enjoyed the college experience. Her major was Interdisciplinary Studies with a concentration in Black Studies and Psychology. The dynamics of the departments were good and both majors had small class sizes. She was involved with Black Organizations Council; and enjoyed spending time with friends in the Black Cultural Center between classes. What she did not like about going to school at Virginia Tech was that there were not a lot of things catered toward African Americans. When she entered VT in the fall, the incoming freshmen class was 80% white and the minority population was reported as "Other". Richmond, VA is her hometown. The social part of her college experience was good and she was involved as a student. Alumna SK would choose to attend Virginia Tech again.

Question 2: Now that you have graduated, what do you think about Virginia Tech?

She still loves Virginia Tech and feels apart of the university. Her husband is a University of Miami graduate and she is proud to be a Virginia Tech alumna. She gets emails from the Alumni Association about once a month

Homecoming weekend and the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity ball are some of the events that she comes back to campus to attend. She feels like the campus atmosphere has changed in regard to the types of students who attend. She said, "When I was there black students spoke to each other and now it is not the same".

Question 3: Now that you have graduated, tell me about your experience as an alum

She still sees and interacts with old and new people from Virginia Tech. People are more open

to talk to you when they know you are a Hokie. She said, "It doesn't matter the ethnicity you are you have a connection to other Hokies no matter if you know them or not". Her degree means something and people recognize the school.

She is not involved with the Alumni Association, but has signed up for the National Capital Region alumni chapter listserv. To this point, she has not felt apart of the Alumni Association, no real connection. Alumna SK attended the Black alumni reunion twice before and prefers to attend those events targeted for Black alumni more than general Alumni Association events. She would like to attend both types of alumni programs but

would feel more comfortable attending Black alumni events. On a scale from 1 to 10, (1 = not involved at all, 10 = very involved, attend 5 or more university events in a calendar year), she ranked her level of involvement with the university and the Alumni Association as a 1.

Question 4: Do you think Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging (i.e. building relationships/meeting the needs) of Black alumni (as students and as alumni)?

She has not seen much reach out from the university; and does not think the university promotes Black alumni. She said, “They need to bring more of the programs back like the summer transition program (STEP) because it demonstrates the university’s commitment to the Black constituency”.

Interview 11:           Alumnus DA Class of 2007  
Major:                 Electrical Engineering (Graduate Degree from University of Maryland)

Question 1:            Tell me about your experience as a student

As a student, his first 2 years was a transition period because he was trying to figure out what he wanted to do. He enjoyed his junior and senior year more than the first two years. Alumnus DA is from the Tidewater, Virginia area and Blacksburg was an eye opener for him. He came to Blacksburg from a different part of the state and went into a challenging Engineering program. He enjoyed the friendships he made and is still friends with the people he met his freshman and sophomore years. The new friends he made came from different parts of the country. His initial circle of friends was from the Tidewater area but he eventually branched out and met people from other areas. Many students in his major were International. He always felt that he had to go to Virginia Tech because it would help him face challenges and grow as an adult. Going to Virginia Tech and moving away from home took away the safety net of everything that was once familiar. Overall he enjoyed his college experience.

He would not choose to attend Virginia Tech again because the things he was interested in then and now are different. When he was younger he was more interested in Electrical Engineering and now he is more interested in Engineering Entrepreneurship, an area VT is not strong in. Alumnus DA did his graduate work at the University and Maryland because their program better suited his career, academic, and social needs. He likes the melting pot integrated environment. He feels that no matter what race you are you can fall into a silo.

Socially, he hung out and went to all the black parties. He had some high school friends who were white and went out to fraternity parties with them. Alumnus DA started branching out to other activities his junior and senior years. He also pointed out that his junior and senior years were the times when he was more focused on academics than hanging out. Virginia Tech had an interesting dynamic because all blacks on campus, and everywhere, do not automatically get along.

Question 2:    Now that you have graduated, what do you think about Virginia Tech?

He participates more at the University of Maryland and their Alumni Association than Virginia Tech. Alumnus DA serves on his college alumni advisory board at Maryland. Maryland makes a better effort to reach out and engage alumni; Virginia Tech does not reach out as much or meet the needs that he has as an alumnus. He feels that Virginia Tech operates in silos. He is active with Virginia Tech in the regard that he recruits on behalf of his company and when he is back on campus he reaches out to former

professors. The biggest obstacles to his involvement with Virginia Tech are geographical location and not knowing where and how he can help.

He said, “Minority alumni’s experience is different than the majority alumni experience. The school is definitely is not for everybody, you can easily be broken mentally”.

Virginia Tech focuses on the STEM majors and doesn’t emphasize the softer skills such as communication and networking that are critical to your success as a person in the real world.

He said, “Virginia Tech focuses too much on football. I don’t care about football it takes place one day of the week, I want engagement on the other six days of the week. Is my expectation that I want more than a football game too much”.

He likes getting the *Virginia Tech Magazine* and learning about research and rankings.

He knew the he wanted to be involved with the University of Maryland Alumni Association while he was still a graduate student in the program. Alumni advisory board experience was something he was interested in. He tried to reach out to the Virginia Tech Engineering Alumni Advisory Board, but said it seemed like they were not interested in new board members. So he did the next logical step, he started attending more University of Maryland alumni activities and they wanted him to be involved. The board proactively invited him to join. Alumnus DA reached out to volunteer at both schools, but the University of Maryland was more receptive. He feels that the opportunities to be involved are more visible at Maryland than Virginia Tech.

Question 3: Now that you have graduated, tell me about your experience as an alum

To him, being a Virginia Tech alumnus means that he grew up to be a strong person and that he got a good education. Alumnus DA is trying to be an ambassador for Virginia Tech especially to minorities. The message that he tries to carry back into the black community to younger kids is that “I graduated from a predominately white school, I made it, and so can you. It was a struggle, but I made it”. He described his experience at Virginia Tech as a struggle. When he goes home to the Tidewater area he always makes a point to talk to kids at his local church or school. On a scale from 1 to 10, (1 = not involved at all, 10 = very involved, attend 5 or more university events in a calendar year), he ranked his level of involvement with the university as a 5 or 6. He ranked his level of activity with the Alumni Association as a 2 or 3.

He participated in Virginia Tech Day yield events, in the spring of 2010, hosted by the Alumni Association. He is not as active with Virginia Tech and the Alumni Association not because he doesn’t want to be involved, but because he doesn’t see the value in it.

He said, “Where do I want to put my efforts at building my career and life or spending time trying to support something that has no strategic approach from administration”.

He thinks that the difference in affinity, toward Virginia Tech, between younger and older alumni is due to differences in society in general.

He said, “Older alumni are at different points in their lives than younger alumni and it will take something different to engage younger people”.

He said once he got out of school and saw the Hokie Nation it made he feel apart of something special because going to Virginia Tech and earning his Engineering degree gave him instant credibility in the work world.

Question 4: Do you think Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging (i.e. building relationships/meeting the needs) of Black alumni (as students and as alumni)?

Virginia Tech does not do a good job of engaging black students and alumni. He learned from volunteering with the University Maryland that without money you cannot accomplish a lot of progress and change. Alumnus DA wants the university to do more. He would like to see administration and the right people engaged and committed to engaging black alumni. He remembers at his Maryland graduation, the President of the Alumni Association was on stage at graduation shaking students’ hands as they crossed and felt this simple yet visible thing had such a great impact.

He said, “It is hard because you want to feel appreciated and want to see top administration engaged but I only see you out here engaging black alumni. It is really about visibility”.

He asked, “What is the story of minorities and our experience at Virginia Tech?” He feels he cannot tell or communicate that story to others on behalf of the school because he doesn’t know it.

He said, “We only hear the stories about white alumni. It doesn’t seem like the university even cares. Virginia Tech focuses on building donor relationships with white alumni”.

He feels it is important to have top university administrators and deans more visible to alumni and described himself as a very determined person who is drawn to strong leadership. He said, “I don’t feel like Tech has a lot of change agents”.

He talked about attending a Carnegie Mellon program with a friend. After the program the school hosted a networking reception and the speaker and the dean of the college attended to meet alumni. As an alumnus he wants to hear directly from Virginia Tech

administration and important people. He has seen the Dean of Engineering for Maryland more than the Dean of Engineering for Virginia Tech. The University of Maryland's College of Engineering Dean is visible, engages, and meets alumni routinely. He knows the Deans are focused on donors but asked if they actually go out to engage alumni of color.

He feels the key is to engage alumni in the first year out of college because this is the time when they are still coming back to campus to visit their friends. This 1-2 year period is critical because most students hang out with younger and older classes. If you miss this 1-2 year period then you will continue through life not being engaged with university and the Alumni Association. He does not feel informed about Virginia Tech, College of Engineering programs, or Alumni Association activities.

He said, "The whole Virginia Tech Alumni Association thing is hard. Do they actually leverage their network to improve the lives of alumni?"

He has not seen the school promote and assist in providing networking opportunities for alumni. He is not sure if it will be beneficial to network within the Hokie Nation so he feels "why would I invest time in something that doesn't pay off".

Virginia Tech efforts to engage Black alumni are not visible to him.

He said, "I don't know what Tech does to engage us. There is nothing wrong with a grassroots approach but the administration needs to take the lead and demonstrate commitment on their part to engage black alumni. Engaging Black alumni is not a priority to VT. When you think about Black faculty/staff at Tech they are tired and alumni know they are tired and face a constant uphill battle. Alumni see they are run down and we say why bother if nothing is changing. If you are black and didn't play football Tech could care less about you. There are more alumni of color who graduated from the Colleges of Science and Engineering than black athletes yet they receive most of the administrations attention and resources. Virginia Tech doesn't care about the minority alumni population. I see the fluff and hear the lip service, but there is no genuine commitment".

Question 5: Is there anything else you would like to mention that we have not covered today?

The vision of where Virginia Tech is trying to go and how alumni can help is always present at the University of Maryland. He said, "You always see the strategic vision of the university, the strategic initiatives are front and center for alumni to understand what role they can play".

Alumnus DA said his parents attended both of his graduations at Virginia Tech and Maryland. The speaker at the University of Maryland commencement ceremony was an African American and the graduation speaker for his department was Asian. He said,

“When I see the melting pot integration at Maryland I question why doesn’t Tech value and want this”. He feels more connected to Maryland because the school mirrors the type of diverse environment that he wants to be apart of. The Maryland Alumni board that he volunteers on has great diversity and Alumnus DA is the youngest. The board members have great relationships with each other and that makes him want to be involved and participate.

Alumnus DA does not see that type of value placed on diversity at Virginia Tech.

He said, “At Tech the school just churns out graduates, but here is no relationship building. Tech’s model is until you can pay to be at the table then you aren’t going to have a seat at the table, part of that good ole boys club. At Maryland you don’t have to pay to be at the table. It is a two way relationship, black alumni want to see some results and I don’t see any from Tech as it relates to diversity”.

Interview 12:           Alumnus MG Class of 2006  
Major:                 Business Information Technology

Question 1:    Tell me about your experience as a student

Alumnus MG's student experience worked in two phases. The first phase was his freshman and sophomore years. During the time he stayed to himself. His experience was "ok" but challenging from a support standpoint. He talked about being a student in 2003 when the Board of Visitors (BOV) voted to end affirmative action.

He said, "I was there, I'm sure you remember when they had the big BOV controversy, taking away a lot of the programs that were set up for us. And so that was a challenge because, in fact, there was one great program I was in, I don't know if you remember Focus, for Business students. They kind of dropped the ball on that one after that stuff happened. So that was kind of tough because I think when you go to a PWI, you need support and for a lot of us it was one of those things where you've never been in an environment like that. I went to school with some white people, but I have never gone to school with that many white people and where it was so few of me. And then two, I think just the general experience of going from high school to a large university where you were just a social security number".

He felt the BOV's decision hindered the growth of black student enrollment because many of the programs that was in place for minority students got cut. When John Rocovich was reappointed to the BOV he said "here we go again". Programs like Aspire, SEED, and Focus helped black students feel comfortable about going to Virginia Tech. He said, "After the BOV decision African American student enrollment dipped. Unless Tech finds a way to bring those programs back and maintain them we won't make the kind of gains we need".

During his last two years of college he served in the student government association as the diversity representative and president of Society of African American Brotherhood (SAAB). It was during his junior and senior years that he learned about how the university functions and connected with people that make things happen. He is thankful because going to Virginia Tech prepared him for the real world "considering that in the real world you have to work with a lot of white people". He was the only black person in SGA and original joined to work on constituency outreach but because he was the only black person they asked him to work on diversity. Other student leadership experience involved working on the Principles of Community. He talked about administrators and faculty members who he worked with included former Vice President of Multicultural Affairs Dr. Ben Dixon, Alicia Cohen, and Ray Plaza. He remembers having dinner at Dr. Betsy Flanagan's house. He had the opportunity to participate on search committees and sat on the Commission for Equal Opportunity and Diversity.

He felt that there were benefits to being involved as a black student because he was exposed to influential people, but that view was not shared by all black students. He said, "The radical Black people in Drop Alliance called me uncle tom". Virginia Tech taught him to interact with people. He said, "Tech can be what you want it to be but it is a place where you have to drive your experience but most of us haven't been taught how to drive the engine". He had friends that went to HBCU's who truly enjoyed their undergraduate experience. The support and network is stronger for Blacks at HBCU's, but the tradeoff is that in the real world you have to be prepared to work with all kinds of people. Students from HBCU's may have to adjust to this type of work environment whereas Black students from PWI's leave college already being exposed to this.

In summary, his first two years of college were different than last two years. He said, "The last two years of college I learned that higher education is a business and the product are the degrees. If you think of it this way you can try to get the most out of it". He would choose Virginia Tech again because he does not believe in "shoulda, coulda, woulda". He would change how he did some things as far as interacting with professors, but would not change going to school at Virginia Tech. For Alumnus MG being exposed to another side of the university and important people changed his perspective about the university.

Personally he did not have a problem socially but knows that some black students did. His roommate freshman year was a white person from Tennessee. His roommate asked him a lot a questions and had never been around a black person before. He said, "The experience was interesting. I can laugh about it now, but looking back it allowed me to see how other people saw me and Blacks in general".

When he first got to college he only socialized with other Blacks because that is where he felt comfortable. His circle of friends expanded when he got involved with SGA. Alumnus MG is from Richmond, Virginia. He enjoyed hanging out in the Black Cultural Center because it helped protect Blacks.

He said, "White students didn't really come in there". For us it is an issue of identity. For white and international kids they know their heritage and can branch out more with other groups because at the end of the day they can go back to their long standing history and traditions. Blacks hold on and hang out together so much because we are searching for what is familiar to us. We lack a true historical identity because it was distorted and taken from us time and again. Black people grow up around other black people and don't branch out as much for many reasons. Black students don't experience as much as our white counterparts pre college years".

Question 2: Now that you have graduated, what do you think about Virginia Tech?

Alumnus MG does not feel connected to the institution in the same way that White alumni do. He feels connected but not as much as he would like to feel connected.

He said, “I think I do get a sense of pride particularly living in this region. The brand is definitely recognized here. You do realize that you are apart of the institution even if you didn’t think you were apart of it while you were there”.

Alumnus MG has a relative who is also a Virginia Tech graduate from the 1970’s. He said that his relative participates in university functions far more than he does. He classified the difference between his experience and that of his older relative as night and day. Alumnus MG keeps in touch with other alumni but that has been the extent of his connection. He said, “Older alumni their VT was not my VT. The experiences of older alumni are not the experiences that I went through”.

Question 3: Now that you have graduated, tell me about your experience as an alum

People recognize his classring but his experience as an alumnus has been non-existent. He feels that there has been no outreach from the institution to Black alumni, inviting them back to participate. The Alumni Association caters to older alumni and he feels it is because older alumni have money to give. He understands that the university is a business but stressed the importance of relationship building when:

He said, “You know, I kind of thought to myself, if you don’t set up the relationship with younger alumni, don’t come to me later when I have money because I feel used at that point”.

There is a level of disappointment, on his part, in terms of the Young alumni engagement. He wishes that younger alumni were used more to bridge the gap with current students. He said his experience probably mirrors the experience of current students more closely than an alumnus who graduated 20+ years ago.

Alumnus MG does not feel connected to the Alumni Association because there have been few invitations extended to him to participate and get involved. He attended the 2007 Black Alumni Reunion and came away feeling disenfranchised because Young alumni and their needs were not reflected. Older Black alumni were featured front and center and involved in the preparation and planning leading up to the reunion. He feels nothing, neither like nor dislike, toward the Alumni Association. His interaction with the Alumni Association has been limited and he does not know what it offers. Only recently has he gotten more correspondence from the Alumni Association, but receives no communication from the university.

On a scale from 1 to 10, 1 = not involved at all, 10 = very involved, attend 5 or more university events in a calendar year, he ranked his level of activity with the university as a 2 or 3 and his level of activity with the Alumni Association as a 0. He would attend general Alumni Association events, but is more interested in attending Black alumni events. Currently, he wants to help Black students on campus and assist in recruitment efforts.

Question 4: Do you think Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging (i.e. building relationships/meeting the needs) of Black alumni (as students and as alumni)?

Alumnus MG answered this question from a student and alumnus perspective.

He said, “As a student it is mixed, I had different situations where I had some decent engagement but I think quite frankly a lot of people who are in positions of authority don’t know how to relate. And culturally, there are just some differences. And they haven’t always been able to kind of recognize those and I think that’s where the disconnect happens. ....but at the end of the day, Virginia Tech is run by a bunch of old white men. So we just don’t connect. I had professors who are nice and are nice people, but if I went to their office, it was awkward. I don’t know if they felt threatened or they just didn’t know what to do. I think a lot of it was they just didn’t know what to do because they hadn’t talked to Black people”.

Some of the frustrations he had as a student have carried over post-graduation.

He said, “As an alum, I think they probably try to approach us. I think they want to approach but they’ll try to approach us in a general sense and because of some of the cultural differences, we don’t make the same connection. You know, I think Black folks, we’re kind of a family thing for us. .... So I think a lot of things are geared that way and even if their intentions are right, they just kind of miss the boat”.

The recommendations he offered for ways to better engage black alumni include consistent communication. He cautioned the university to be aware of the differences in communication styles and cultural differences. He thought getting in touch with people electronically with a Black alumni newsletter would help tremendously. He would love to have regional chapters/groups for Black alumni. This commitment from the university and Alumni Association would demonstrate a commitment to engaging Black alumni “something more than just words”.

Alumnus MG feels that having people of color in senior level positions would also make a difference to Black alumni. He would like to see more majority senior level administrators at Black alumni events to demonstrate a commitment and buy-in. He considers the university and VTAA to be separate organizations and said, “It seems like the Alumni Association is a completely separate organizations from the outside looking in”. He assumes they are connected but it does not look that way to him.

Question 5: Is there anything else you would like to mention that we have not covered today?

Alumnus MG thinks the university and Alumni Association really need to figure out how to engage Black alumni. He knows many Black alumni who have graduated and never returned to campus. He also thinks that Black alumni who want to see more activity have to step it up. For example,

He said there are Black alumni, particularly younger alumni, who come back to campus for the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity ball and not attend the Black Alumni Reunion. Some of this low turnout from young Black alumni is because he feels like every Black alumni event features the same older Black alumni. He stressed the importance of identifying “some fresh blood in those ranks”.

Interview 13:           Alumnus KD Class of 2007  
Major:                 Computer Science

Question 1:            Tell me about your experience as a student

When alumnus KD first got to Virginia Tech he was in University Studies. He chose computer science as his major and it was hard academically. Many senior students reached out to him his freshman year and let him know about student organizations to get involved in. Originally, alumnus KD was going to go to Morehouse. He applied and was accepted, but he could not afford to attend. Virginia Tech was more affordable and that is what influenced his decision. He grew up in the Chesterfield area outside of Richmond, VA. He loved his student experience and would not take it back for anything. He was very involved with student and administration populations. There were some negative experiences, but he would not change it. Virginia Tech prepared him for the real world. Looking back, he feels like he got more from VT than if he would have gone to a HBCU. Virginia Tech is more representative of the real world and prepared him to enter the job market. He would choose to attend Virginia Tech again.

As a student he was involved in Black Student Alliance, Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Student Government Association, Society for African American Brotherhood, CS2 a computer science community service organization. Virginia Tech was not a culture shock socially because he grew up on the outside of Richmond in the more rural area.

Question 2:    Now that you have graduated, what do you think about Virginia Tech?

Alumnus KD feels very attached and apart of the institution because he was involved as a student. He stays in contact with university administrators and the student groups he was apart of as a student including SGA and BSA. As a founding member of his fraternity's on-campus chapter he remains very involved with the current students and personally committed to their success, he gives money back to them. Alumnus KD feels that he left a legacy behind at Virginia Tech because he was involved. It has been about a year since he has been on campus and that is due to a demanding work schedule and the geographical location, distance, and time that it takes to travel back to Blacksburg.

Question 3:    Now that you have graduated, tell me about your experience as an alum

Alumnus KD endured and made it through to graduation. The first thing that comes to his mind when he thinks about being a Virginia Tech alumnus is Hokie Pride. There are a lot of Hokies in the Northern VA area. He remembers going to the Virginia Tech versus Boise State football game and feeling a great sense of pride to see Hokie fans fill up FedEx field.

He said, “Hokie pride you see it everywhere. It kind of gives you this big huge sense of pride. I graduated from this school, look what everybody is doing. .... I have friends who graduated and going to law school in the Netherlands and traveling all over Europe. I mean, it’s huge. You’re apart of a big thing, an extended family. I guess I feel a sense of pride a sense of being apart of something special. The experience I had at Tech I could never forget any of that”.

He attended the Young Alumni mixer in Washington DC in July 2010 and the Black Alumni Reception in September 2010. On a scale from 1 to 10, (1 = not involved at all, 10 = very involved, attend 5 or more university events in a calendar year), he ranked his level of involvement with the university and the Alumni Association as a 5.

Question 4: Do you think Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging (i.e. building relationships/meeting the needs) of Black alumni (as students and as alumni)?

He does not believe that Virginia Tech should just cater to Black alumni because the school is a diverse university with many cultures. He was involved in policy writing while a student and feels that the school has made good strides. Now that he has graduated, he thinks that if Virginia Tech tries to focus just on one group it may handicap the efforts of engaging all people. He said, Virginia Tech should attempt to make Blacksburg a place where all people feel comfortable and welcome.

Interview 14: Alumna LK Class of 2002, 2005  
Major: Undergraduate Degrees in Political Science and English, Masters in Public Administration

Question 1: Tell me about your experience as a student

Alumna LK really enjoyed her experience as a student. She saw a transition at Virginia Tech from her freshman to senior year. While she was a student Dr. Ben Dixon was hired as the first Vice President for Multicultural Affairs. She enjoyed the classes, professors, and campus. Alumna LK studied abroad and participated in student activities such as being a resident advisor, orientation leader, and serving on the judicial review committee. She was a member of the Corp of Cadets her freshman year and volunteered in the Dean of Students Office in the Multicultural Awareness Program. After college, she worked at the Japanese Government in Washington DC. Her student experience benefited her life both personally and professionally. Virginia Tech now compared to when she started in 1998 has transformed. She feels that much more work is needed to make Virginia Tech a more inclusive and welcoming environment.

Question 2: Now that you have graduated, what do you think about Virginia Tech?

Alumna LK is very proud of Virginia Tech and to be an alumna. Her office is decorated with Virginia Tech items as way to show her school pride to others. She would like to be more involved with student recruitment and retention efforts. Currently, she recruits on behalf of her company at Virginia Tech and works on the Hill.

Question 3: Now that you have graduated, tell me about your experience as an alum

Alumna LK has been involved in different types of alumni programming including participating in the Chicago alumni chapter, the Black Alumni Reception in fall 2010, and signing up for the National Capital Region alumni chapter listserv. She would like to receive more information about social and academic programs offered by the Alumni Association. Her desire is to see the Black alumni efforts grow and would like to help in any way she can. The university and the Alumni Association are one in the same to her. The university is mostly focused on students and the Alumni Association is geared toward alumni. On a scale from 1 to 10, (1 = not involved at all, 10 = very involved, attend 5 or more university events in a calendar year), she ranked her level of involvement with the university and Alumni Association as a 2 or 3.

Question 4: Do you think Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging (i.e. building relationships/meeting the needs) of Black alumni (as students and as alumni)?

She thinks that the university is reaching out to all its alumni.

She said, “In terms of Black alumni, I think what you’re doing separately is great and it’s definitely needed. So I don’t necessarily feel like they’re not doing enough. But I think if they really want African Americans to be involved, what you’re doing will probably have to continue because for so many people it’s easy to graduate and just move on and not come back for different events. The problem if you go to a regular alumni event there’s so many people there that it’s hard to really get face to face with the people that you know. And I think that’s the key with some of the African American alumni. In some way we kind of do want to have things specific to us because we want to be face to face with the people we remember”.

Each year she and her girlfriends try to travel back to campus. Her low involvement has less to do with the school and more to do with her life and work commitments. It is more important to her to have events targeted for Black Alumni because when she goes to general alumni events she does not see people that she knows. She said, “I want to hang out with the people I went to school with”.

She recommends the Alumni Association and university utilize social media including Facebook and LinkedIn. She still uses her vt.edu email account. The way to get more alumni tied to the Alumni Association is to do social events and couple that with information and education. If alumni feel they can come to the Alumni Association for education and classes they will be more likely to give. Alumni need to be educated about giving back to Virginia Tech and pulled into student recruiting efforts.

Interview 15: Alumnus JD Class of 2000  
Major: MBA program at National Capital Region campus

Question 1: Tell me about your experience as a student

Alumnus JD got his undergraduate degree in Physics from Hampton University in 1970. He earned his MBA degree from Virginia Tech in 2000 and took classes at the National Capital Region campus. It was a good program and the professors were very knowledgeable. There were only two blacks in his MBA cohort and he wanted and expected more diversity. He would choose to go to Virginia Tech again.

Question 2: Now that you have graduated, what do you think about Virginia Tech?

Virginia Tech is a top school academically and prepared helped increase his industry knowledge. He feels apart of the Hokie Nation and people recognize the school. He said, "There is a lot of camaraderie". When asked if he feels a greater connection to Virginia Tech or Hampton he said Virginia Tech because it is more recent, he said 60% Virginia Tech and 40% Hampton.

He interacts more with the Hampton Alumni Association, but wants to be more involved with the Virginia Tech Alumni Association. He described himself as very service oriented. Hampton University is very active in the community and that is why he continues to support the school. He would like to see Virginia Tech do more community service projects.

Question 3: Now that you have graduated, tell me about your experience as an alum

To alumnus JD being an alumnus is about being apart of the Hokie Nation and meeting people wherever he goes that know about Virginia Tech. He has considered being more engaged with the Alumni Association and would like to see more community projects because his passion is helping others. He would like to get more communication from the Alumni Association.

The Alumni Association is an extension of the university that is responsible for representing the university to its alumni. On a scale from 1 to 10, (1 = not involved at all, 10 = very involved, attend 5 or more university events in a calendar year), he ranked his level of involvement with the university and Alumni Association as a 4.

Question 4: Do you think Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging (i.e. building relationships/meeting the needs) of Black alumni (as students and as alumni)?

Alumnus JD feels that Virginia Tech does a good job of engaging Black alumni and their professional needs. He enjoys the programs, lectures and symposiums that are offered to alumni at the campus in Northern, VA.

## APPENDIX B RECRUITMENT ANNOUNCEMENT

The Virginia Tech Alumni Association is interested in hearing your feedback. I am conducting a research study to examine how Virginia Tech African American alumni feel about their experience at Virginia as a student and alum. Alumni were referred, by other alumni and/or former classmates, and invited to participate in a personal interview. Participants are free to withdraw from this study at any time. Participants are free to refuse to answer any item. Interviews are being conducted with alumni to determine how we can better serve you. If you are willing to participate please visit this link (\_\_\_\_\_) to sign a consent form and schedule a time that is most convenient for you. I will be conducting interviews in the \_\_\_\_ area on \_\_\_\_ (day, times). If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at [lbrogdon@vt.edu](mailto:lbrogdon@vt.edu) or (540) 231-1171.

APPENDIX C INFORMED CONSENT FORM

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

**Informed Consent for Participants in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects**

**Title of Project:** African American Alumni Engagement at Virginia Tech

**Investigator:** Laurie Brogdon

**I. Purpose of this Research/Project**

This study will examine how Virginia Tech African American alumni feel about their experience at Virginia as a student and alum. Alumni were referred, by other alumni and/or former classmates, and invited to participate in a personal interview.

**II. Procedures**

Participants will be asked a series of questions and allowed the opportunity to respond giving feedback regarding their opinions and experience. The research session will take place in locations most convenient for the alum, either in a local bookstore, their home, or a nearby Virginia Tech extension campus. Interviews will last approximately one hour.

**III. Risks**

Emotional discomfort, if any, is minor and would not be greater than that experienced in everyday life. However emotionally difficult circumstances that occurred during the alum's time as a student, may surface. To limit this discomfort any individual is free not to respond to a question(s)

**IV. Benefits**

Participants will gain an appreciation of the conduct of research in communication. In addition, scholars and practitioners stand to gain a greater understanding about relationship management in a higher education setting. No promise or guarantee of benefits has been made to any participant to encourage him or her to participate.

**V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality**

Participants' responses to interview questions are anonymous. No individuals will be identified in reports of the research and all information used in the study will be accessible only to the researchers. Interviews will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy.

**VI. Compensation**

In exchange for their participation in this study, participants will receive a Virginia Tech Alumni Association pen and notepad.

**VII. Freedom to Withdraw**

Participants are free to withdraw from this study at any time. Participants are free to refuse to answer any item.

**VIII. Participant’s Responsibilities**

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities: To participate honestly and earnestly to the best of my abilities.

**IX. Participant’s Permission**

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent.

---

Participant signature

Date

Should I have any pertinent questions about this research or its conduct, and research subjects' rights, and whom to contact in the event of a research- related injury to the subject, I may contact:

**Investigators:**

Laurie Brogdon

[lbrogdon@vt.edu](mailto:lbrogdon@vt.edu)

**Faculty Advisor:**

Dr. Damien Waymer

[dwaymer@vt.edu](mailto:dwaymer@vt.edu)

**Departmental Reviewer:**

**Chair, Institutional Review Board:**

## APPENDIX D DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Thank you so much for participating in my study!

In this study I am evaluating Virginia Tech African American alumni from the class years of 1980-1989 and 1990-1999.

I asked alumni like you to participate in a personal interview like we have just completed to learn about African American alumni's feelings toward Virginia Tech. All alumni were asked the same set of questions.

I expect that the findings of this study will help Virginia Tech and the Alumni Association understand more about what it can do to build relationships with African American alumni.

If you are interesting in learning more about other studies involving university alumni see:

- Ashforth, B., & Mael, F. (1989). Social Identity Theory and the Organization. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(1), 20-39. Retrieved from Business Source Complete database.
- Mael, F., & Ashforth, B. (1992). Alumni and their alma mater: A partial test of the reformulated model of organizational identification. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 13(2), 103-123. Retrieved from Business Source Complete database.
- Mael, Fred (1988). Organizational identification: Construct redefinition and a field application with organizational alumni. Ph.D. dissertation, Wayne State University, United States -- Michigan. Retrieved September 19, 2010, from Dissertations & Theses: Full Text. (Publication No. AAT 8903243).

If you have any questions about this study or would like to learn more about the findings (at the end of the spring 2011), please feel free to contact the investigators.

Laurie Brogdon ([lbrogdon@vt.edu](mailto:lbrogdon@vt.edu))

Dr. Damien Waymer ([dwaymer@vt.edu](mailto:dwaymer@vt.edu))

## APPENDIX E IRB APPROVAL LETTER



Office of Research Compliance  
Institutional Review Board  
2000 Kraft Drive, Suite 2000 (0497)  
Blacksburg, Virginia 24060  
540/231-4606 Fax 540/231-0959  
e-mail irb@vt.edu  
Website: www.irb.vt.edu

### MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** December 21, 2010

**TO:** Laurie Brogdon, Damion Waymer

**FROM:** Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires October 26, 2013)

**PROTOCOL TITLE:** Virginia Tech African American Alumni Engagement

**IRB NUMBER:** 10-946

Effective December 21, 2010, the Virginia Tech IRB Chair, Dr. David M. Moore, approved the new protocol for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at <http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm> (please review before the commencement of your research).

### PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved as: **Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 6, 7**

Protocol Approval Date: **12/21/2010**

Protocol Expiration Date: **12/20/2011**

Continuing Review Due Date\*: **12/6/2011**

\*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

### FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals / work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

*Invent the Future*

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY

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Date*	OSP Number	Sponsor	Grant Comparison Conducted?

\*Date this proposal number was compared, assessed as not requiring comparison, or comparison information was revised.

If this IRB protocol is to cover any other grant proposals, please contact the IRB office ([irbadmin@vt.edu](mailto:irbadmin@vt.edu)) immediately.

cc: File