ENVISIONING VIRGINIA TECH

BEYOND BOUNDARIES

COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

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"Community relationships" is a broad term used in the higher education literature to describe a university's relations with the community in which it finds itself situated. Other terms in use elsewhere include "regional development," "community engagement," and "university community partnerships" (Feinblatt, 2008). However, these terms each have their own nuance and many refer to active or targeted interactions between the university and its surrounding communities. This paper touches on some of the interactions between these players and the effects of a university's presence in a community. A common term used to describe this more holistic relationship between the players in a local community is the "town-gown" relationship. Organizations such as the International Town & Gown Association (ITGA) are focused on helping both universities and the communities in which they are embedded navigate the complex and interdependent relationships they have. At the local level, one way that Virginia Tech and the Town of Blacksburg maintain open lines of communication is through the Town-Gown Committee, co-chaired by senior associate vice president for student affairs, Dr. Frank Shushok, and Blacksburg Deputy Town Manager, Steven Ross.

The OECD (2007) highlighted one of the sources of tension that can emerge in relationships between universities and their surrounding communities. It noted that contrary to the strongly-defined boundaries of local and state governments, "research-intensive universities cannot have a mandatory geographical sphere of influence; indeed such institutions operate at the local, regional, national and international scales" (p. 56). Therefore, even institutions that are working to address local concerns through their public missions may find that there may be disagreements over what the best course of action to meeting local concerns, or even what those local concerns are. At the broader level, because Virginia Tech is one of Virginia's land-grant institutions, it is seen as having an obligation to meeting the needs of the commonwealth. As its stature rises at both the national and international levels, so does the role of its land-grant mission to use its resources and expertise to solve global issues. This paper begins with a focus on the local and regional roles Virginia Tech plays and the challenges it faces. The second section focuses on its relationship with the commonwealth including some of those tension points followed by a brief exploration of the impact of its land-grant mission on this relationship.

Regional Presence

No matter the course it elects to take, Virginia Tech's future is most closely intertwined with the Town of Blacksburg and the greater New River and Roanoke Valleys. If Virginia Tech chooses to expand student populations, these valleys will take on the bulk of the infrastructure, both physical and social, needed to support that expansion. If Virginia Tech chooses to set its sights on having fewer students at the Blacksburg campus at any given time or chooses to house fewer students on its main campus, these will have very real but different impacts on the surrounding areas.

As a major employer and driver in the local economy, a public research institution, and a land-grant university, Virginia Tech has influential relationships at the local/regional, state,

national, and international levels. Feinblatt (2008) noted that "land grant universities have the mission to respond to the contemporary needs of students and communities, focusing knowledge and expertise in solving problems facing their regions" (p. 3). However, the OECD (2007) noted that tensions can emerge between the desire to become a world-class institution and being an institution that remains sensitive and responsive to regional needs. The 2011 European Union Regional Policy document similarly found that colleges and universities that "define themselves in terms of research excellence can often find themselves 'locked in' to the pursuit of outputs that maintain or enhance their position in national or international league tables with scant regard to regional needs" (Goddard & Lempton, 2011, p. 37).

The consulting firm Brailsford & Dunlavey (B&D), in conjunction with the International Town Gown Association (ITGA), conducted a 2013 town and gown survey looking at issues of campus edge developments, economic development, student housing, shared services, and friction points. Some of the trends uncovered in the survey findings will be explored in the following sections. The survey captured 349 ITGA-affiliated responses, representing a third of the total organizational membership. 40% of respondents were municipal members while 60% of respondents were institutional members (colleges or universities).

Regional Development. In many "college towns," the university is the primary draw for many individuals. Faculty, staff, and some students come with their families, generating both the need for services beyond the university. This creates a labor pool for other businesses that may develop in response to demonstrated need in the community or to best utilize the highly-educated workforce available in the region. Alumni who took advantage of available networking opportunities while students and who enjoy what a region has to offer may also start new enterprises locally and become embedded in the social tapestry of a community.

Porter (2007) noted that higher education institutions influence regional economic development through several roles they play in local communities: employer, purchaser, real estate developer, workforce developer, advisor and network builder, and technology transformer and incubator (pp. 43-44). These roles are even more critical in less populated areas, such as Southwest Virginia, where the private sector may not otherwise be as robust or diverse due to its area. In such communities, "successful mobilization of the resources of the university can have a disproportionately positive effect on their regional economies and achievement of comprehensive regional strategies" (Goddard & Kempton, 2011, p. viii). The OECD (2007) similarly found in their review of 14 regions across 12 countries that "there is a simple direct impact on the local economy of large research-intensive universities competing successfully on the global stage for research contracts, well-paid staff and well-qualified students regardless of the extent of its dynamic engagement with local businesses and the community" (p. 53).

Four of the areas that are most commonly used by universities to encourage regional economic and community development include "enhancing regional innovation through their research activities, promoting enterprise, business development and growth, contributing to the development of regional human capital and skills, and improving social equality through regeneration and cultural development" (Goddard & Kempton, 2011, p. 5). Goddard and Kempton

(2011) cautioned that there is no single approach to regional development that can take into account the many nuances present in each area and at each institution, and regions should develop their own plans that are carefully tailored to meet their needs while maximizing the benefits of their particular strengths (p. 20).

Housing. A 2015 Housing Market Study completed for the Town of Blacksburg identifies a present and growing shortage of affordable housing for various subpopulations. Student housing remains a contentious issue that was addressed in the Town of Blacksburg's housing study, and the top five most challenging issues of off-campus student housing from the 2013 B&D survey highlight some of the main areas of concern for communities: alcohol-related incidents, late-night noise, house parties, parking, and poorly maintained/unsightly properties. These concerns, among others, can lead to limiting undergraduate student housing to certain regions. One rationale for this action is to ensure that the correct infrastructure is in place in terms of transportation and security to support the needs and demands of this population.

Transportation. Understanding the transportation needs of both the campus and the broader community is an important component of planning the campus of the future. Transportation needs will vary depending on where students and faculty/staff live in relation to our campus(es), but a future presence in Blacksburg will require careful planning of local, regional, and broader transportation. Of the top five town-gown friction points identified in B&D's 2013 town-gown survey, three of the five were directly related to the use of personal automobiles (parking space shortage, traffic congestion, and parking traffic violations), while a fourth was more generally focused on issues related to street upkeep. Coordinating public transportation infrastructure with university needs and major housing and retail/office development is one way to reduce the strain on parking and road infrastructure.

Beyond local transportation needs, convenient and affordable mechanisms for connecting the campus with the larger region and locations around the globe, such as through passenger rail and air travel. The European Union Regional Policy's "Connecting Universities to Regional Growth" noted the many benefits to a region that having a globally-connected university can net. These benefits include attracting investment in the region through both individuals and funds to encourage the development of new and innovative firms as well as strengthening existing firms (Goddard & Kempton, 2011, p. 22). However, if a region is cut off from the broader world because of a lack of ability to travel to and from the region, then these investments are less likely. The firms that do develop in the region will likely relocate as the need for interconnection with individuals and markets elsewhere grows.

Commonwealth Presence

Virginia Tech's land-grant status and role as a state agency can create a complicated relationship with the commonwealth when combined with declining state funds as a percentage of university revenue and an increased push to be a world-class research institution. Virginia Tech, along with other flagship institutions in Virginia, is perceived as admitting more out-of-state students instead of qualified in-state students because of the higher tuition rate charged to out-of-state students and as the institutions are increasingly appealing to students from outside of Virginia

(Kumar, January 30, 2011; Chandler, November 22, 2013). However, as Table 1 demonstrates, Virginia Tech's total undergraduate population increased by 2,250 students between 2006 and 2015. The number of out-of-state domestic students actually decreased by 46 while the student body gained 664 international and 1,480 Virginia resident undergraduate students. For graduate students, the university community gained 401 students between 2006 and 2015 with an increase of 348 international students compared to just 53 new domestic graduate students. So while university expansion benefited Virginia residents more at the undergraduate level, the demographic shift at the graduate education level has been towards an increase in the number of international students (Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, 2015a; 2015b).

Table 1 Virginia Tech Student Headcount Enrollments by Level of Study and Residence, 2006, 2010, and 2014

	Fall 2006		**Fall 2010**			**Fall 2014**		
Level of Study and Residence	Number	Percent of Population	Number	Percent of Population	Change from 2006	Number	Percent of Population	Change from 2010
UG- International	457	2.08%	509	2.15%	11.38%	1,121	4.62%	120.24 %
UG-Virginia	16,175	73.53%	17,492	73.84%	8.14%	17,655	72.81%	0.93%
UG Non-Virginia Domestic	5,517	25.08%	5,734	24.2%	3.93%	5,471	22.56%	-4.59%
UG Total	21,997	77.26%	23,690	76.4%	7.7%	24,247	77.66%	2.35%
Graduate International	1,542	25.23%	1,821	26.22%	18.09%	1,890	29.02%	3.79%
Graduate Virginia	3,324	54.39%	3,661	52.72%	10.14%	3,174	48.74%	-13.3%
Graduate Non-Virginia Domestic	1,245	20.9%	1,482	21.34%	16.05%	1,448	22.24%	-2.29%
Graduate Total	6,111	21.46%	6,944	22.4%	13.63%	6,512	20.86%	-6.22%
Professional Total	362	1.27%	372	1.2%	2.76%	465	1.49%	25%
Total	28,470	--	31,006	--	8.91%	31,224	--	0.7%

Source: Virginia Tech Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, 2015a, 2015b

Tension points emerge as the combined amount of state funding per in-state student at Virginia Tech and the price of in-state tuition does not equal the overall cost of educating that student. On the other side, out-of-state students are subsidizing the cost of education for in-state students by paying more than the full cost of their education. For the 2015-2016 academic year, in-state undergraduate students will pay $12,485 compared to the $29,128 out-of-state

undergraduate students will pay in tuition and fees (Virginia Tech University Bursar, 2015). However, the projected general fund per in-state equivalent Virginia resident student is only $6,826 for the 2015-2016 academic year (Virginia Tech, 2015). This leaves a $9,817 gap between the combined in-state tuition plus state appropriations revenue per in-state student and the price of out-of-state tuition and fees. The funding disparity puts pressure on the university to increase tuition rates for in-state students, increase the ratio of out-of-state students to in-state students to generate increased revenue, and/or determine ways to further reduce the cost of education, which may or may not reduce the quality of the education students receive.

Virginia Tech may need to be more sensitive in responding to these pressures compared to the other Virginia flagship institutions because of its statewide presence and land-grant status. While Virginia Tech is primarily based in Blacksburg, it has students across the state courtesy of its second campus in the National Capital Region and Commonwealth Campus Centers. One potential drawback of this statewide presence in several locations could be a question arising "of dilution of resource and partnerships between several higher education institutions across a region can be very demanding in terms of senior management time and energy as well as staff and student mobility" (OECD, 2007, pp. 57-58). With a presence across the state and a sense of obligation to the state and its residents through various activities, Virginia Tech must plan its trajectory with caution as it aligns with and influences the trajectory of the state and its various regions in the future. Porter (2007) noted that "few institutions have managed their role in economic development strategically, nor have they fully leveraged the surrounding economy to improve their own competitive position" (p. 41). This can be a highly resource-intensive undertaking but one that could yield significant rewards for both the state and the institution if handled correctly.

Feedback obtained during Virginia Tech's Presidential Search emphasized the importance of Virginia Tech's strong relationships with Blacksburg, the New River Valley, and all across Virginia. One respondent noted that the university "has been the driving force as the economic bedrock of Blacksburg, Southwest Virginia and beyond. As [Virginia] Tech flexes its new-found economic muscle, it is expanding its influence and service into virtually all areas of the commonwealth." In addition to improving student education at Virginia Tech, one of the ways in which internationalization will be advantageous to the region and the commonwealth as a whole is the great economic benefit to communities in which international students study. Across the commonwealth, Virginia's 17,145 international students made a net contribution to the state economy of $487,539,000 while directly or indirectly creating 6,541 jobs during the 2013-2014 academic year (NAFSA, 2014). For Virginia Tech, the 3,133 international students made a net contribution to the community of $73,693,200 and created 1,236 jobs (NAFSA, 2014). These economic benefits continue after graduation as many students choose to stay and work in the area. Approximately two-thirds of foreign students who received their PhDs from 1989-1997 remained in the US ten years after receiving their degrees (Finn, 2011).

Extension and Outreach. The American approach to higher education emerged in the 19th century, resulting in a new type of institution based on "a set of beliefs about the social role of the university" (Bonnen, 1998, p. 28). Based on these beliefs, the Morrill Act of 1862 called for

the creation and support of institutions in each state that would "teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts...in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life" (APLU, 2012). As such, land-grant institutions were charged with serving the residents of their respective state. The charge accompanied a goal of educating the whole person beyond the traditional confines of teaching and learning and to further integrate research and outreach/extension into the undergraduate and graduate student learning environments. This both practically-oriented and outwardly-focused approach to higher education positioned these state institutions to be sources of community support and sites of technical innovation.

At Virginia Tech, a commitment to outreach and service is instilled in the "Hokie culture," as was evident in many of the comments provided through public input mechanisms during the Virginia Tech Presidential Search. Although difficult to define, participants describe Virginia Tech and Hokie culture as being friendly, welcoming, and dedicated to serving others. Virginia Cooperative Extension formalizes this commitment to service and marked its 100th year in 2014. The cooperative arrangement with Virginia State University as Virginia's other land-grant university for administration of the Virginia Cooperative Extension puts Virginia Tech even closer to every resident of the state by virtue of the Extension offices located in each county. In its 2011-2016 strategic plan, the Virginia Cooperative Extension lays out its intent to focus on six major areas: enhancing the value of Virginia's agriculture, sustaining Virginia's natural resources and environment, creating a positive future through 4-H youth development, strengthening Virginia's families and communities, cultivating community resiliency and capacity, and improving its organizational effectiveness (Virginia Cooperative Extension, 2010). What began as a program more oriented towards agriculture and the home has remained true to its roots while expanding to meet the needs of increasingly-urbanized communities across the state. At the same time, Extension has remained true to its original purpose of working to solve social and economic problems facing the communities it serves.

Conclusion

As a public land-grant institution, Virginia Tech has strong incentives to maintain positive and productive relationships with its local, regional, and statewide communities. However, obstacles such as transportation infrastructure, student housing, economic development, and insufficient state appropriations per student can complicate those relationships. These and other factors will need to be taken into consideration in its visioning, planning, and decision-making processes as Virginia Tech looks towards its 175th anniversary.

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