A Virginia Tech Conversation

Virginia Tech is a public research university located in Blacksburg, Virginia. It has nine colleges and a graduate school that serve 33,000 students. With facilities across the state and around the globe, it is ranked 38th in research rankings by the National Science Foundation.

Daniel Seymour (DS) spoke with Timothy Sands (TS), Virginia Tech’s president. Ken Smith (KS), the Vice Provost for Resource Management and Institutional Effectiveness, also contributed to the conversation.

DS: Tell me about the big picture, Tim. How do you see the whole process of inventing the future?

TS: We are actively envisioning our institution one generation into the future. This process, known as “Beyond Boundaries,” is intended to undergird our next strategic planning process by looking far into our future. As soon as a shared vision began to come into focus earlier this year, every little and large decision made at every level of the institution has filtered through Beyond Boundaries. A sequential process of visioning, planning and implementation has been replaced by a continuous process that is generating momentum in every corner of the university.

DS: That sounds incredibly comprehensive.

TS: It is. In fact we are now scrambling to assemble metrics to monitor progress, and to lower barriers, small and large, before they are confronted. The result is a new budget model (Participatory Incentive-Based Budget), transdisciplinary themes known as “Destination Areas” and an overarching aspiration for the student experience that we call, the “VT-shaped student.” We are doing everything we can to clear the runway. Extending that metaphor (perhaps a little too far!), we are now approaching takeoff velocity, our flaps are adjusted properly, we think we have an appropriate load, but our wheels are still touching the runway. Needless to say, anxiety is heightened, but so is the excitement around our impending takeoff.

DS: Can you speak to a specific example of an area where you have already taken off?

KS: The diversity of the entering undergraduate class is up 26% since fall 2012 but we are continuing to invest in financial aid and pipeline programs to leverage that progress.

DS: How does this relate? Why is it important?

TS: Our motto, *Ut Prosim* (That I May Serve) requires that we ask the question: How can I serve if I don’t understand the people I am serving? This question elevates the importance of developing empathy, and reinforces the need to diversify our campus. An important part of our efforts to create an inclusive and diverse campus is our messaging around the alignment with everything we
do, including our ongoing visioning process I just mentioned, Beyond Boundaries. In addition to the ideal of equity, there is a threat to our university presented by the shifting demographics in the Commonwealth. If we do not embrace diversity, we will lose access to the fastest growing pools of talent in the state. The same can be said for the nation and the world. Most importantly, though, we owe it to all of our students to provide a campus environment that allows for developing skills in communicating across differences (in expertise and in lived experience).

**DS:** Do you have a specific example of how you are working to achieve this goal?

**TS:** Ken?

**KS:** We really want to become a more visible option in some communities so we have developed very targeted pipeline programs. We call the approach College Access Collaborative. Through routine, individualized contact with potential students we intend to show them that Virginia Tech is a place that wants them to attend and be successful. So, it isn’t just recruitment because we work with them there to help students prepare for college work.

**DS:** Are there other areas that reflect this same type of investment formula?

**KS:** Yes, sponsored research. We put an increase in research funded by industrial partners in our strategic plan years ago. We wanted to double our numbers from around $23 million in 2012 to $45 million in 2018. The idea was to invest in this area because we knew that externally funded research from federal sources was probably going to be relatively flat. We didn’t want to lose momentum.

**TS:** The trajectory hasn’t been a straight line. Although we have made progress—we were up to $31 million in 2015—we needed to accelerate to meet our milestone. We have a new Vice President for Research & Innovation, Dr. Theresa Mayer, and she is taking bold steps to transform our relationships with our major industry partners. One of her initiatives, working with our Advancement division, is to launch our “Business Engagement Center.” The BEC provides a single-point of contact representing all aspects of our relationships with each major partner. The structure is modeled after a similar organization at the University of Michigan.

**DS:** It sounds like having an ambitious goal isn’t enough.

**TS:** No. It isn’t about wishful thinking. It is about having a vision and a plan. It is dreaming and doing.

**DS:** You sound like a proud father, Tim.

**TS:** It is easy to be proud of this institution. For example, last week Virginia Tech was presented with a Diversity Champion Award by INSIGHT Into Diversity magazine at the National Press Club in DC. We received one of ten such awards presented nationally to universities and colleges. This was an award based on commitment and innovation in creating an inclusive campus, the prerequisite to sustained growth in diversity. The
magazine recognized our InclusiveVT framework and our “Principles of Community.” So, yes, I am very proud.

**DS:** Thanks to both of you.