

**Comments by Zenobia Lawrence Hikes, Ed.D.
Vice President for Student Affairs
to the Virginia Tech Review Panel
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**Report on Healing and Recovery Initiatives at
Virginia Tech Post-April 16**

I. Introduction

Chairman Massengill and members of the Review Panel, I am Zenobia Lawrence Hikes, Vice President for Student Affairs.

The Virginia Tech community is one of exceptional resilience and compassion. Following the horrific events of April 16, our community of faculty, staff and students mobilized in countless ways to provide support to grieving families, the injured and hospitalized, enrolled students and the university at large. On behalf of the Office of the President, the Office of the Provost, the Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer, the Division of Student Affairs, the Graduate School, and Human Resources, I would like to share with you some of the collaborative initiatives, support services, programs, and activities we employed to begin the healing and recovery of our community.

Ceremonies

In every culture, ceremonies play an important role in the process of healing and recovery. On Tuesday immediately following the tragedy the university came together in a convocation held in Cassell Coliseum. Featured speakers included President George Bush, Governor Tim Kaine, University President Charles Steger, noted author and University Distinguished Professor Nikki Giovanni, and leaders representing four major religions. The convocation was televised worldwide and served to signal the strength and unity of the Virginia Tech community in the wake of the tragic events of April 16. Approximately 10,000 were in attendance in the coliseum and an additional 25,000 were accommodated in overflow seating in Lane Stadium.

On the same evening as the convocation, the students of Hokies United organized a candlelight vigil on the Drillfield. This event was attended by thousands of students, alumni, faculty, staff, and friends who came together to mourn and pay their respects. It was for this vigil that Hokie Stones were first placed in a semicircle in front of the reviewing stand to honor the deceased

victims. Also initiated at the vigil were message boards on which mourners could write condolences and expressions of grief. As the number of boards grew over several days, tents were erected on the Drillfield to protect them from the elements. Together with the Hokie Stones, the message boards have come to serve as the focal point for the collective grief of the university community and as the repository for flowers and other mementos symbolizing the loss of students and faculty who were our dear friends and colleagues.

Throughout the days following the tragedy, the Memorial Chapel served as a place of quiet refuge where members of the university community could go for a moment of reflection.

Representatives from religious and faith-based organizations made themselves available at the chapel to those who desired pastoral counseling.

Family Support

A number of initiatives were directed specifically at meeting the needs of the families of Virginia Tech students, and I would like to highlight just a few of these. In an effort to respond to the high volume of calls from families of Virginia Tech students concerned about their safety and welfare, the university established a 24 hour call center that was staffed by university volunteers as well as representatives from the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM). As the volume of calls diminished, the Dean of Students Office assumed the call center responsibilities.

To support the grieving families who had lost students and faculty, individual family liaisons were assigned, the majority of whom were from the Division of Student Affairs, the Graduate School, and the Provost Office. These individuals provided personalized services and information to assist families with processes such as the retrieval of student effects; removal of student vehicles; access to benefits available from the Criminal Injuries Compensation Fund, the Red Cross, and other community agencies; resolution of student accounts; and family participation in commencement ceremonies.

Individual liaisons were also assigned to injured students and their families to assist them with the recovery process and reintegration to the academic community for those who were not graduating. President Steger, joined at times by Governor Kaine and Attorney General McDonnell, visited injured students in area hospitals to check on their welfare and let them know that the university was concerned about them.

Deceased students were honored at the 2007 spring commencement by the awarding of posthumous degrees. Their families were invited as guests of the university to attend commencement to be recognized and accept their son's or daughter's diploma and class ring. To remember and honor the victims of the tragic events of April 16, the Virginia Tech Foundation established the Hokie Spirit Memorial Fund to aid in the healing process. The fund will be used to cover expenses including but not limited to: assistance to victims and their families, grief counseling, memorials, communication expenses, and comfort expenses. In addition, a general Hokie Spirit Scholarship Fund as well as specific memorial funds in the name of each of the decedents have been established. Additional attention is being focused on the school-age children of deceased faculty members.

II. Student Health and Wellness

Cook Counseling Center

In the days following the April 16 tragedy many events and support activities were taking place to facilitate the healing process. In the area of student health and wellness, the university's Cook Counseling Center took the lead in terms of providing psychological assistance to students on campus. To meet anticipated demand for increased services, Cook Counseling Center extended its hours of operation and offered services both in the evenings and on the weekends. Counselors worked closely with groups of students with special needs, such as residents of West Ambler Johnston Residence Hall, surviving students who were in Norris Hall at the time of the incident, members of various student organizations and programs that had lost members, and roommates of deceased students. To date approximately 60 outreach presentations have been made to faculty, staff, and student groups, and the volume of appointments in the counseling center has increased at least 50% over this time last year. Knowing that commencement would be an especially difficult time for students and their families, Cook Counseling Center enlisted 50 mental health professionals as volunteers to assist the regular staff. Counselors were present at each commencement exercise throughout the weekend.

Anticipating an increased need for psychological counseling in the upcoming months and years, the center staff completed several grant applications in an effort to help finance expanded services. The center is providing counseling for the students who will remain in Blacksburg during the summer. For students outside of Blacksburg during the summer, the center is also facilitating counseling referrals.

Schiffert Health Center

The university's Schiffert Health Center also played an important role in the healing and recovery process. Medical personnel from the center visited hospitals where injured victims were treated and then provided special follow-up wound care to a student who had suffered gun shot wounds. To be sensitive to the psychological needs of students who may have experienced trauma, medical personnel incorporated psychological screening questions into their conversations with students who presented for physical injuries.

Services for Students with Disabilities

The Services for Student with Disabilities Office has taken the lead in providing accommodations for any injured students who may need assistance in the classroom and anticipates that there will be an increased need to provide accommodations for students with psychological disabilities.

Recreational Sports

Recreational Sports provided a valuable service to the university community by keeping its fitness facilities open during the week of authorized closing so that students and faculty could exercise and engage in stress relieving activities. In addition, they opened fitness classes to all students and families of the victims.

III. Faculty and Staff Health and Wellness

Concern for the health and wellness of the campus was not focused solely on student needs. Human Resources took the lead in addressing the needs of faculty and staff. Immediately upon learning of the shootings on campus, Human Resources (HR) contacted ValueOptions, our employee assistance provider, to request assistance and crisis counselors were on campus by mid-afternoon. Both small and large group employee sessions were scheduled to provide information related to common reactions to trauma and stress, as well as tips for self-care and recovery support. Squires Student Center was designated as the location for individual meetings with employees, with several counselors assigned to that location throughout the day. Information was provided to employees who are parents to assist them in communicating with their children. To date, 127 group information sessions, reaching 2,980 participants, have been held with colleges, departments, and workgroups and over 800 individual sessions have been held as of May 15, 2007.

Numerous support resources were developed by ValueOptions and made available through group sessions as well as one-on-one sessions including self-care tips and coping with trauma. This material was disseminated to employees through University Relations and the university websites.

Training programs are being developed, with the assistance of experts in the field, to help supervisors effectively manage employee issues that may emerge from the events. Additional resource information focused on resilience and rebounding from trauma has been developed and is being shared in hard copy and on the internet.

IV. Student Affairs and Academic Affairs Collaboration

To meet our students' needs and to provide a less stressful end to the semester, a number of measures were taken that involved collaboration between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs.

Flexible Options for Completing the Semester

On April 18, the Office of the University Provost in collaboration with the college deans, provided three options for students to complete the semester. These options took into account the education of our students, as well as their physical and mental well-being realizing that various students would react differently in the aftermath.

Classes resumed on Monday, April 23, and students had the option of designating, on a course by course basis, how they wished the semester grade to be assigned by the faculty. Grades could be based on the following:

- The materials which had already been submitted
- The material already submitted plus any other assigned material which the student chose to submit
- All the material which otherwise would have been submitted

In support of the flexible options and to encourage students to continue their educational experience, the Division of Student Affairs supported students who decided to remain in their residence halls. Housing and dining options were continued despite the student's choice of completing the semester. The college deans and the faculty were very helpful in advising students and in facilitating a successful end to the semester.

Deferred Academic Suspensions

To support our students further, the Office of the University Provost decided that there would be no academic suspensions in the spring of 2007. Students in academic difficulty were allowed an additional probationary term without requiring academic appeals. This change will impact the number of available residence hall rooms for the fall semester; however, the Division of Student Affairs is in full support of this decision.

Classroom Support

When students returned to classes, the university activated the largest known deployment of mental health practitioners in U.S. history. The schedules of the victims and injured were researched through the registrar's office and approximately 305 counselors attended these classes to provide support for the faculty and students. Counselors were identifiable by purple arm bands. Others who were available to provide general assistance and support were identifiable by yellow arm bands.

The Center for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching (CEUT) held a number of workshops through the period of Wednesday, April 18, to Friday, April 20, to help faculty prepare for resumption of classes on Monday, April 23. Among the workshop topics were: engaging the students in conversation surrounding the tragic events, responding to students who experience difficulty with the discussions, and describing the grading options the faculty made available to students for completing their individual courses.

Deferred Judicial Cases

During the days following the tragedy, Judicial Affairs also provided options for students with pending judicial hearings. The office's most immediate focus for judicial hearings was graduating seniors and students with serious offenses.

Other students were given the option of resolving their cases before the end of the semester or in the fall.

V. Student Support Services

Dean of Students Office

The Dean of Students Office played a key role in coordinating the campus response to the tragedy. In collaboration with others, the office coordinated the work of the family liaisons and served as the central clearing house for information related to the victims of the tragedy. They

worked closely with the State Police to facilitate the return of students' personal property from Norris Hall, provided an information hotline for students and parents, and processed a staggering volume of letters, cards, and remembrances for the victims.

Cranwell International Center

Cranwell International Center responded to the special needs of international students that resulted from the incidents of April 16. Complimentary international telephone cards were distributed to students who needed to contact their families abroad to assure them that they were safe. To address the unique concerns of Korean students, staff made telephone contact with each undergraduate and many graduate students from Korea to offer assistance. In addition, the center responded to departments that requested presentations on responding to the special needs of international students.

Multicultural Programs and Services

Multicultural Programs and Services worked closely with the leadership of the Asian American Student Union and other campus leaders to address concerns about potential retaliation and requests from the press. The students were assured of the university's concern for their safety.

Residence Life

Residence Life has played a key role in the efforts to promote healing and recovery on campus. Immediately following the events of April 16, resident advisors were deployed to personally speak with each resident student on campus by Tuesday afternoon and offer counseling resources. As reports from concerned faculty and families were received, the professional staff followed up appropriately with individual students and met with student groups to facilitate their discussions about lost friends or roommates. As residents returned to campus, counselors toured through the buildings and were on call for staff to contact for residents. Exterior doors to all residence halls remained locked to help ensure a sense of safety and well being among residents.

Housing and Dining Services

Housing and Dining Services provided complimentary on-campus housing and meals for victim's families and friends during commencement weekend. To be sensitive to the special needs of these guests, the housing arrangements included access to counseling services, security coverage, and 24 hour a day guest services.

The Graduate School

While the Division of Student Affairs provided support services to the general student population, the Graduate School focused its efforts on the specific needs of graduate students. Initiatives included providing support to those who lost friends and faculty members, attending to the unique academic needs of graduate students, and assisting graduate assistants to carry out their teaching and research responsibilities. The Graduate School maintained regular communication with all graduate students and opened the multipurpose room in the Graduate Life Center as a place for graduate students to gather and to take advantage of on-site counseling services. Specific outreach efforts were directed at supporting Korean graduate students as well as those from other Asian countries.

VI. Student Activities and Programs

Corps of Cadets

The Corps of Cadets participated in a number of ceremonial events related to the April 16 tragedy. The cadet regiment provided the band, color guard, and ushers for the convocation and then provided buglers for Echo Taps during the candlelight vigil. In addition, the cadet regiment served as honor guard for the memorial wreath at War Memorial Chapel and then at the cenotaph.

University Unions and Student Activities

University Unions and Student Activities served as a central gathering place and repository for memorials during the weeks following the April 16 incident. Also, the student centers have displayed memorial tributes from around the world. Squires Student Center and the Graduate Life Center remained open throughout the entire week following the incident to provide counselors and community support to assist those in distress. In addition, the various union facilities were used as venues for memorial services and commemorative events. Plans are currently underway for a fall healing concert that will bring the campus community together to remember the victims.

Hokies United

We are especially proud of the work of Hokies United, a student-driven volunteer effort organized to help respond to local, national, and international tragedies. As mentioned previously, Hokies United banded together immediately after the tragedy occurred and was able to pull together a candlelight vigil held on the Drillfield the evening of April 17. In addition, they organized a series of unifying activities intended to bring the community together. These included a casino night in War Memorial Gym and a picnic on the Drillfield that was attended by an

estimated 15,000 people. And on the first day back to classes, Hokies United organized once again to hold a campus-wide moment of silence.

VII. Conclusion

Finally, the Virginia Tech campus community remains committed to the process of healing and recovery as evidenced by the combined efforts of our students and employees from across the university in such departments as Physical Plant, Athletics, Human Resources, Student Affairs, the Graduate School, the Provost Office, and academic departments, to name just a few.