

# Dear Higher Education

LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

---

## Now Is Not the Time to Wait

TIM SANDS

*Dear Higher Education,*

In my nearly fifty years of engagement with higher education, I can recall no five-year period more fraught with challenges than the last five. We have navigated a historic pandemic, the social upheaval that followed the murder of George Floyd, the court-mandated end to affirmative action in college admissions, and the ongoing backlash against “DEI.” Reflecting on my service as a university president at two public land-grant institutions over the past decade, I feel a tenuous sense of pride for opening the gates to underrepresented and underserved students, and some trepidation for what my successor, presumably one of you, will face when my time is up. I am pleased to share some of the wisdom I have gained to accompany the battle scars of these tumultuous years.

My introduction to economic and cultural diversity began in Hayward, California, where I was raised as the oldest of three children of a high school math teacher and a devoted “homemaker.” My parents supported my unusual interests including ornithology, entomology and meteorology, and my business enterprises, which ranged from mowing tiny lawns at a mobile home park (a great racket!) to running a silk-screen printing business.

Hayward in the 1960s and ‘70s was a cannery town. I worked as a member of the Teamsters union in the summer, sorting, cooking, canning, bottling, and packaging all sorts of tomato products. About half of the families in Hayward spoke Spanish or Portuguese at home, many of whom were the descendants of people who came to work in the cannery or harvest fruit from the orchards. I encountered wonderful people and cultures, but also developed a clear sense that I did not want cannery work to be part of my future.

I was fortunate to attend the local public university, UC Berkeley, on a Regents scholarship that covered my tuition at \$212/quarter. I worked as a houseboy at 1 Canyon Road for Mrs. Dorothea Torrey Kelly, the matriarch of a family that had lived in that home since the day of the great earthquake of 1906. My room was free in exchange for about 10 hours/week doing odd jobs and maintaining the prolific ivy that covered the craftsman-style home located above Memorial Stadium. I also served as a hasher at the Alpha Phi sorority down the hill where I received two meals a day in exchange for serving dinner and cleaning up afterwards with the hasher crew. This allowed me to afford my college education without taking out a loan or depleting savings, something that would be almost impossible today for a student with modest resources.

After a 25-year career in industry at Bell Communications Research and as a professor at my alma mater and at Purdue University, I had an opportunity to move into the role of provost at Purdue. I had not served as a dean or a department head; my only previous academic administrative appointments were as chair of the executive committee of an interdisciplinary graduate program at Berkeley, and then as a research center director at Purdue. Becoming provost at Purdue in 2010 awakened latent themes from my own experiences around college access and the critical role of universities in facilitating social and economic mobility. As provost, I was privileged to have responsibility for supporting the full range of academic disciplines along with enrollment management, our community and cultural centers, and our struggling but persistent efforts in diversity and inclusion.

My time as provost at Purdue was relatively short, totaling about three and one-half years in two stints sandwiching six months as acting president that bridged the presidencies of France Córdova and Mitch Daniels. In that brief period, I learned enough to realize what I didn't know about the experiences of underrepresented and underserved students, faculty, and staff. I was well tutored, especially by Dr. Christine Taylor, the chief diversity officer at the time, along with long-time members of the Black Caucus. We made some progress in inclusion and diversity, but not enough, and always against passive resistance by some. As I left that role in 2014 to take the position of president at Virginia Tech, Dr. Taylor challenged me to make inclusion and diversity a hallmark of my new presidency. Knowing that I was moving to an institution in a former state of the Confederacy added to a compelling sense of mission I felt at that time.

In preparation for the transition, I had the opportunity to do a deep dive into institutional data and explore the history of Virginia Tech and the Commonwealth. As I interviewed the university's faculty, staff, students, alumni, and partners. I uncovered three important strategic imperatives for my new role:

First, although Virginia Tech's enrollment was stable, interest in the institution from prospective students was stagnant. It had only been a comprehensive university since 1970. Its history from 1872 through the 1950s as a White, male military institute had instilled a strong culture but demographic trends were not in Virginia Tech's favor and the institution was well behind its public land-grant research university peers. We had to open the door to attract students who might not have considered Virginia Tech as an option in the past.

Second, employers loved Virginia Tech students for their work ethic, practical smarts, and commitment to service, but they were concerned with the lack of cultural competencies that were difficult to develop among a predominantly White and relatively wealthy student body.

Third, I was struck by the history of Virginia as the landing spot of the first enslaved Africans in what is now the United States. Over 400 years of history encompassing slavery, Jim Crow, and Massive Resistance had created a tremendous gap in generational wealth among Black and White residents of the Commonwealth. Compounding this gap was a long history of impoverished Scots Irish in Appalachia that contrasted with the wealth in the so-called Golden Crescent spanning northern Virginia, Richmond, and Hampton Roads. I concluded that a focus on inclusion and diversity was central to the university's prospects for future growth and relevance.

That challenge was top of mind on my first day when I arrived in my office to find a freshly issued report on inclusion and diversity at Virginia Tech. That report recounted decades of effort yielding cycles of modest progress followed by periods of retrenchment. The report concluded that repeating that cycle would not yield different results. The task force recommended a completely new approach with a counterintuitive first step – eliminate the office of diversity and inclusion. The university had come to consider that office to be the proverbial “office down the hall,” which was responsible for all things diversity and inclusion. Members of the community could wash their hands of the obligation to focus on diversity and inclusion – the “Office” would take care of it. That resonated with my experience at Purdue. I suspect the same could be said about many historically White universities.

What would replace the Office? It was to be a transfer of the commitment to everyone, starting at the top and at the bottom and meeting in the middle. This became known as InclusiveVT. As the ownership for InclusiveVT took hold, we opened a new office of inclusion and diversity (OID) with the primary role of facilitating, not replacing, our community commitment. I hired Dr. Menah Pratt to lead the new OID. Menah came from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where she had responsibility for diversity, inclusion, and strategic affairs. Wearing the same two hats at Virginia Tech, Dr. Pratt was well positioned to ensure that inclusion and diversity was directly integrated into strategic planning. Looking back, this was critical to the success we have achieved so far. Sustainable progress in diversity and inclusion requires complete integration into everything the university strives to accomplish.

Over the past decade our successes include an increase in the number of undergraduate students identifying as Black from 834 to 1,876 (125% increase) and an increase in first-generation students from 4,346 to 5,780 (33% increase). These increases have been purposeful, as we lowered superfluous barriers rather than lowering standards. Undergraduate applications have grown from 21,000 for Fall 2014 to 50,000 for Fall 2024. The applicants are more diverse in almost every dimension. The result is a dramatically different campus environment. Our students, regardless of background, have opportunities to gain cultural competencies that would have been difficult a decade ago. Our steady commitment to diversity and inclusion resulted in Virginia Tech being named a Diversity Champion by INSIGHT Into Diversity Magazine for eight years running.

While we have much to celebrate, we also recognize that change is difficult to sustain. As we approached the pandemic, we had steadily reduced the disparities in 4-year graduation rates for underrepresented or underserved students (including underrepresented minority, Pell-eligible, first-generation, and veteran students) relative to the student population as a whole to 1.8 percentage points for the 2017 entering cohort. That gap increased to 4.2 percentage points for the 2019 entering cohort. The pandemic exposed a lack of resilience under the stress of the pandemic, primarily for those without generational wealth. We also learned that our students of color and low-income students who were working part-time jobs were less likely to have secured a first destination upon graduation than the wealthier students with built in networks and the flexibility to pursue paid internships. While I believe our students and our institution will recover in time, the pandemic was a humbling experience for all.

When I think back on the last decade, today's politically charged backlash against "DEI" can be viewed superficially as a reaction to the activism around Black Lives Matter, but of course it is deeper than that. We are living in a time-capsule moment when the pendulum is swinging with greater amplitude than anyone can recall. Our actions in this tempestuous time will be scrutinized by historians many decades from now. Did we stay the course, or did we abandon principles to respond to political and societal transients, having to reverse tactics again and again?

A salient example is the tension between free speech on campus and our duty to keep our students and employees safe in the aftermath of the October 7, 2023, terrorist attacks by Hamas in Israel. Are we actively managing the tension, or are we taking the seemingly easier route of swinging with the political winds? At Virginia Tech, we have tried to stay true to our long-standing "Principles of Community,"<sup>1</sup> which reflect the complexities of balancing free speech and academic freedom with maintaining physical safety and an inclusive community. As an educational institution, we owe it to our students to provide tools for civil discourse across differences, and to our faculty to protect their ability to seek the truth through scholarly work.

What can we as academic leaders do to meet the challenges of the future? The upheaval of the past four years has exposed the real divide in our society between those with a promising future and those who have all but lost hope. Institutions of higher education have an obligation to address this divide. If we fail, our institutions will wither along with society. I do not yet have complete clarity on the path forward, but two challenges are compelling and addressable.

First, we must recognize that the lack of generational wealth has made college unaffordable and inadvisable for many. As Paul Tough has illuminated,<sup>2</sup> the advantages of a college degree in building wealth (the "college wealth gap") are negligible or negative for many of those who lack the resources to avoid taking on oppressive debt, and at the same time must work 20, 30 or 40 hours per week to stay in college. These students lack the networks and workplace skills that are readily achieved through the paid internships and familial connections that are strong

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.inclusive.vt.edu/about/vtpoc.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/05/magazine/college-worth-price.html>

predictors of a successful launch upon graduation. We need to take the same energy we have applied to DEI and refocus it into addressing the wealth and opportunity gap.

Second, much of the public has lost faith in higher education in part because scholars of inequity have not been able to separate the dispassionate search for truth from the need to personally address inequity through activism. That a scholar, through their research and lived experience, would find it difficult not to act is understandable and very human response. Unfortunately, the general public has almost completely lost faith in the scholarship of the activist. There is a fine line to be walked, and I have seen some of my colleagues do this well, but scholarship and activism are nevertheless in tension.

In closing, to my colleagues in higher education leadership and to the faculty, now is not the time to watch passively in the hope that the pendulum will swing back to the days when colleges and universities were among the most highly respected institutions in the United States. As my late father-in-law often said, “reputations last longer than deserved, whether good or bad.” That pendulum has no restoring force. It is not swinging back without definitive and sustained action by all of us. That is our generational challenge.

*With hope,  
Tim Sands  
President, Virginia Tech*

---

## About the author

Timothy D. Sands is the 16th president of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and a professor in the College of Engineering. Since joining Virginia Tech in 2014, he has worked collaboratively with the provost and university leadership to set the university on track to become a leading modern, global, land-grant institution. Under President Sands’ leadership, undergraduate enrollment has been increased by 5,000 to achieve the benefits of scale while preserving the strong sense of community rooted in our motto, *Ut Prosim* (That I May Serve). President Sands initiated InclusiveVT in 2015, leading an effort that has increased the enrollment of underrepresented minority (URM) students by 88 percent while closing the 4- year graduation rate gap from 10 percentage points to 1 percentage point. URM and underserved students (Pell-eligible, first-generation, and veterans) now make up nearly 40 percent of the entering class, including transfers. President Sands’ recent awards and honors include The Edward Bouchet Legacy Award, the National GEM Consortium’s Academic Leadership Award, the Virginia Latino Higher Education Network’s Leadership Impact Award, and the Roanoke-Blacksburg Technology Council’s Regional Leadership Award. He has published more than 250 refereed papers and conference proceedings and has been granted 21 patents in electronic and optoelectronic materials and devices. His recent research efforts have focused on the design and development of novel nanocomposite materials for environmentally friendly and cost-effective solid-state lighting, direct conversion of heat to electrical power, and thermoelectric refrigeration. He holds faculty appointments in the Bradley Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering and the Department of Materials Science and Engineering in the College of Engineering, with research interests in microelectronics, optoelectronics, and nanotechnology. He is a fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, the Materials Research Society, and the National Academy of Inventors. As part of his civic engagement and community leadership, President Sands chairs the board of directors for the Business-Higher Education Forum (BHEF) and the Virginia Space Grant directors for the Business-Higher Education Forum (BHEF) and the Virginia Space Grant Consortium. He serves on the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors of the Northern Virginia Technology Council (NVTC) and is a member of the Boards of the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), the University Research Alliance (URA), and is an ex-officio member of the Board of the Northern Virginia Chamber of Commerce. He is also a member of the Board of Visitors of the

National Intelligence University. Before coming to Virginia Tech, President Sands was executive vice president for academic affairs and provost of Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, serving as acting president in 2012. Throughout his career, he has participated in and led research teams and academic programs that have been characterized by open collaboration across a wide array of disciplines. Before becoming provost, President Sands served as the Mary Jo and Robert L. Kirk Director of the Birck Nanotechnology Center in Purdue's Discovery Park. He was a professor of materials science and engineering at the University of California, Berkeley, and directed research groups at Bell Communications Research (Bellcore) in Red Bank, New Jersey. President Sands earned a bachelor's degree with highest honors in engineering physics and a master's degree and a doctorate in materials science from the University of California, Berkeley. He joined the Purdue faculty in 2002 as the Basil S. Turner Professor of Engineering in the schools of Materials Engineering and Electrical and Computer Engineering.