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Virginia Tech takes new approach to diversity

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Photos by MATT GENTRY | The Roanoke Times

Virginia Tech President Timothy Sands (center) visits with a group of faculty and staff last Monday. Sands has created the President's Inclusion and Diversity Executive Council to monitor the progress of diversity at the university.



Posted: Sunday, October 5, 2014 11:45 pm

By Tonia Moxley tonia.moxley@roanoke.com 381-1675

BLACKSBURG — Virginia Tech has joined four other state universities in banning discrimination against transgender students, faculty and staff, and has mounted a new effort to increase the school's overall diversity.

Last week, President Timothy Sands unveiled Tech's expanded anti-discrimination policy and announced a broad restructuring of diversity initiatives to about 400 employees at the Inn at Virginia Tech.

Those employees came to hear about the changes and to give feedback on the new diversity plan, Provost Mark McNamee said. About 100 people joined the meeting remotely, he said.

"The drive here is to be sending the message that we are an inclusive campus," Sands said in a telephone interview before the event. "Students ... need to have an experience on this campus like they're going to have in the outside world."

Tech revised its anti-discrimination statement after the board of visitors unanimously approved new wording to protect gender identity and expression last month.

"We are a diverse and inclusive university, and this reaffirms that we are inclusive. That was really my reasoning," board Rector Debbie Petrine said of voting in favor of the change. "I think it's also just a matter of you're either inclusive or you're not. If you're going to be inclusive, that means everyone."

Four other public institutions and the governor's office have done the same.

According to a Roanoke Times survey of published nondiscrimination statements, the College of William and Mary, James Madison University, Norfolk State University and Old Dominion University have also extended protections for gender identity or gender expression.

In the first executive order of his tenure, Gov. Terry McAuliffe extended administrative protections to gay and lesbian state employees, and for the first time in Virginia history added gender identity to the list of those protected. Former democratic governors Mark Warner

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On Sept. 15, the Virginia Board of Visitors voted to add gender expression and identity to its nondiscrimination policy, joining four other public universities in providing some protections to transgender students, faculty and staff.

According to a Roanoke Times survey of Virginia universities' online nondiscrimination policies, these schools include protections for gender identity or expression:

College of William and Mary: Protects gender identity or expression.

James Madison University: Protects gender identity.

Norfolk State University: Protects gender identity.

Old Dominion University: Protects gender identity.

Virginia Tech: Protects gender identity and

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and Tim Kaine had issued similar orders, but had not extended protections to transgender people.

Sands said including transgender people in the university's policy is an important step in changing perceptions of Tech, which is often stereotyped because of its rural location, its engineering and technical focus and its history as a predominantly white school. Changing that perception is critical to recruiting the brightest researchers, professors and students.

"We have to get this institution into a new orbit," Sands said. "Where we have flexibility, we will not discriminate."

But there are limits to that flexibility.

Despite McAuliffe's order, state health and other benefits have not been extended to same-sex spouses of state employees, and sexual minorities are prevented from suing in court for damages for discrimination. Only

the General Assembly may extend those rights, and it has repeatedly declined to do so.

"It's great to see colleges and universities stepping up to protect all their employees," said James Parrish, executive director of Equality Virginia, a nonprofit advocacy organization for sexual minorities. But, he said, state institutions will remain at a competitive disadvantage compared to in-state private schools that can offer spousal benefits and out-of-state public institutions that can legally protect sexual minorities from discrimination.

A message seeking comment on Tech's nondiscrimination policy from the Virginia Family Foundation, a nonprofit advocacy group that works for traditional family values, went unanswered.

Sands said he's impressed with Tech's prior work on diversity and the steady progress on enrollment of underrepresented students. But it's been slow.

Undergraduate minority enrollment grew from 5,248 in 2004 to 6,820 in 2013, according to university figures. Meanwhile, graduate minority student enrollment grew from 2,365 to 2,968 in the same time period. Total Tech enrollment during those years grew from 27,262 to 30,757.

Minority enrollment for this year's freshman class — pending the results of an official student census — shows an increase over 2013, according to preliminary numbers provided by the admissions office. About 790 first-year minority students accepted offers to attend, up from 752 last year.

Tech is behind some of its peers and ahead of others on diversity and inclusion, but Sands said he wants to speed up the overall pace of change to get ahead of demographic changes nationwide. Those trends show big growth in the population of nonwhite minorities, and those broad social changes will come to Tech, whether or not the institution is prepared, Sands said.

He also said that if more diversity comes before a more inclusive environment can be established, problems will arise.

To that end, the president said he is implementing changes recommended by the university's Task Force on Inclusive Excellence. The task force, assembled under retired President Charles Steger worked for more than a year to assess past diversity initiatives and suggest new approaches. Its final report landed on Sands' desk just as he arrived.

On recommendations from the task force, Tech has dissolved its 16-year-old Office of Diversity and Inclusion and is instituting a "distributive model" that moves responsibility for building a more welcoming and diverse campus to individual departments, schools, colleges and other units.

The implementation will be overseen by the President's Inclusion and Diversity Executive Council, a group of high-level Tech officials chaired by Sands. Each university unit and program will be required to publicly state its diversity and inclusion goals, formulate and declare a plan to achieve them and report the progress to the council.

The progress reports will be open to the public in some as yet undetermined form, McNamee said. But it's unlikely that the council's meetings will be open to the public, he said.

That accountability piece has been the weak link in Tech's system, and in the initiatives of most other universities striving for a welcoming and diverse campus, McNamee said.

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Details of how the progress will be measured and what consequences might be imposed for noncompliance have not been presented. But the approach will be done from the bottom up, officials say, with input and goals coming from people who do the day-to-day work.

“The intent with the restructuring is, then everyone owns it. Everyone has the responsibility and accountability,” Petrine said.

Other institutions, including Duke University, Texas A&M and Cornell University have adopted similar models.

The dissolution of Tech’s former Office of Diversity and Inclusion affected 14 employees, McNamee said. All were reassigned within the university. Former Vice President William Lewis is now working on special assignment in alumni relations, Tech spokesman Larry Hincker said.

McNamee said the employees were put in units and departments where they would better be able to do their work.

For more information on Tech’s diversity initiatives, visit www.diversity.vt.edu.



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Molly Lazar · Blacksburg, Virginia

I notice they are no longer hosting the Martin Luther King essay and poster contest for area schoolchildren. It is a real pity since it was so successful in getting kids to think about prejudice and MLK's legacy. The fact that they are cutting back on outreach makes me wonder if this was a cost-cutting measure rather than the arguments they're touting in this article.

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Agreed. That project would seem to have more real value than time spent on yet again a "broad restructuring of initiatives" & "distributive models". I assume at some point VT & other colleges do get down to the business of educating their students. Of course, this is not PC thinking. Then again some of us differ on what constitutes an actual college education.

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