

5-Year Communications and Marketing Plan

updated December 2023

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Executive Summary

The 5-Year Communications and Marketing Plan will elevate university, advancement, college, and unit priorities and help us achieve a best-in-class communications and marketing organization that will benefit Virginia Tech for years to come. This Plan addresses [the charge](#) given to the Vice President of Communications and Marketing to elevate, align, and integrate communications and marketing activities across the university.

The Plan applies the success of the **Advancement** and **Human Resources models** to the Communications and Marketing division, which is composed of professionals on college, unit, and central teams. These partnership models of embedded professionals have proven that when we organize around shared goals, employ collaborative planning, and use enterprise solutions for digital platforms, great results ensue. We will apply the examples of Advancement and Human Resources across all communications and marketing work throughout the university to support the success of university, advancement, college, and unit priorities.

This Plan addresses how we are **investing in people** and providing the skills and career development essential to making Virginia Tech an effective organization where communications and marketing professionals can grow and develop. The Plan articulates ways for all communications and marketing professionals across the university to excel. We are

stronger together; we are better when we can all see how our work is connected and when we share goals.

We are improving and articulating processes to meet top **university priorities** that will shape the trajectory of Virginia Tech, including Virginia Tech Global Distinction and Virginia Tech Advantage, and others as they develop over time. We will support these aspirations by elevating specific college, unit, advancement, and other university priorities, which provide the framework for success.

We are enhancing our process to apply central resources through a balanced, **collaborative planning process**. While we strive to be nimble and responsive, these resources can be deployed more reliably by creating a shared understanding of college and unit priorities in advance. By planning together and communicating consistently, we will work strategically.

Collaborative planning will position lead communicators in colleges and units to support the priorities of their college or unit leadership, as well as advancement and university priorities. Collaborative planning will likewise align communications and marketing plans for departments and offices under appropriate college and unit plans. With collaborative planning, we will reduce inconsistencies, unify messaging, and present a more professional, cohesive presence to all audiences.

Our audiences are complex and varied, from those who receive mass communications to those who receive carefully segmented communications. These audiences are best reached through our official platforms, with coordinated messaging, consistent branding, and greater internal transparency and collaboration. This Plan outlines best practices to reach our audiences most effectively.

The Plan also identifies a thoughtful approach to **digital product development and implementation**.

While collaborative planning is key to our success, it is essential that we are committed to remaining nimble and responsive to changing needs, evolving technologies, and unforeseen opportunities. The 5-Year Plan is a living, iterative document that we commit to constantly optimize and refine.

Initiated in January 2023, the 5-Year Communications and Marketing Plan will support university aspirations by creating alignment around shared priorities, collaborative planning and workflow processes, and a culture of investing in our people.

Constellation Mindset

Sometimes we need to think differently in order to be innovative.

While we're on one team, composed of college, unit, and central professionals, it is still easy to feel disconnected. Working at a dynamic, complex university with a global footprint, individuals can find it hard to feel involved in decision-making and knowledgeable about all efforts. And each college and unit has ambitious goals that need attention, in addition to university and advancement priorities that guide our work. How do professionals across the division feel connected and work in alignment, while also cultivating the individuality in each area that makes Virginia Tech special?

It is necessary to apply structure, and in some cases expectations, to connect the dots among college and unit, advancement, and university priorities. However, the theme of alignment doesn't have to be viewed as a directive. Instead, if each of us sees ourselves as a star, we can make connections and create a different kind of structure. This way of thinking, called a **constellation mindset**, allows us to consider our relationships around the university in a new way.

Each college and unit team is led by a talented communications and marketing professional. Sometimes, two or three colleges/units will connect in order to better tell the story of Virginia Tech. Other times, even bigger constellations will form. This mindset will open the possibilities of our collaboration so that bigger themes can be illuminated, such as research or inclusion and diversity. Indeed, selected themes will be incomplete without widespread participation from communicators. If the middle star in Orion's Belt isn't shining, there is no belt.

Any effort to draw university-wide constellations is only successful with the support of colleges and units, where most stories originate.

Culture of Investing in People

We create a culture that focuses on continually investing in the development of communications and marketing professionals across campus, guided by the following principles:

We invest in building new and expanded communications and marketing competencies.

Communications and marketing professionals need to be knowledgeable about emerging channels, vehicles, tools, and approaches. New forms of communicating with university audiences are constantly invented. To design, develop, and deliver state-of-the-art

communications and marketing over the next five years, we continue to deploy strategies for assessing and understanding market trends and megatrends, evaluating new and emerging technologies, and refining the professional competencies across our network of communications and marketing professionals.

We design professional development and training programs that span the full spectrum of communications and marketing competencies.

The growth of the communications and marketing profession at Virginia Tech is dependent upon continued investment in professional development and training. The emerging integrated communications and marketing function allows the university to deliver development strategies and programs in a coordinated manner, in which economies of scale can be achieved. Defined career paths lead to targeted development strategies and programs aimed at building critical skills and proficiencies in essential areas within the Communications and Marketing division. The central team will partner with Human Resources and internal and external providers to develop a comprehensive professional development program and deliver training and development efforts efficiently and effectively.

We stay abreast of leading practices among communication and marketing professionals.

The manner in which our audiences seek and access information is constantly evolving. Technology will continue to disrupt traditional forms of communications and marketing and Virginia Tech needs to be informed of leading practices and adapt to the changing market conditions. To do so, communications and marketing professionals will attend industry conferences, monitor leading publications, and regularly monitor audience data. Information collected about leading practices and preferences gleaned from experience and audience data will be broadly shared across the enterprise and will be used to enhance existing strategies and approaches and/or to develop new practices, technologies, and methods.

We mentor and leverage the many strengths of our experienced professionals.

The division has attracted talented and gifted professionals who serve the needs of multiple constituents with a wide variety of demands. They are committed to the success of the university and have immeasurable experience and knowledge. As retirements and attrition reshape our organization over the next five years, seasoned professionals' wisdom will be transferred to emerging leaders and contributors. Formally, a mentorship program will pair current leaders with emerging leaders, and forums to share knowledge across the enterprise will be organized. Informally, leaders will guide others and build a new network of high-performing professionals.

A Commitment to Collaborate

The Communications and Marketing division, composed of college, unit, and central teams, has a shared commitment to collaborate on and elevate priorities and university aspirations.

University Priorities – including Virginia Tech Global Distinction and Virginia Tech Advantage, among others – are derived from the university’s strategic plan, ultimately directed by the President. They are broad in nature, touching nearly every corner of the university. **University priorities** and **Advancement priorities** are driven forward by division-wide, integrated communications and marketing plans. College and unit communications and marketing plans are customized to support **college and unit priorities**, as well as university and Advancement Priorities as appropriate.

The central team will implement division-wide integrated communications and marketing plans for specific priorities that support the university aspirations. These plans will utilize the full range of communications and marketing tactics – from advertising to editorial content, from social media strategies to media relations and more – to achieve success. These integrated communications and marketing plans will call upon the contributions of and be developed in collaboration with professionals on college and unit teams across the university. However, the plans may not necessarily require new work by the college and unit teams – rather, the plans will often represent a new way of organizing existing work.

Through a collaborative planning process, the central team will be better able to elevate and amplify college and unit priorities. For example, college teams regularly produce stories about faculty scholarship, year in and year out. This content clearly supports Virginia Tech Global Distinction through multiple priorities: a dean’s priorities for elevating a college; the integrated communications and marketing plan for the research priority; and possibly the global reputation priority.

Without a collaborative planning process, we risk working reactively instead of strategically, not leveraging a college’s research content for greater exposure on central platforms, and not encouraging deeper collaboration among communicators.

The central team will partner with directors of communications and marketing in the colleges and units to create, collect, and analyze college/unit annual, comprehensive communications and marketing plans. These plans will proactively connect the dots to see how, for example, a college’s storytelling about faculty scholarship fits into the wider constellation of research. The central team will be able to leverage that content to serve multiple priorities, while amplifying college and unit priorities. Collectively, we will fundamentally improve the way central resources are shared.

This level of coordination and partnership – seen in the success of the partnership models of Advancement and Human Resources – will pay dividends as we organize our collective work

around priorities in support of the aspirations. Consider the successes of the Advancement model – such as the dramatic increase in undergraduate alumni giving, from 9 percent to 22 percent – and imagine the positive impact when we apply the model to other efforts.

To be effective in this endeavor, we commit to open and transparent collaboration across the division and with leadership across the university.

Inside Advancement

The Communications and Marketing division reports to the President and to the Senior Vice President of Advancement. This structure sets a foundation for a vibrant culture of philanthropy and engagement, which supports our greatest aspirations and honors our history and mission as a land-grant university. Virginia Tech is deeply committed to building this culture of philanthropy and engagement among everyone who wants the university to reach its goals. Philanthropy and engagement provides a critical foundation for supporting university goals; Communications and Marketing has a large role in that.

Content Strategy

For the editorial function, the university's content strategy guides our efforts. The content strategy is only successful when content from the colleges and units, where most stories originate, is elevated and shared.

Purpose of content strategy

A coordinated, university-wide content strategy guides our editorial decisions, allowing us to:

- Deeply engage audiences;
- Support university, college/unit, and advancement goals;
- Showcase stories at strategic times;
- Engage in long-term editorial planning;
- Maintain the official record of university stories; and
- Improve the measurability of our content.

Core statement of content strategy

As communicators at Virginia Tech, we elevate the university and its colleges and units, inform the campus community, and inspire others to give back to and engage with the university. We do this by creating and publishing content that shows how Hokies are a force for positive change and how the university positively impacts the lives of others.

Content goals

- Elevate the profile of the university and its colleges and units to attract and retain all audiences important to our success
- Inform the campus community both broadly and in segmented ways tailored to college and unit audiences
- Inspire the Hokie Nation to give back to and engage in the life of the university

The content strategy is guided by several principles and practices:

- **Mass and segmented communications:** The core statement and goals above define our approach to mass communications at the broadest level, while target audiences and measurement within the content strategy are platform-dependent and often specific to colleges and units. The central team will collaborate with college and unit teams to help college and unit leadership reach their internal and external segmented audiences in meaningful ways. For example, segmented communications are appropriate for reaching a college's faculty, staff, and students.
- **Editorial and marketing workflow:** The editorial and marketing workflow is intertwined with priorities. Each integrated communications and marketing plan, defining how we approach priorities, will outline editorial and marketing contributions to varying degrees, depending on the respective priorities.
- **Brand and messaging:** The brand guidelines are the platform on which all communications and marketing professionals conduct their work. The central team will support priorities with messaging and will collaborate to develop college- and unit-specific messaging. Rather than offering prescriptive language, the branded messaging will lend an aligned voice to all university communications.
- **COPE, Breadth, and Depth:** The “create once, publish everywhere” strategy defines the distributed nature of content creation – because most stories originate in the colleges and units – and the dissemination of content across platforms that are available to communications and marketing professionals. The central team helps to coordinate content planning for priorities, offering breadth across the enterprise. College and unit teams offer depth – deep knowledge and subject-matter expertise that reflect college and unit priorities. Breadth and depth go hand-in-hand to illuminate priorities.

Moving the Needle on Priorities

This Plan is anchored in collaborative, division-wide planning to deliver on university priorities. As new priorities emerge, the collaborative planning process will allow the division to stand up new plans.

University Priorities

The President identifies priorities that are most critical to the university's global land-grant mission:

- Virginia Tech Global Distinction, in the ways the university is recognized for excellence around the world and in the distinctive way we achieve our land grant mission, ([integrated communications and marketing plan](#)) and
- through the Virginia Tech Advantage ([communication plan](#)).

Other Priorities

The following priorities move the university toward the university priorities, are shared across the university, and are supported by integrated communications and marketing plans. Other priorities include, but are not limited to:

- Inclusion and Diversity
- Global Impact ([integrated communications and marketing plan](#))
- National Indicators ([integrated communications and marketing plan](#))
- Graduate Strategic Enrollment / Tech Talent Investment Program
- Greater Washington, D.C., Metro Area Presence (link to integrated communications and marketing plan)
- Health Sciences and Technology
- Innovation Campus (link to integrated communications and marketing plan)
- Student Experience

Advancement priorities are engagement and fundraising efforts that support all university, college, and unit priorities. They include but are not limited to:

- Alumni and Donor engagement
- Annual Giving campaigns
- Boundless Impact campaign
- Donor Relations
- LINK: Center for Advancing Partnerships
- Planned Giving
- Principal Partnerships
- New Gifts and Commitments
- Virginia Tech Advantage student support
- Virginia Tech Global Distinction support

College and unit priorities are identified by college and unit leadership, and are often (but not always) connected to university priorities. Examples could include but are not limited to:

- Colleges seeking to integrate the data sciences throughout the academic enterprise
- A college seeking to expand its undergraduate enrollment
- A college or unit's need to inform faculty, staff, and students with college- or unit-specific content

Integrated communications and marketing plans

An integrated communications and marketing approach employs coordinated effort to guide content strategy; to use paid, owned, and earned tactics; to deliver on measurable business goals; and to inspire specific audience segments to increase awareness, take an action, change a behavior or perception, or build loyalty. Integrated planning for university priorities synchronizes the efforts of central, college, and unit teams. The Vice President of Communications and Marketing is responsible for delivering on all communications and marketing efforts that support priorities.

In most cases, an integrated communications and marketing plan will employ a structure based on the following. The efforts will often be organized by **communications and marketing partners**. They will often work closely with a subject-matter **Expert** outside of Communications and Marketing. Each focused effort will also include **Consultants** who need to provide input, a **Delivery Team** of senior leaders and stakeholder communicators inside Communications and Marketing who bring specialized expertise to the effort, and an **Informed Group** of university leadership and stakeholders who must be updated on progress.

Plans may include:

- **Executive summary**
- **Goals**
- **Timeline and deadlines**
- **Budget**
- **Messaging Toolkit**
- primary and secondary identified **Audiences**
- **Market Research / SWOT Analysis**
- A measurement **Dashboard**
- **Creative Briefs**
- **Amplification Plans** for specific content
- Identified **Tools and Technologies**
- **Project Management** systems and personnel
- **Paths** for all colleges and units to plug into the effort
- Owned, earned, and paid **Tactics**, including but not limited to **Advertising**, VT News **Stories and Videos**, **Web**, **Email**, **Social Media**, magazine **Articles**, and **Media Relations** pitches

Communications and Marketing Plans for Colleges and Units

The work of communications and marketing professionals in colleges and units will be guided by an annual plan that is specific to the college or unit and includes university and advancement priorities as appropriate. The central team will provide the structure and template for each lead communicator to create a college or unit communications and

marketing plan, including specific goals and opportunities for supporting priorities. Each lead communicator's plan will be unique but all will follow a structure provided by the central team. Communicators in departments and offices under lead communicators will adopt the lead communicator's plan and structure, under the lead communicator's guidance.

Digital Product Management

The Communications and Marketing division is committed to a digital-first philosophy (adopted in 2015) to meet the university's various audiences where they are and to adapt to evolving expectations in a complex digital environment. The university has an obligation to meet digital accessibility standards, outlined by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, in accordance with disability laws. Doing so will reduce friction for the multitude of ways that audiences explore content online, through a variety of devices or with assistive technology.

Communications and Marketing works as a close partner with the Information Technology division and the Advancement division. The central Digital Products team will collaborate with the Information Technology division and Advancement division to support university-wide tools and technologies that can be leveraged by communications and marketing teams to reach shared objectives.

As the Communications and Marketing division continues to evolve and plan for tools and technologies, greater success will be found through a trusted process for innovation. This process is first informed by audiences, desired outcomes, and users (the university's communications and marketing professionals). The central Digital Products team will use data and analytics, conduct usability studies, and evaluate our technology stack, or combination of technologies, in order to proceed with intention and avoid inconsistencies.

The central Digital Products team will work with the Information Technology division, Advancement division, and stakeholders to make decisions about what platforms to use, what software to buy, and what technology to develop that offers the greatest levels of security, accessibility, and user experience. The central team will work to provide enterprise-level communications and marketing solutions, in a shared system of tools and platforms, to support alignment. Using the university's communications and marketing tools and technologies will help align our work. In collaboration with the college and unit communications and marketing directors, the central team will identify outliers and gaps in existing tools and technologies and devise timelines for integration over the five-year period.

Existing products

The Communications and Marketing division strongly encourages the use of the following digital products as best practices to communicate effectively with our audiences:

- **CMS**, Ensemble
- **Customer relationship management system (CRM)** for alumni and donor constituents, Blackbaud
- **Email platform for communicating with alumni and donors**, BBIS. It is best practice to use BBIS to ensure professional, consistent, and timed communications with alumni and donors.
- **CRM for prospective students**, Slate
- **Email platform for communicating with external audiences outside of alumni and donors**, Adobe Campaign
- **News platform**, VT News
- **Video aggregator**, Kaltura, which is connected to the VT News platform. It is the best practice for all communicators to upload video into Kaltura so that the content can reach audiences on VT News.
- **Photo aggregator**, the Virginia Tech Photo Library, a custom ResourceSpace platform. It is a best practice for all communicators to upload a selection of their top photos into the Photo Library, so that all communicators can access, utilize, and showcase photos that their colleagues have generated.

Additional considerations

As the division configures the landscape of the technology that communications and marketing professionals use to do their work of communications and marketing, these elements will be kept in mind:

1. **Staffing** up with the right competencies
2. **Training** existing team members
3. Providing **support** when things break or issues arise
4. **Managing/maintaining** the entire scope of the digital experience
5. Adherence to a digital product management **process** that focuses first on audiences, outcomes, and users

Implementation

The implementation of this 5-Year Plan commences in early 2023 with separate integrated communications and marketing plans for priorities, schedules for creating collaborative plans for colleges and units, schedules for developing digital products, and a project management component.

The 5-Year Plan implementation – led by Heather Ducote, senior director of marketing and brand management, and project-managed by Susan Gill, director of communications management – will be inclusive of central, college, and unit teams.

Supporting Colleges and Units

The central team hired a Senior Director of Communications and Marketing for Colleges and a Senior Director of Communications and Marketing for Units to provide greater support to colleges and units and increase collaboration across the division. These two positions are deploying the tools and processes created by the central team to guide the collaborative planning process in support of the shared priorities.

Collaborative Planning Process

In the second half of fiscal year 2023, a division-wide communications and marketing planning process that is integrated into the advancement work planning process will commence. The process will result in communications and marketing plans that support university, advancement, college, and unit priorities. The annual Communications and Marketing collaborative planning process is as follows:

January:

Vice President of Communications and Marketing updates President and Senior Vice President of Advancement on 5-Year Plan progress; Communications and Marketing provides report to division on current FY integrated communications and marketing plans supporting university priorities; planning for next FY integrated communications and marketing plans for university priorities begins

February:

Communications and Marketing updates division on 5-Year Plan progress; seeks feedback from lead communicators on annual plans' effectiveness and template

May:

Advancement division distributes draft Advancement work plan; colleges and units with Advancement teams begin building their FY work plans; Communications and Marketing distributes template for college/unit annual work plans; Communications and Marketing provides report to division on current FY integrated communications and marketing plans supporting university priorities

July:

College/unit Advancement teams complete FY work plans; lead communicators submit

college/unit annual plans

August:

Communications and Marketing shares updated integrated communications and marketing plans for university priorities; Advancement division work plan finalized, FY budgets set; Communications and Marketing provides report to division on past FY integrated communications and marketing plans supporting university priorities

September/October:

Performance evaluation and performance planning dialogue based on goals in college/unit annual plans, Advancement team work plans, and integrated communications and marketing plans

November/December:

Communications and Marketing assesses 5-Year Plan and prepares for update; develops budget requests for next FY

Integrated Workflow Meetings

Integrated communications and marketing planning for the top two university priorities (Virginia Tech Advantage and Virginia Tech Global Distinction) as well as the other university-wide priorities (Global Impact, National Indicators, Inclusion and Diversity, Graduate Strategic Enrollment, Greater DC, Health Sciences and Technology, Innovation Campus, and Student Experience) will occur through focused meetings convened by the identified leads for these priorities. College, unit, and central communicators will discuss specific contributions toward the integrated communications and marketing plans and grow and refine the integrated plans together.

In addition, planning and discussion for all priorities, including college and unit priorities, will be integrated into standing editorial meetings, lead communicators' Council meetings, and all-communicator meetings. The extension of central resources (such as video coverage in colleges and units) will be a key part of those conversations, as will discussions on the full range of communications and marketing tactics to support college and unit priorities. Specific contributions will be discussed well in advance, allowing time for college, unit, and central communicators to craft their contributions (such as stories, photos, videos, design elements, web, and social media).

Marketing Spending

The central Marketing team will work with procurement, colleges, and units to understand the landscape of marketing spending across the university in order to coordinate messaging and placements, and, when possible, find cost savings to create transparency and collaboration. Alignment of marketing campaigns and targeted market research maximizes the effectiveness of marketing placements and is another way to align the message of Virginia Tech. We can be more impactful and avoid confusion with a shared knowledge of the comprehensive marketing spend across campus.

Digital Platforms

The central Digital Products team will utilize a digital product management process, focusing first on audiences, outcomes, and users, to regularly investigate the needs and possible solutions represented by a variety of digital platforms. The central team will collaborate with the Information Technology division and Advancement on university digital platforms that support communications and marketing work. Digital platforms first to receive focus over the five-year period are social media, video, and email/CRM.

Conclusion

The 5-Year Communications and Marketing Plan is a living document that will be evaluated each January. The Plan is reflective of the Communications and Marketing division's Guiding Principles, supports university aspirations with alignment around shared priorities, institutes collaborative planning and workflow processes, and creates a culture of investing in people.