

**Commission on Graduate and Professional Studies and Policies
CGPS&P Resolution 2021-2022D**

Resolution for Equitable and Cost-of-Living-Responsive Graduate Student Compensation

First Reading by CGPS&P	October 6, 2021
Staff Senate Review:	Completed by November 17, 2021
Faculty Senate Review:	Completed by November 17, 2021
Undergraduate Student Senate Review:	Completed by November 17, 2021
A/P Faculty Senate Review:	Completed by November 17, 2021
Approved by CGPS&P	November 22, 2021
First Reading by University Council:	February 7, 2022
Approved by University Council:	March 21, 2022
Approval by University President:	March 21, 2022
Effective:	upon approval

WHEREAS, graduate students on assistantships (GTAs, GAs, and GRAs) are ostensibly paid to work 20 hours per week, but many graduate students exceed 20-hour work weeks while teaching classes, realizing projects, performing experiments, and publishing papers; immoderate amounts of graduate student labor on behalf of the university are thus hidden and unpaid; and

WHEREAS, the [2021 Graduate Student Assembly Cost-of-Living Survey](#) (Appendix 1) found that 72% of graduate students were left with only \$20 per month after basic living expenses were paid. Additionally, at least 1 in 5 graduate students work over 20 hours a week in other jobs to make ends meet; and

WHEREAS, the [2019 Virginia Tech Food Access and Security Study](#) (Appendix 1) survey data have indicated that many graduate students face food insecurity: Domestic student respondents face 35% food insecurity rates while international students face 49% food insecurity rates; and

WHEREAS, these surveys indicate that the current compensation plan is insufficient to meet the local cost of living, and students cannot afford basic needs like food, medicine, and housing without working additional jobs throughout the summer and the academic year – leading to obligations that detract from their commitments to the university; and

WHEREAS, these surveys do not reflect the additional and ongoing burden imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic: ascending housing prices in Blacksburg and surrounding communities along with other inflationary pressures (see Appendix 2), which have further driven graduate students into poverty and have had especially detrimental implications for international graduate students and graduate students from historically marginalized backgrounds, constituting an equity issue; and

WHEREAS, the [2020 Graduate Education Task Force report](#) (Appendix 1) found that graduate student stipends at Virginia Tech also fall short of our aspirational peers and negatively impacts

our ability to recruit strong students to our institution. The minimum stipend values at peer institutions were only \$144 below the average Virginia Tech stipend for GTAs. When students are weighing options between different R1 offers, the stipend is a key deciding factor. Virginia Tech currently has one of the smallest overall enrollments of graduate students – 55% of our aspirational peers; and

WHEREAS, the 2020 Graduate Education Task Force report recommended that in order to catch up or excel beyond our aspirational peer institutions in recruitment and retention, Virginia Tech needs to: 1) increase baseline stipends for graduate teaching and research assistantships; 2) annually compare stipends to aspirational peers by discipline; 3) incentivize colleges to maintain competitive rates; and 4) develop standard phrasing for departments to properly convey their intention to employ graduate students for multi-year periods; and

WHEREAS, provision of sufficient financial support in the form of an assistantship stipend that covers basic living expenses – continually reevaluated on the basis of the local living wage – and that includes additional support in the form of tuition remission and, at least, partial fee remission, is necessary to reduce the financial burden placed on graduate students via student loans or excessive workloads; and

WHEREAS, thus, more time is opened for the pursuit of scholarship, service, institutional continuity, and extramural funds that strengthens the educational and research missions stated by the Virginia Tech Graduate School and Board of Visitors. Additionally, a compensation package that alleviates many or most of the financial burdens placed upon graduate and professional students and secures sufficient financial support for multi-year periods advances the university's ability to recruit and adequately support top research-based graduate students;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the university commits to establishing a strategic goal and formulating a viable funding plan before the 2023-2024 school year for providing financial support to graduate students that recognizes the particular challenges faced by international and historically marginalized students, that sufficiently meets or exceeds the local cost-of-living for the geographic region in which they are studying, and that accounts for assistantship, tuition and fee remission, and health insurance; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that Virginia Tech affirms the findings of the 2020 Graduate Education Task Force report regarding assistantship compensation goals (see Appendix 1) and will strive to become a leader among our aspirational land-grant peers in offering equitable and responsive graduate student compensation guided by cost-of-living. To achieve this aim, university leadership will appoint a task force consisting of administrative context experts, faculty, and a substantive representation of graduate students. The task force will be charged to review the analysis and findings regarding financial support of graduate students contained in the 2020 Report and update as necessary. The task force will draft a report and recommendations by

December 31, 2022, for providing assistantship stipends and other financial support that sufficiently meets or exceeds the local cost-of-living and that minimizes educational debt; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that Virginia Tech recognizes and values the full extent of graduate student contributions to the university community and commits to actively pursuing measures that will alleviate the current hardships and shortcomings in food security, healthcare, and financial stability of its graduate students.

Appendix 1: Supporting Materials

[The 2021 Graduate Student Assembly Cost-of-Living Survey](#) reports the average take-home compensation and recommendations contained within the executive summary.

[The 2019 VT Food Access Security Study's](#) internal reports show that graduate students are facing staggering levels of food insecurity. This report presented survey data collected between December 2018 and January 2019 indicating that **35% (±7%)** of graduate students are classified as having low or very low food security, with low food security being defined by the USDA as reduced diet quality, variety, and/or desirability and very low food security including disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake. Additionally, the study indicates that “International students are **1.4 times more likely** to have a low/very low food security status than domestic students (p=0.06).” It should be noted that food insecurity has increased since 2019 as a consequence of the Coronavirus pandemic. For more information on the drastic increase in food insecurity in Virginia, please see the [May 2021 Virginia SNAP-Ed Report](#).

[The 2020 Graduate Education Task Force Report](#) found that our graduate student stipends are not competitive with our peer institutions – one possible cause of stagnating recruiting numbers for graduate students.

This Report recommends raising compensation to be more competitive with peer institutions as well as points to our low grant application rates in comparison to peer institutions. When this information was presented to the Board of Visitors, several members of the board commented on our low grant application rate and urged the graduate school to pursue strategies for increasing it. While not being competitive with our peers is concerning, we recommend **not** using peer institutions as our primary benchmark but rather using cost-of-living which will more effectively address the equity and workplace problems with graduate student compensation mentioned by the resolution.

According to the [Housing Market Profile](#) from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, average rent increased 12% in the first quarter of 2020 whereas rent only increased only by 3% in the same quarter in 2019. Increase in student demand for housing has continued to increase rent prices over the past few years locally and reduced the number of affordable housing options in Blacksburg well beyond the average housing market.

Lastly, we recommend looking at aspirational collegiate institutions for comparison, such as [Duke University where they announced that](#) Ph.D. students will receive a 12-month stipend for the first 5 years starting in 2022, a move the Dean of the Graduate School notes is “vital for the future of doctoral education at Duke”.

Other schools have recognized this shifting graduate student landscape at a more local level. For example, the Department of Biomedical Engineering at Texas A&M provides [12 month funding for a minimum of 4 years](#).

Appendix 2: NRV Cost of Living for Domestic and International Students

These data are to provide a contextual overview of the estimated cost of living and ‘ballpark’ compensation increase. It is not a budgetary command or finding.

Data collected by [MIT’s Living Wage Calculator](#) as of January 2019 indicate that the living wage for a single adult without children required for the New River Valley area to meet the area’s cost of living is **\$31,195** before taxes. For the state of Virginia, this living wage is **\$34,552**.

Notably, due to supply chain disruptions and ongoing complications from the Covid-19 pandemic, inflation has made the biggest 12-month jump in 30 years -- **increasing 6.2% in the last 12-months alone** [with energy and utilities experiencing the largest jumps between September and October 2021](#).

Additionally, data from the [Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia](#) project over the next 10 years, inflation is expected to increase an average of **2.44% per year** for PCI and **2.2% per year** for PCE.

Presently, VT graduate students and employees **do not** receive annual compensation increases to keep pace with inflation.

Factoring in tax disparities, [international students are taxed at 14%](#) with the majority of domestic students being charged **12%** (Tax bracket \$10,275 - \$41,774). While difficult to track precisely because this rate can be inconsistent among international students, the general trend can also be demonstrably found in the cost-of-living survey findings.

Further, university fees are not incorporated in the cost-of-living report. The yearly student fees for Virginia residents at Blacksburg Campus are **\$2,424** at base cost, going up to \$4,424 / year for the college of engineering, specifically. For international students, these fees jump to **\$3,028** with an additional Immigration Services Fee of **\$550 / year**. International students pay a range from **\$3,578 - \$5,578** (CoE).

We estimate that an additional **\$3,800 - \$5,800** may be needed to account for these **fee and tax** disparities equitably. Further investigation will be needed from the taskforce to adjust the cost-of-living for the increased financial burden placed on the international graduate community. Therefore, the total base compensation for graduate students is estimated to be between \$35,000 - \$37,000 for students residing in the NRV area, and it is recommended to be further adjusted in consideration of changes in fees, inflation, and place of residence (Blacksburg, DC, NOVA).

Appendix 3: Graduate Assistantship Support Task Force Charge

The following is included for reference and accountability:

The Report of the Graduate Education Task Force, released in November 2020, made the following recommendations relating to Graduate Teaching and Research Assistantship Stipends:

1. Increase the minimum assistantship stipend rate to match the minimum rates of Virginia Tech's aspirational peers (i.e., the top 14 United States land-grant universities in the 2020 Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings).
2. Annually compare graduate stipend rates to our peers at the discipline level, and create incentives for colleges to increase stipend rates, as appropriate, to be competitive (this could be incorporated into the dashboard used to measure department/program performance).
3. Graduate school should develop standard phrasing for use by departments to properly convey their intention to employ graduate students for multiple year periods, subject to reasonable constraints (academic progress, job performance, funding availability, need for position).

These recommendations underscore the importance of moving forward with a comprehensive analysis of graduate student financial support at Virginia Tech and formulation of a plan to advance the university's ability to recruit and adequately support top research-focused graduate students—particularly at the PhD level. Graduate students have expressed significant concerns that assistantships and benefits are often inadequate to support them and their families without incurring significant debt, with consequent negative impacts on mental health and equity.

Recognizing that enhancing financial support of graduate students would involve reallocation of funding from other programmatic needs and that graduate students receive assistance from a variety of university and extramural sponsors and donors, the Provost and Dean of the Graduate School are appointing and charging a task force to review Virginia Tech's research-based graduate education programs and draft recommendations for further enhancement. This task force will operate through consensus-based decision making, particularly the 'Consensus-Minus-One' model outlined in the [American Heart Association's Mission Lifeline](#) to ensure that all voices are represented and heard equitably and that conflicts are resolved productively.

The Task Force will be chaired by a senior administrator in an academic college who has direct oversight of graduate education, and its membership will include the following content experts, student and faculty representatives:

- A representative from Graduate School leadership
- 2 college dean's office representatives, one from humanities/social sciences and one from sciences/engineering
- A budget and finance representative
- A representative from OSP or OVPRI
- A representative from Cranwell International Student services
- A representative from the Department Heads Council
- The GPSS President
- The BOV graduate representative
- 8 graduate students nominated by the GPSS from at least 3 colleges and at least 2 different residency statuses who will represent a wide variety of disciplines and relevant experiences, from which **5 members are selected** by the chair in collaboration with the GPSS president.
- 4 faculty members nominated by the Faculty Senate from both humanities/social sciences and sciences/engineering, from which **2 members are selected** from their respective disciplinary areas by the chair in collaboration with the Faculty Senate President. .
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The task force will be charged as follows:

- Review the analysis and findings contained in the 2020 Report of the Graduate Education Task Force and update as necessary.
- Draft a report and recommendations for providing assistantship stipends and other financial support sufficient to cover cost-of-living and educational expenses and that minimizes educational debt. This report will be submitted to the Provost and Dean of Graduate School before being reviewed by the Board of Visitors.
- The report and recommendations should address:
 - The cost of implementing any recommendations and proposals for phased implementation of a funding plan;
 - strategies for increasing extramural support for graduate students;
 - strategies for increasing philanthropic resources and utilizing innovative budgeting strategies to reduce institutional costs;
 - the manner in which equity could be addressed across different types of assistantships and funding sources;
 - the special circumstances relevant to international students, including actual cost of living and federal requirements that those on F and J visas verify that they have funds available to pay for their education, living and other expenses;
 - any potential impact of the funding plan on graduate student enrollment; and
 - A process for the continued monitoring of how the cost of living for graduate students changes over time and maintaining an appropriate stipend amount.

A report with recommendations that represents a consensus among Task Force members shall be submitted to the Provost and Dean of the Graduate School by December 31st, 2022.

November 23, 2021

Responses to CGPSP Resolutions

CGPSP 2021-22C (or GPSS 2021-22A)

Based on our review of the commission charge, the Faculty Senate Cabinet does not believe that the Commission on Graduate and Professional Studies and Policies has the authority to advance this resolution. Additionally, the approach advocated by this resolution is problematic, as it would give a portion of task forces or working groups control over the whole.

CGPSP 2021-22D (or GPSS 2021-22B)

The Faculty Senate Cabinet supports a review of our current methods of funding graduate students and the consideration of different approaches to how we support them as students, teachers, and researchers, including the duration of their funding.

We do not, however, support this resolution, which would require a substantial funding commitment based solely on the information, opinions, and references contained within the resolution, and would apply the GPSS-recommended approach to task forces and working groups that we have characterized as problematic.

CGPSP 2021-22E (or GPSS 2021-2022E)

Waive rights to comment

CGPSP 2021-22F (or GPSS 2021-22H)

The Faculty Senate Cabinet believes that Virginia Tech should do everything within its means to provide parental leave and childcare services to all its employees. The pandemic has revealed again just how important these options and services are for the health and well-being of parents and children, as well as the substantial impact that insufficient parental leave and childcare have on equity and advancement, particularly for female employees.

We do not, however, support this resolution, which would require a substantial funding commitment based solely on the information, opinions, and references contained within the resolution; would make policy alterations prior to analyzing their cost; and would apply the GPSS-recommended approach to task forces and working groups that we have characterized as problematic.

Respectfully,

Dr. Robert Weiss
Faculty Senate President

Professor of Natural Hazards
Center for Coastal Studies (Coastal@VT), Director
DRRMVT, Director
Department of Geosciences



Administrative and Professional Faculty Senate

<https://governance.vt.edu/ap-faculty-senate.php>

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Lujean Baab
TLOS

November 11, 2021

To: Vice President of Policy and Governance

From: A/P Faculty Senate Polices and Issues Committee

The A/P Faculty Senate has reviewed and does not endorse as written the Commission on Graduate and Professional Studies and Polices (CGPSP) Resolution 2021-22D to Make 12-month Graduate Contracts the Default Contract.

The consensus is that this resolution needs more study and input from beyond CGPSP for financial analysis, consideration of variables in graduate student roles and funding sources, and determination of impact prior to moving forward. A resolution to initiate and be involved in this study would be more appropriate at this time.

We have no further comment.

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Staff Senate

<http://www.staffsenate.vt.edu/>

March 17, 2022

To: Vice President of Policy and Governance

The Staff Senate Committee on Policy and Issues has reviewed and does not approve CGPS&P Resolution 2021-2022D as written. We would like to comment that this resolution has undergone significant rewrites and is much improved from when first submitted. We do, however, still have concerns with the way this resolution is worded and the potential impact of this wording.

The first “Whereas” statement, as written, suggests that graduate students are contracted to perform 20 hours of work per week for which they are paid, but that they are actually performing work in excess of 20 hours for which they are not being paid. We fear that if the University approves this resolution with this wording, it is admitting that graduate students are working additional hours for which they are not being paid. This could have legal implications for the University.

The strictness of the proposed timeline is concerning as it is very tight and narrow for the assembly of, completion of analysis by, and formulation of a viable funding plan by the task force. The resolution does not include staff representation on the task force. This oversight not only denies staff a voice in a process that could impact them but also denies our knowledge, expertise, understanding, and insight into these same issues. Additionally, the resolution is committing the University to funding stipends that meet or exceed the local cost-of-living which raises two questions. First, how will this be assessed and implemented going forward in future years since the resolution words this as an on-going process (“...offering equitable and responsive graduate student compensation guided by cost-of-living.”)? Second, how will this impact the ability of departments to hire needed staff and to equitably distribute workloads? If the increase in graduate student stipends is expected to come from departmental budgets, this could negatively impact the long-term ability of a department to function as needed by necessitating the need for cuts in other areas such as not hiring new staff and/or increasing the workloads of current staff. This would not be sustainable.

Lastly, this resolution asks for “...equitable and responsive graduate student compensation guided by cost-of-living.” and assistantship stipends or other financial support that “sufficiently meets or exceeds the local cost-of-living...”. This is a commitment that the University has not made to any other group of employees.

Despite our general support of this effort, we unfortunately cannot support this resolution as written and have no further comment.

**Thank you,
Amber Robinson, Chair Staff Senate Policies and Issues
Committee**

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Staff Senate

<http://www.staffsenate.vt.edu/>

February 7, 2022

To: Vice President of Policy and Governance

The Staff Senate Committee on Policy and Issues has reviewed and does not approve CGPS&P Resolution 2021-2022D. We would like to comment that we believe that this is an important issue and we appreciate the work and documentation that has gone into this resolution. However, there is still work that needs to be done and considerations that need to be made before we can support this resolution.

We support the idea of establishing a task force to investigate this matter more fully and provide detailed data, cost estimates, and perhaps alternative solutions to this issue. However, the wording of the last paragraph beginning with "Now, therefore, be it resolved" indicates that the resolution is asking the University to already commit to increasing graduate student assistantship funding and to establish a task force to determine how (not if) this can be accomplished. The resolution is asking for the commitment of raising assistantship rates to be made before the matter is fully investigated and recommendations made about if this is even feasible. We feel that the current projected cost to the University (\$10-18M per year) will be prohibitive to the action of increasing assistantship funding to the level requested. For the cost estimate provided, perhaps a portion of this money could be more effectively spent in educating the graduate students about additional resources and programs that are already available to assist students and/or providing funding and support toward programs that reduce food insecurity. Additionally, the Board of Visitors already implemented a 5% increase of graduate student stipend rates effective August 2021 (see Board of Visitors Meeting Minutes, March 21-22, 2021, Section X.)

The connection between the recent wage increase of lower-tiered staff members to \$15 and supporting graduate students with a stipend increase, are not fair nor accurate. Graduate students are in the Blacksburg area for 2-5 years while they work toward a higher degree that will presumably advance their future, their career, and their earning potential. Staff members are not in the area short-term. They live and work here on a permanent basis and are not investing their time toward greater earning potential. Staff are simply trying to live and survive. Additionally, the Virginia Tech website states up front that international students must provide proof that they can bear the financial burden of the education and that employment opportunities are limited (<https://vt.edu/admissions/international.html>).

We do not support this resolution as written and have no further comment.

**Thank you,
Amber Robinson, Chair Staff Senate Policies and Issues
Committee**



March 17, 2022

TO: Alice Fox, Advocate
Commission on Graduate and Professional Studies and Policies

FROM: Council of College Deans

Paul Winistorfer, College of Natural Resources and Environment, Chair Council of
College Deans

Laura Belmonte, College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences

Julie Ross, College of Engineering

Aimee Surprenant, Graduate School

Paul Knox, Honor College

Alan Grant, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

Robert Sumichrast, Pamplin College of Business

Ron Fricker, College of Science

Lee Learman, Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine

Dan Givens, Virginia Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine

Rosemary Blieszner, College of Architecture and Urban Studies

RE: CGPS&P Resolution 2021-2022 D
Resolution for Equitable and Cost-of-Living-Responsive Graduate Student Compensation

The Council of College Deans supports Resolution 2021-2022D as revised and to be presented for vote by University Council March 21, 2022.

We support the revision of the original resolution and are pleased to support the revised resolution as presented to University Council.