



Student Government Association of Virginia Tech
290 College Avenue
Squires Student Center, Suite 123 (0138)
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
(540) 231-8631 | sga@vt.edu | www.sga.vt.edu

Dear Provost Clarke,

We are grateful to have this opportunity to write to you on behalf of the Virginia Tech undergraduate student body. We aim to convey significant concerns surrounding academic resource capacity, campus mental health, and other challenges to learning that students are experiencing during this unprecedented fall semester. We have proposed solutions for your consideration.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been many policies put in place to maintain student physical well-being, but such policies have often come at the detriment of student academic well-being. For example, students have been asked to stay at home when possible, contact tracing has been administered, and random testing has been implemented. There is no doubt that these policies have made our community safer from a public health standpoint. However, this consistent period of social isolation has brought upon widespread mental health issues among our students.

According to data from the Virginia Tech Cook Counseling Center, the pandemic has negatively impacted student academic success (64%), increased loneliness and isolation (63%), reduced student motivation (64%) as well as had a significant negative impact on campus mental health (67%). These broad mental health concerns discourage a positive, academic environment and have a significant impact on student morale and overall academic success.

The constraints of the pandemic have left many students without proper academic resources. Office hours have, in many cases, been diminished in capacity as well as caliber due to the limitations of virtual instruction. Classes that have been traditionally offered synchronously have, in some cases, struggled to engage students asynchronously. Students who are struggling the most with virtual instruction have not been connected with tutoring or other academic support, often due to instructor and teaching assistant capacity issues. After speaking with a number of students and teaching assistants, the following observations were consistent across Colleges and departments: up to 4 hour-long wait times for help with a teaching assistant via Zoom, a significant lack of capacity in the Student Success Center, and a moderate scarcity of academic resources due to a general surplus of students who are seeking them this semester. Students who are working from home also have personal and family conditions to navigate, many as a direct result of the pandemic. Students have not been encouraged to meet with their academic advisors to plan revised graduation timelines.

Additionally, many students are still struggling from the modality switch that occurred in the spring 2020 semester. The move from in-person to online classes was a dramatic shift, and many students did not have a sufficient academic support system, causing them to fall behind in their classes. These students entered fall semester courses which referenced foundational knowledge (from prerequisite courses) which they did not have due to the diminished academic quality stemming from the spring 2020 modality change. For most of these students, they have gradually caught up over the course of this fall semester. However, this discrepancy has caused undue academic stress throughout this semester.

Students have also experienced acute, emotional fatigue as a consequence of the shift to, in many cases, a fully-digital environment. Jana Korunovska and Sarah Spiekman, in their paper *The Effects of Digitalization on Human Energy and Fatigue: A Review* discuss the effects of dramatic increases in usage of information and communication technology. Their research shows a strong, direct relationship between increased technology usage and emotional fatigue. This is especially relevant to students today, who are now approaching 8 months of relatively quarantined life. Not only are many students behind in their classes as a result of the modality change from spring 2020, many are emotional drained as they work to catch up.

Outside of these issues, students are experiencing increased financial instability and locational instability. Employment, both on and off campus, pose risks related to COVID-19 transmission. Many low-income students simply do not have the option of taking time off of work during the pandemic. Additionally, students are not able to count on consistent work hours or work weeks as they always have the risk of needing to quarantine for two weeks and lose their ability to generate the income they rely on. Although the Student Emergency Fund has mitigated this to an extent, for many students the negative impact of the pandemic on their financial well-being is a unique hindrance to their academic success. This is especially true of our International students, who do not qualify for CARES act funding and, in some cases, risk self-deportation as a result of financial instability. Broadly speaking, most students have a constant anxiety of whether they will be able to continue to live in their current residence. The looming threat of a positive test for COVID-19 could result in immediate isolation from friends and family, and many off-campus students also face pressure from their family to return home should they test positive for the virus.

All of these aforementioned academic concerns are magnified due to stress, anxiety, and other mental health concerns brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, this had led to an unprecedented academic environment this fall semester. Below are our proposed solutions for your consideration.

1. Introduce the Credit/No-Credit grading option that was implemented in the spring, whether it is brought back as-is or is modified. It is important to consider that the traditional grading option, in many cases, does not adequately consider the unique range of both anticipated and unanticipated challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated academic environment this semester.

As future alumni of Virginia Tech, we are deeply concerned about academic rigor and the value of our degree. We feel this is the right point in the semester to offer this grading option. Given that all add/drop deadlines for this semester have passed, this decision would ensure that only the students whose lives were significantly impacted this fall by unprecedented challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic would be able to utilize this grading system; it would not be possible to deliberately complete difficult courses using this grading option, as students did not have prior knowledge that it would be offered.

As this is a change that can be implemented with little turnaround time, this solution delivers a high impact with low administrative burden— in the long run, it would help students stay on track within their degree programs as it allows them to better focus on synthesizing foundational concepts from spring 2020 (many courses did not cover the complete course objectives due to the modality change) without having to withdraw (and subsequently repeat) fall courses due to GPA-related concerns.

For concerns regarding the transfer of credits to other institutions, we found that most institutions have put out a statement reiterating that they will honor the CC (C- or higher) designation or its equivalent. Some students are also concerned about how employers and graduate schools would view the use of this grading system. It is our understanding that the vast majority of organizations are understanding of the aforementioned academic, mental health, and life circumstances that may lead to the use of this grading system. Regardless, we are aware of stark differences between individual circumstances and are confident in each individual taking into account their post-graduation plans, conducting due diligence, and exercising discretion when considering this grading option.

Our peer institutions, including the University of Virginia, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and John Hopkins University have made the decision to instate similar policies for the fall 2020 semester for these same reasons. After reviewing the decisions made by many of our peer institutions, we have considered a range of potential versions for this solution, such as including a CB (B- or above) designation.

We recognize that this solution would go a long way in supporting students and their long-term academic success, but we also understand the concerns that other institutions navigated before finalizing their version of this grading option for fall. If this is a proposal you are open to considering, we hope to work with you and other University decision-makers to give our input on the granular details.

2. Due to concerns of emotional fatigue from the digital environment, student mental health well-being is at risk. Our suggestion is to implement a set of mental health days throughout future semesters— a small number of one-day breaks where no lectures are to be held, no new work can be assigned, and no assessments or assignments can be due on these days in order to allow students a break from their accumulated day-to-day stress. Having mental health breaks not only boosts student morale, it helps them focus better on academics after the break.

We understand this has been implemented in the spring plan; however, we are reiterating the importance of this decision and we hope that it does not end after the spring 2021 academic semester.

3. Increasing tutoring services around campus. Such services could come from other students, teaching assistants, and professor office hours. Currently, the capacity is lacking in many departments due to increased demand from students participating virtually. This is due in part to more students being behind and requiring academic resources, but also due to the relative ease of attending office hours virtually when previously it would require a trip to campus.

In any case, we hope that academic resource capacity can be improved as we begin to approach the week of final examinations. We also hope that more students can be employed as a result of this endeavor.

4. Maximize opportunities for on-campus and hybrid classes in the spring 2021 semester. If at all possible, instead of one large asynchronous section for a particular course, see if it would be feasible to also have one or two smaller, synchronous, in-person sections.

This would be especially impactful for students in dire need of an in-person experience due to intense, negative conditions in their home environment.

5. Implement new SPOT survey questions for the Fall 2020 semester that ask specifically about the workload of virtual and hybrid courses. Use this data to adjust the workload of these courses should they be offered again in a virtual or hybrid setting in Spring 2021.

We hope that our efforts result in meaningful impact regarding academic support during this unprecedented pandemic, similar to the work done by our student leader peers at the University of Virginia, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, John Hopkins University, and a other institutions around the nation. We appreciate your time and consideration of our solutions, and we are interested in open dialogue with you that results in decisions that best support the Virginia Tech undergraduate community.

Sincerely,



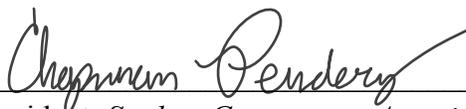
Student Advisory Chair
State Council of Higher Education for Virginia

10/29/20
Date



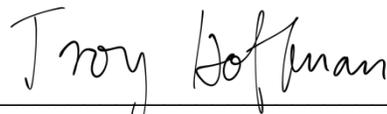
President, *Student Government Association*

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Vice President, *Student Government Association*

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Legislative Branch Chair, *Student Government Association*

10/29/20
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Academic Affairs Chair, *Student Government Association*

10/29/20
Date

cc: Eric Kaufman, Rachel Holloway, and Frank Shushok