



On February 2nd, 2023, after a report back to the Senate from the ex officio representative to the Sexual Violence Culture and Climate (“SVCC” hereafter) from the Graduate Professional Student Senate (“GPSS” hereafter), the Senate held a vote of no confidence in the current proceedings of the SVCC. The GPSS states the SVCC at present is not meeting the mission it was tasked by University Council to achieve. The senate reached this conclusion for several reasons. First, and most concerning, it is not clear to students who is representing them. The SVCC website lists only four student representatives out of 35 total members. Furthermore, there was a call for student volunteers that was advertised to the general student body, however, it is not clear if any student representatives were added to the primary SVCC group following this solicitation. Further muddying the student body's understanding of their representation is the unknown process by which students were possibly selected to fill student representative seats. It is unclear whether students at remote campuses received organized and direct communication regarding the application process. The overarching lack of transparency has raised serious student concerns regarding inclusion of a diverse and representative student body presence. Additionally, there is no direct representation of any student organizations (beyond the Senates) that guide culture and social engagement around campus on the primary working group. Of specific note, there is a continued lack of representation from the United Feminist Movement (“UFM” hereafter), who has been a leader in this effort since the beginning, leading protests¹ and writing multiple open letters²³, in order to enact change at the University. Moreover, UFM made a public statement about the committee's deficiency in diverse student representation and focus on administrative, rather than student engagement based solutions. These concerns do not seem to have been addressed. We believe that this combined with other voiced complaints about representation should have incentivized a restructuring of the primary SVCC group. The lack of diverse student representation and the exclusion of a leading activist group at our university, as well as a lack of response to these concerns has led students to feel as though their voices are not heard or valued.

Furthermore, student representatives to the primary SVCC group and subcommittees are not currently supported or compensated for their work on behalf of the SVCC in the form of their expertise and knowledge about sexual violence and campus climate. We have not been notified of plans for this to change. Therefore, these “volunteers” are exploited in yet another form of “invisible labor” on behalf of the University. Work on these issues may often be traumatic and can place students in vulnerable positions. The lack of transparency in SVCC student selection and lack of monetary or parking support for current and future representatives further perpetuates the

¹ <https://www.wdbj7.com/2021/09/29/hundreds-gather-virginia-tech-protest-sexual-violence/>

² https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DySINCH3VMcrA6sG_3E5BGB9I3mRKimV/view

³ <https://www.wdbj7.com/2021/11/04/virginia-tech-starts-21-member-work-group-address-sexual-violence-campus/>

barriers for precarious student populations not being able to participate or inform the SVCC on student experiences and needs, particularly underrepresented and marginalized students.

Additionally, the hiring of the HR firm, Segal, is viewed poorly by students. Despite the voiced concerns about hiring Segal, the decision was made on an executive level above the working group, without any student input. Furthermore, no details are shared on the costs of hiring Segal, while at the same time students are told there are not enough resources to compensate other student participants for work for the University. The absence of transparency in the decision making processes coupled with the unequal representation on the committee makes it harder to believe that the students' best interests are at the heart of the committee. Furthermore, it seems inappropriate that a HR firm with no apparent experience in sexual violence climate should be the ones guiding the discussion and identifying markers of success. Regardless of the intention, the message sent to students with this action is that the University is focused on an easier administrative approach to this problem, rather than a more thorough engagement approach with the communities who the working group nominally wishes to serve.

Finally, there does not currently seem to be a plan of action or roadmap to achieving cultural change at Virginia Tech related to Sexual Violence. The actions taken so far seem to be incremental, and built upon the processes and departments that have been dealing with sexual violence already. These flawed and insufficient processes have perpetuated the institutional space for sexual violence for decades. Between this, the lack of intentional and supported student representation and engagement, and the hiring of an outside HR firm to guide the needed deep institutional change, GPSS does not believe the current direction of the working group will lead to the desired change, and is forced to deliver a vote of no confidence.

It is the sincere wish of the GPSS to see the SVCC succeed in its mission. However, we believe that without student buy-in, it ultimately will fail to capture student experiences and understanding of violence on campus. In summary, we believe that increased transparency about SVCC student representation and organizational decisions, thoughtful inclusion of diverse student representatives, a clear and measurable action plan made public, and added support for student representatives will allow students to regain confidence in the working group. It is our desire to work together to thoughtfully generate better student participation.

Sincerely,

The Senators and Executive Board of the Graduate and Professional Student Senate