WHEREAS, the 2020 Graduate Student Cost of Living Survey (Appendix 1) found that 72% of graduate students are barely making ends meet during the year, with the average student having only $20 per month left after living expenses are paid, domestic students typically have to work multiple jobs during the summer in order to stay enrolled and finish their programs, and international students actually owing $166 more than they take in with fewer work options during the summer; and

WHEREAS, this data does not reflect the changing economic state of the COVID-19 pandemic, including skyrocketing housing prices in Blacksburg (see Appendix 1), which have further driven graduate students into poverty and has had especially detrimental implications for international graduate students and graduate students from historically marginalized backgrounds; and

WHEREAS, The Virginia Tech Food Access and Security Study (Appendix 1) has found that a startling number of graduate students face food insecurity with the most secure population, domestic students, having a staggering 35% rate of food insecurity and some of the most precarious members of our community, international students, facing 1.4 times the rates of food insecurity as domestic students; and

WHEREAS, we know from this data (summarized in Appendix 1) that graduate students are facing dire circumstances and so further inaction towards addressing it constitutes neglectful
complicity through preventable hunger, lack of medical care, and graduate students being unable to afford housing; and

WHEREAS, Virginia Tech has stated in their assessment of the graduate school and in Board of Visitors meetings that they would like to see graduate students bringing in more grants, but because most graduate students have to work multiple jobs during the summer to make ends meet or otherwise have their time limited by a lack of resources, graduate students are prevented from spending that time writing grants or pursuing additional professional opportunities; and

WHEREAS, paying graduate students a living wage opens up time for professional opportunities, service work, and institutional continuity that strengthens the educational and research missions of Virginia Tech; and

WHEREAS, graduate student pay constitutes an equity issue, with historically marginalized students in general and international students in particular having to work, on average, more hours while taking in less money from their assistantships than their privileged counterparts, assuming they can even work at all, which many international students cannot due to F1 visa restrictions; and

WHEREAS, preliminary cost assessment of this resolution for the university will be between 10 and 18 million dollars a year (this cost assessment was generated internally by extrapolation from 2020 COVID-19 estimates of how much it would cost to extend all graduate assistantships by one month through the graduate school and does not take into account recent inflation or cost of living hikes that have occurred during the pandemic) with the recommended task force being the body charged with doing a more precise data analysis using information the authors of this resolution do not have access to at present; and

WHEREAS, the increased cost of living as a result of the pandemic has already been recognized through the implementation of a $15 an hour minimum wage for dining services employees and many other staff members, auxiliary and non-auxiliary alike, and this important university priority of a living wage for staff members should be extended to graduate students; and

WHEREAS, paying graduate students a living wage provides increased security for graduate students, supports marginalized graduate students, opens up possibilities that advance the mission of the university, and contributes to overall morale of the graduate student body. For these reasons, we believe the cost of implementing this resolution is not only worth the investment in a valuable part of the university community but is something we have a moral
obligation to do given the threats of hunger, homelessness, and lack of access to life-saving medical care that graduate students face; and

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the university commits to provide graduate students on assistantship a living wage, as evidenced by the documents in appendix 2, as the baseline pay rate and taking into account the additional costs incurred by international students. This task force (see Appendix 3 for our recommended charge) will be charged with providing a more concrete cost estimate, financial implementation plan, provide access to data not publicly available, and draft a budget proposal to include this increased cost in the academic year 2023-2024 budget. The majority of this task force membership (at least 51%) should be graduate students (with a particular focus on international students) nominated by the Graduate and Professional Student Senate and representing at least three different colleges (including a member representing programs outside of Blacksburg) to offer a wide range of perspectives and expertise. Other members should be relevant stakeholders including, but not limited to, budget and finance representation, Graduate School representation, Cranwell representation, and faculty members with relevant expertise in the equity/political economy issues raised by this resolution.
Appendix 1: Supporting Materials

The cost of living survey can be found here: https://gsa.vt.edu/advocacy/2020-2021-advocacy/2020-2021-cost-of-living-survey-results.html

With the average take home pay and recommendations contained within the executive summary.

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 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. See: https://www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/USHMC/reg//BlacksburgVA-HMP-May20.pdf

The Graduate Education Task Force Report has reported that our graduate student stipends are not competitive with our peer institutions and is leading to stagnating recruiting numbers for graduate students. The report can be found here: https://graduateschool.vt.edu/numbers/task-force-reports/2020-grad-ed-task-force-rept.html

This Report recommends raising wages to be more competitive with peer institutions as well as points to our low grant application rates in comparison to peer institutions. When this 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 as that will more effectively address the equity and workplace problems with graduate student pay mentioned by the resolution.

Additionally, internal reports show that graduate students are facing staggering levels of food insecurity. The Virginia Tech Food Access and Security Study can be found here: VTFoodAccessSecurityStudyReport20191030.pdf

This Report presented survey data collected between December 2018 and January 2019 that indicates that 35% (±7%) 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

Lastly, we recommend looking at aspirational collegiate institutions for comparison, such as Duke University where 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”. Announcement here: https://gradschool.duke.edu/about/news/duke-makes-12-month-funding-commitment-phd-students

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. Link: https://engineering.tamu.edu/biomedical/admissions-and-aid/scholarships-aid/graduate-funding/index.html

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

Data collected by MIT’s Living Wage Calculator as of January 2019 indicate that the living wage required for the New River Valley area to meet the area’s cost of living is $31,195 before tax. For the state of Virginia, this living wage is $34,552. See: https://livingwage.mit.edu/metros/13980

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, see: https://apnews.com/article/why-is-us-inflation-so-high-77dc786442ccc3ed8092a7647716d682; https://www.bls.gov/news.release/cpi.nr0.htm

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 (philadelphiafed.org/surveys-and-data/real-time-data-research/spf-q3-2021&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1637350955339000&usg=AOvVaw1LLtFpuyjMyfavu2jrYzbU).

Presently, VT graduate students and employees do not receive annual pay 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) (https://finance.uw.edu/sfs/tax/nra#general%20tax%20information; https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/irs-provides-tax-inflation-adjustments-for-tax-year-2022). While difficult to track precisely because this rate can be inconsistent between 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 CoL report. The yearly student fees for Virginia residents at Blacksburg Campus is $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) (https://www.bursar.vt.edu/content/dam/bursar_vt_edu/tuition/2021-2022%20Tuition%20and%20Fees_FINALv7.pdf).

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 CoL for the increased financial burden placed on the international graduate community.

Appendix 3: Recommended Task Force Charge

We recommend utilizing the following charge or some variation within the spirit of the charge when developing the task force necessary to implement this commitment:

The Coronavirus pandemic revealed many fundamental inequities that structure the university. Not least of which is the underpaid nature of graduate student labor that has led to graduate students facing hunger, homelessness, and a lack of access to medical care. Given Virginia Tech’s commitment to Ut Prosim, that I may serve, and our land grant responsibilities to provide for our community, these financial hardships faced by the graduate students are a top priority to rectify. This task force will investigate a number of options for implementing a cost of living increase for graduate students and provide an in-depth financial plan for implementing a cost of living increase by academic year 2023-2024. One of these options under consideration should include increasing the number of 12-month graduate assistantship contracts offered, including considering making 12-month contracts the default option. When calculating cost of living the amount graduate students are required to pay in fees must be included. Lastly, all calculations for cost of living should use the average international student as the model; this is because international students are some of the most financially precarious members of the graduate student community and often have additional fees, higher taxes, and other financial obligations that domestic
students do not. In recognition of graduate student leadership on this issue, the majority of members for this task force will be nominated by the Graduate and Professional Student Senate.

Additionally, there are a small number of extenuating considerations captured in Appendix 4 that should be respected by this task force that come from the graduate student body but are independent of the charge.

Appendix 4: Extenuating Circumstances for Consideration

During the GPSS readings of the resolutions a small number of protections were requested and are contained here:

First, the volume of graduate students accepted by the university should not be negatively impacted by the implementation of this resolution. In effect, the increase in pay should not function as a disincentive for departments to take in qualified students.

Second, the implementation of this resolution should not be an obstacle to merit raises that are present in a few departments that offer that possibility.