WHEREAS, during the Covid-19 pandemic communication to graduate students ranged from incomplete to outright dangerous misinformation about testing eligibility, position in line for vaccines, and institutional role; and

WHEREAS, these gaps in communication have been a consistent problem for graduate students for at least 3 years. For example, there has been consistent confusion about what information is relevant for Graduate Teaching Assistants with faculty being notified about important changes like damages to classrooms, changes to schedule, or valuable pedagogy workshop opportunities without the teaching assistants who might be the primary instructor being notified; and

WHEREAS, these communication gaps stem from the ambiguous status of graduate students as sometimes students and sometimes employees depending on any given situation and often changing from day to day; and

WHEREAS, graduate students are officially considered students by human resources, which does not capture the full scope or their duties and as detailed later are not afforded the full protections and resources that undergraduate students have access to; and

WHEREAS, graduate students are a unique population who perform a wide range of campus functions and require specific attention paid to their situation as well as specific protections for their time and resources; and
WHEREAS, beyond communication issues, graduate students are often taken advantage of because of their nebulous status as sometimes students and sometimes employees. Furthermore, graduate students are frequently treated like students and thus not subject to state and federal worker protections that come along with being a public sector employee; and

WHEREAS, graduate students are oftentimes expected to work far more than the 20 hours a week they are contracted for by the university, with little to no protection that the undergraduate student employees on the same schedule receive; and

WHEREAS, Just as often graduate students do not have access to or have limited access to student services that undergraduates receive. For instance, graduate students are far less likely and able to utilize essential services like Cook Counseling or disability accommodations than undergraduate students--especially if the graduate students work from one of the satellite campuses--because they are designed to accommodate undergraduates primarily (See, also, GPSS Resolution 2021-2022W); and

WHEREAS, taken together, these issues arising from a lack of communication and ambiguous positioning at the university pose significant equity issues for graduate students and can often cause material harm as we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic when graduate students would receive unclear information or simply not receive vital information at all; and

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that graduate students be associated with the job they perform at the university when it comes to university communications. I.E. if a graduate student works as a teaching assistant or instructor of record they should be treated as faculty in addition to their role as graduate student for the purposes of communication; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that a joint task force be developed within six months of passing this resolution between Human Resources, the Graduate School, and graduate students (who form the stakeholder population) to address the ambiguous status of graduate students and solidify workplace protections necessary for performing the unique role that graduate students have at this institution. This should also include special considerations for the unique communication and student services needs that the satellite campuses have who often have more difficulty with these issues than Blacksburg graduate students.