Graduate and Professional Student Senate
GPSS Resolution 2021-2022B
Resolution to Make 12-month Graduate Contracts the Default Contract

First Reading by GPSS: August 26th, 2021
Second Reading by GPSS: September 9th, 2021
First Reading by CGPSP date
Staff Senate Review: date
Faculty Senate Review: date
Undergraduate Student Senate Review: date
Approved by CGPSP date
First Reading by University Council: date
Approved by University Council: date
Approval by University President: date
Approved by Board of Visitors: date
Effective: upon approval

WHEREAS, the 2020 Graduate Student Cost of Living Survey (Appendix 1) found that graduate students barely make ends meet in the semester, with the average student having only $20 per month left after living expenses are paid, and typically have to work multiple jobs during the summer in order to stay enrolled and finish their programs; and

WHEREAS, graduate students, unlike undergraduate students, generally are required to work for the university during the summer, rarely earning enough during their summer research and service duties to provide a standard of living commensurate with their stipends; and

WHEREAS, preliminary cost assessment of this resolution for the university will be between 10 and 18 million dollars (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

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, that prevents students from writing grants or pursuing additional professional opportunities; and
**WHEREAS**, having graduate students funded and available for the summer opens up professional opportunities, service work, and institutional continuity that strengthens the educational and research missions of Virginia Tech; and

**WHEREAS**, graduate student pay is also an equity issue, with marginalized students having to work, on average, more hours during the summer and taking in less money from their assistantships than their privileged counterparts; and

**WHEREAS**, extending the opportunity for all graduate students to be funded year round 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 worth the investment in a valuable part of the university community; and

**WHEREAS**, we recognize that some graduate students would like to keep their summers available for external opportunities, and so we recommend making 12-month assistantships the default (i.e., all graduate students should be given 12-month funding as an option, rather than imposing a requirement) to preserve such opportunities; and

**NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that the University offer the opportunity to expand 9-month graduate assistantship contracts to 12-month graduate assistantship contracts to all graduate students on assistantships by the 2023-2024 school year; and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that the President of the University charge a working group to provide a more concrete cost estimate, financial implementation plan, and draft a budget proposal to include this increased cost in the 2023-2024 yearly budget, with the stakeholder portion (see GPSS 2021-2022A) made up of graduate students. If this budget proposal is voted down, then the graduate school will be responsible for finding the money to implement the assistantship expansion by 2023-2024. Additionally, there are a small number of extenuating considerations captured in Appendix 2 that will be respected by this task force.

**Appendix 1: Supporting Materials**


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

The Graduate Education Task Force Report can be found here: [https://graduateschool.vt.edu/numbers/task-force-reports/2020-grad-ed-task-force-rept.html](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.

Duke University 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

We recommend using this report as a model as it also points to the need for long-term stability in addition to year-round funding.

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: 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, this resolution should not be taken as an opportunity to reduce the graduate student pay band as a cost-saving measure. The spirit of this resolution is to increase the stability of graduate student’s finances and that will be undermined by any attempt to decrease monthly take home pay.

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