Message to all graduate and professional students from the President of the Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS):

Dear fellow graduate students,

Through the COVID pandemic, the Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS) here at WVU has been working very hard to make sure that graduate students are protected during this period. A team of senators wrote up a letter addressed to the administration (see here) in order to make sure that graduate students are being put into consideration during this pandemic. The main points of the letter include extending all graduate students’ time-to-degree, providing protections for international students, taking care of healthcare, solidifying a plan for Summer 2020, and providing workplace protections for graduate students. This letter currently has over 250 signatures and includes both grad students and faculty members. As GPSS, our goal is to make sure the administration is taking into account the challenges graduate students are facing when making decisions about the pandemic.

For your information, the response letter from the administration is provided below.

Best,

Haley Wahl (GPSS President)

wvugpss@gmail.com

TO:

- WVU Graduate and Professional Students

FROM:
Thank you for your thoughtful letter to the WVU administration related to your concerns about the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on graduate and professional students. We share many of your concerns. Please be assured that many groups and individuals across the University community continue to work diligently on planning and problem solving to address these and other issues. We hope that you have carefully reviewed the information that has been communicated to all students, faculty, and staff via the coronavirus.wvu.edu website and via email to address the challenges the University faces during this time of dramatic changes in University operations.

We have consulted with appropriate individuals and offices across campus to develop responses to your concerns. We also met with Haley Wahl and Casey Shin (President and Vice President of the Graduate and Professional Student Senate) on May 7 to discuss these concerns. We summarize the most current information that we have obtained about the issues raised in your letter. We noted that your letter focuses on “graduate workers,” but we have responded with regard to all graduate and professional students for most of these concerns. At any point in time, only about a quarter of our graduate and professional students hold graduate assistantships, and students may hold assistantships at some times but
not others. We are concerned about all of our students and many of the policies and practices developed in response to the pandemic will apply to all students, faculty, and staff.

Provided below is information about each of the issues we identified from your letter:

1. **Automatically extend ALL graduate workers' time-to-degree [and time to candidacy] by one full calendar year, with options for additional time past the one year.**

Graduate programs at WVU encompass master’s, doctoral-research, and doctoral professional programs of varying lengths and structure. The only University-wide time-to-degree rules (see the Graduate and Professional Catalog – Degree Regulations - [Time Limits](#)) are the 5-year limit on time in doctoral candidacy (for PhD and EdD students), the 8-year limit on completion of a master’s degree, the 8-year limit on course validation, and the requirement that a student graduate under the requirements of a catalog that is no more than 7 years old. There is no University-wide rule concerning time-to-candidacy, although some doctoral-research programs may have program or college/school rules about this timing. On April 9, I informed the Graduate Associate Deans in all colleges and schools that I would approve exceptions to the University time limits upon request from the academic units for individual students whose progress has been adversely impacted by the events of this semester. Minimal paperwork is required, and the only burden for a student might be the need to communicate with their advisor about the need for an extension.

A blanket extension of these time limits could create havoc with a program’s enrollment planning, management of course offerings (consider 2- and 3-year master’s programs and cohort-based professional programs), and student
evaluation processes. Such a blanket extension also might unnecessarily lead to an increase in the average time-to-degree for all students, which does not, in the long run, benefit students (who could be delayed in moving into post-graduate work roles) or programs (for which time-to-degree is used as one metric of program quality and adequacy). Given WVU’s decentralized and student-focused model of graduate education, we encourage programs to make decisions about exceptions to both University-level and college/school/program-level time limits based on individual students’ experiences and needs.

The Graduate Associate Deans have been asked to provide and encourage exceptions and extensions related to college/school/program rules for individual students when justified by the circumstances of this semester. Further guidance will be provided in the coming days from me, and this information will be shared with graduate program coordinators and graduate students. We cannot guarantee how an individual faculty member, program, department, or college/school will evaluate student progress in relation to the changes of this semester, but there is no reason to believe it is in any of those parties’ interest to not be considerate and accommodating of those circumstances. Students who believe they have been treated unfairly in this area should consult with (in order and as appropriate) their advisor, advising committee, graduate program director, department chair, graduate associate dean, or dean. The Office of Graduate Education and Life can also provide consultations and advice. If a student believes that an academic sanction has been unfairly imposed, the student may file an appeal.

2. Provide concrete protections for the international graduate worker community.

The Office of Global Affairs (OGA) personnel providing direct support services to students—including the I-20 processing staff—have been deemed essential personnel. We have no way to guarantee that future budget pressures will not
cause reductions in staff, and that is the case throughout the larger university. However, if such reductions were to come, they would be managed in a way that would still allow WVU as a whole, and OGA specifically, to attend to the needs of its international students, both graduate, and undergraduate.

**a. Help graduate workers maintain legal status.**
OGA has continued to process I-20 extensions and new I-20 applications since WVU's transition to remote work. OGA advisors are still available via various virtual methods, with several individuals managing the phone lines and email vanity accounts—all of which are checked multiple times per day.

**b. Financial assistance and provision of health insurance to international graduate students who lost their assistantships.**

Many GA positions are designed upfront to last for only 9 months, so not having a GA position in the summer is not necessarily a loss of funding related to COVID-19. We typically only offer summer positions to about half of the students who hold GA positions in the fall or spring. We cannot extend GA opportunities into the summer where such an arrangement (and need) didn’t already exist. We are honoring the contracts that were made through either the Spring 2020 or Summer 2020 terms, neither shortening nor lengthening them beyond their original terms.

Graduate students who were provided with spring health insurance through their assistantships will remain covered under the current Aetna plan through August 10, 2020, even if their assistantship does not continue through the summer term. Other graduate and undergraduate students who purchased the WVU student health insurance during the spring term also will be covered through August 10, 2020.

Note that international students are eligible for Gray Emergency funding.
To apply for financial assistance from the Gray Fund, students should contact the Mountaineer Hub and submit an online ticket. Select "Current Student Inquiry Submission." The Hub staff will reply to the request.

International students also can take hourly work at the University.

- Students can search for an on-campus job by logging into Handshake with their **WVU Login username and password**.

Additionally, once they have been in the U.S. for a year, international students can apply for financial hardship exceptions to allow them to work off-campus.

- Students should contact OGA for assistance.

**c. Contingency plan for graduating international workers that cannot return home.**

OGA is working to identify and assist these students. If the student has graduated and is no longer a student, there are limitations on what WVU can do to help, but there is no intention of leaving international students, graduated or not, unsupported in basic living conditions (e.g., housing, food) should they be unable to return home because of travel restrictions. For students who are truly stuck (lease has ended and they are awaiting flights home), we will try to assist with emergency housing options. Students who find themselves (or anticipate being) in this situation should contact OGA.

**d. Finding a way to assist workers unable to return.**

Most deans have expressed that an extension or deferral would be likely for international students who are unable to arrive at WVU in time for the fall semester, but future funding of those students cannot be guaranteed. OGA will be
coordinating with deans and affected department chairs in June/July to determine what support is available to give our students and what coursework they can still accomplish from abroad if necessary. OGA is also working with relevant offices at the University to determine what work, if any, new or continuing GAs are permitted to perform while outside the country without negatively impacting their immigration status or tax liability.

3. Provide healthcare coverage pertaining to COVID-19 care for all graduate workers.

As noted above, students who had WVU student health insurance in the spring (that they either purchased themselves or that was provided through a graduate assistantship) will retain that coverage through August 10, 2020. Eligible students (domestic students registered for 6 or more credit hours, and international students registered for 1 or more credit hours) can request mid-year enrollment in the Aetna student insurance plan any time during the semester if their current coverage is lost due to a qualifying life event. If a spouse or parent experiences a change in employment resulting in a loss of non-WVU health insurance students can request enrollment in the Aetna plan.

Aetna is currently paying claims at 100% for COVID-19 testing-related services (in-network or out-of-network), and inpatient COVID-19 treatment for services received at in-network providers. In addition, certain telemedicine services currently do not require a co-pay and referral requirements have been temporarily suspended.

WVU is committed to doing everything it can to protect the health of the university and the surrounding community. These efforts have and will continue to take many forms. While we have an interest in COVID-19 testing, especially as we begin a return to campus, we cannot currently commit to testing all WVU students, faculty,
and staff. Making such a commitment would be dependent on a number of logistical considerations and resources (e.g., costs, availability of tests in adequate numbers), some of which are beyond WVU’s control. We have groups working on contingency plans for a return to campus, and this is one of the aspects that is being considered. What we can say is that whatever we do, it will be informed by recommendations from the public health and larger medical community. On the issue of providing treatment beyond what is available from a student’s insurance policy, WVU is unlikely to be able to take on the financial obligation of covering treatment. That said, healthcare centers (e.g., hospitals) and other community entities often provide some level of such support. More information will be forthcoming as the details of our return to campus are developed.

4. Announce a firm plan for Summer 2020, and waive Summer 2020 University fees.

a. Fund all graduate workers who find themselves without summer funding.

As noted above, many graduate students would not have summer funding even without the COVID-19 disruption. It is not feasible for WVU to provide summer positions for all graduate and professional students (or even all graduate and professional students who had GA positions in the spring).

Graduate and professional students may apply for CARES Act funding (although it is generally not available to international students), Gray Emergency funding, and Stitzel Emergency funding (after July 1, if additional funding becomes available for this program). In addition, students whose financial circumstances have changed should contact Student Financial Services to modify their FAFSA, which may allow them to obtain additional loan money.

As for using reallocated funds from unrealized travel expenses to provide
unbudgeted support for graduate students, it is not as simple as that. While we are realizing some unexpected savings from reduced activity, we also are experiencing substantially more increased costs and loss of revenue streams. The University is working hard to address these budgetary issues in total, which involves considering all of our expenses and revenues, and changes in each of these. We do remain committed to finding ways to continue supporting, in one form or another, our essential needs, and graduate students are an essential, integral part of WVU. Still, there are budgetary realities that we are still trying to understand and that have yet to unfold, and there are limitations as to what we can do.

b. Immediately waive all fees for the Summer 2020 session.

While some of the resources that the university fees cover are not currently available (e.g., PRT, Rec Center), others do remain available (e.g., counseling services, library services), even if remotely, and costs associated with others (e.g., custodial and maintenance staff; infrastructure repairs) persist. Additionally, as we move into summer, there is the chance that some services not currently available will begin to re-emerge (e.g., Rec Center). There are always services the University must provide to students, but the mix of those specific services and/or the form they take can change depending on our mode of operation (e.g., on-campus, online). The University fees allow us to maintain those services to best serve our students.

c. Explicitly communicate with graduate workers.

Most of the issues raised in this letter have been addressed in communications to all students and/or on the coronavirus.wvu.edu website. See https://coronavirus.wvu.edu/students/student-workers/ for information about graduate assistantships that was provided in March. Messages from the Office of
Graduate Education and Life were sent to all graduate and professional students on March 15, and to all Graduate Associate Deans on April 9, and relevant information has been included in many of the Weekly Updates sent to all graduate and professional students. Although most communication is being managed by University Relations, information specific to graduate and professional students and their program faculty will continue to be sent directly to them. We plan to send some additional communication soon.

- Further, we are insisting on information about the wording of “graduate student assistants” not being considered for temporary furlough.

The furlough plan identified in the April 23rd Campus Conversation is being put into place, but it does not affect student workers or GAs. They will not be furloughed.

Graduate students with fellowships are not considered employees and therefore are not subject to furlough. All fellowships managed by the Office of Graduate Education and Life will be paid in full. It is possible that fellowships funded by external entities could be modified, but we have not heard of any instance of this happening.

- Additionally, we request communication to include information on the Fair Labor Standards Act.

It is not clear that the Fair Labor Standards Act applies to GAs (although this point is regularly argued in the courts across the country). A graduate or professional student who is not a GA (i.e., not paid) cannot be “required to work” unless the “work” is part of a course or required to earn course credits. Even so, students can decline to “work” as long as they understand the potential impact on their course grade or credits. Any potentially inappropriate cases of faculty or staff insisting that
students work should be reported (in order) to the graduate program coordinator, department chair, College/School Associate Dean, or Dean. The Office of Graduate Education and Life can assist students in communicating and resolving their concerns in this area. Any violations of guidance concerning work in labs, greenhouses, studios, or similar sites of on-campus research or scholarly activity should be reported to the appropriate Dean or to the Research Office.

d. Provisions for professional graduate workers who need to do specific activities for their degree requirements.

These issues are best handled by the individual programs. Many of these requirements come from national accrediting bodies. Requirements and approved modifications to these requirements are currently in a state of flux for many programs. We have already seen some modifications in requirements that will facilitate degree completion for students in some programs, but students in other programs may be delayed due to lack of access to required in-person activities.

5. Explicitly state workplace protections for graduate workers.

A University committee is working on standards and practices to go into effect when we are able to start returning faculty, staff, and students to campus. Protections for all groups (faculty, staff, students) will be the same.

These protection considerations will be tactical (e.g., provision of Personal Protective Equipment and outlining safe work procedures) and also provide for recourse should someone be pressured to work in a setting or manner that is hazardous. The University already has mechanisms for addressing allegations of retaliation. These mechanisms will apply to situations around COVID-19 work-related issues as well.
Please be aware that we are in a time of rapid change, and resolution of many of your concerns will change along with the state of the pandemic, guidance from public health and government officials, and decisions made about how best to manage WVU operations during these conditions. As you have questions, you can direct them to faculty and administrators in your department or college/school, to the coronavirus@mail.wvu.edu address, or to the Office of Graduate Education and Life (GradEd@mail.wvu.edu).

Once again, we appreciate your concerns and value your willingness to participate in a dialogue to help us understand how graduate and professional students are being impacted during this crisis. Graduate students are important members of our university community, and we are doing everything we can to best serve your interests and help you progress in your careers. The goal of all of us at this great institution is to carefully work toward safely, humanely, and effectively returning WVU to its academic mission.