



# FUTURE OF STUDENT GOVERNANCE

## *Task Force Report*

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## REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF STUDENT GOVERNANCE

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### INTRODUCTION

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In the fall of 2020, President Timothy Sands and Provost Cyril Clarke appointed Kim O'Rourke, Vice President for Policy & Governance, and Frank Shushok, Jr., Vice President for Student Affairs, to lead the Task Force on the Future of Student Governance to work in parallel with the President's Committee on Governance. The overarching charge of the Task Force was as follows:

*The Task Force on the Future of Student Governance at Virginia Tech will work in parallel with the President's Committee on Governance with the specific goal of developing a set of recommendations for redesigning the structure of student governance to more effectively represent the voice of the undergraduate, graduate, and professional students.*

*The recommended structure will define more clearly the distinct roles and responsibilities of the various bodies involved in student governance and relationships between them, and will foster inclusion, collaboration, and coordination among those bodies. The Task Force will assess the strengths and deficiencies of the current structure, benchmark best practices at other universities, and develop a set of recommendations tailored to Virginia Tech's overall system of shared governance— which may include proposed additions, eliminations, mergers, or scope modifications to the existing governance entities.*

*Preliminary recommendations will be shared with the President's Committee on Governance for feedback and refined for submission to the President at the end of spring semester 2020. With the President's endorsement, specific proposals will then proceed through the governance system during spring semester 2021, with a goal of implementation at the beginning of fall semester 2021.*

#### Task Force Members

- Kim O'Rourke, Vice President for Policy and Governance, and Secretary to the Board of Visitors (Co-Chair)
- Frank Shushok Jr., Vice President for Student Affairs (Co-Chair)
- Blake Barnhill, Senior, Computer Science, and Past Vice-President, Student Government Association
- Monty Abbas, Professor of Civil & Environmental Engineering and Past President, Faculty Senate
- James Bridgeforth, Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs & ExperienceVT
- Victoria Dashevsky, Senior, Packaging Systems & Design, Chair, Commission on Undergraduate Student Affairs
- Grant Boomer, Senior, Finance & Management, 2021 Class President
- Trichia Cadette, President of the Black Graduate Student Organization
- Monika Gibson, Assistant Dean & Director for Graduate Student Services
- Maruf Hoque, Graduate Student (Roanoke), Translational Biology, Medicine & Health, President of the Graduate Student Assembly
- Ennis McCrery, Director for Student Conduct, Former Graduate Representative to the Board of Visitors
- Thomas Miller, Senior, Sociology, Chair of the Student Life Council
- Rachel Spector, Senior, Environmental Conservation & Society
- Heather Wagoner, Director for Student Engagement & Campus Life
- Molly Ryan, Project Coordinator, Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs

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## REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF STUDENT GOVERNANCE

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### A BRIEF HISTORY ON STUDENT GOVERNANCE AT VIRGINIA TECH

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Student governance at Virginia Tech as it is known today began in 1966, with the creation of the undergraduate Student Government Association (SGA). This newly formed organization brought together the “Civilian Student Body” and the student government for the Corps of Cadets— a change that reflected the changing nature of the university that began in 1964, when the Board of Visitors made participation in the Corps voluntary. Over the years, SGA has been recognized for its efforts to improve services and programs for the student body.

SGA represented all students until the formation of the Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) in 1969 to represent graduate and professional student interests. This change occurred following significant growth in graduate programs and enrollments, as well as a 1975 decision to create a separate honor system for graduate and professional students.

The Commission for Student Affairs (CSA) was formed as a result of the approval of the report of the Task Force on Councils, Commissions, and Committees by University Council in 1991. The membership of CSA consists of representatives from the Student Affairs, Council of Academic Deans, Staff Senate, Faculty Senate, general administration, academic support, Extension/public service, and student organizations, both graduate and undergraduate.

The addition of an undergraduate and graduate student as non-voting representatives to the university’s Board of Visitors in 1983 and 1995, respectively, further emphasized the importance of the student voice in shared governance.

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### OVERVIEW OF CURRENT STUDENT GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

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#### **Student Government Association (SGA)**

Like many other institutions, the Student Government Association at Virginia Tech is divided into three units of governance that mirror the federal system in the United States:

- **Executive Branch:** This branch consists of the President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer. The President has authority to choose a host of Directors in the cabinet that executes several auxiliary and business functions within SGA.
- **Legislative Branch:** This branch, which is also known as the General Assembly, is by far the largest and most powerful. Led by a Chair and supported by a Vice Chair, the body includes a representative for each college and some 39 At-Large Representatives, for a total of more than 80 representatives. The purpose and function of this body is to propose, debate, and pass legislation that will improve the undergraduate student experience at Virginia Tech.
- **Judicial Branch:** This branch includes a Chief Justice, an Associate Justice, and seven other Justices. This body’s main purpose is to interpret SGA’s constitution and bylaws, to facilitate elections, and to oversee impeachments.

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## REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF STUDENT GOVERNANCE

### Graduate Student Assembly (GSA)

The Graduate Student Assembly is composed of the General Assembly, the Executive Board, and the Graduate Student Representative to the Board of Visitors.

- The General Assembly of the GSA is the legislative body of the organization, and consists of Graduate Student Delegates representing their home Departments or non-academic communities, as well as the Executive Council. The Assembly exercises its power through Acts of the Assembly at the advice of its Committees and the Executive Council, in accordance with the GSA Constitution and bylaws.
- The Executive Board of the GSA is vested with executive power by the Assembly to ensure the effective operation of the GSA, and for fulfilling its purpose, function, and mission. They are responsible for managing the various Programs and Events, for managing the GSA funds, for scheduling and running the General Assembly Meetings, and for collecting information on and representing the needs and concerns of the graduate and professional students at Virginia Tech to the University administration.
- The Graduate Student Representative to the Board of Visitors: At their discretion, the Graduate Student Representative to the Board of Visitors shall address the Assembly about matters related to their position. The Graduate Student Representative to the Board of Visitors may call for resolutions of support for their positions. The Graduate Student Representative to the Board of Visitors is not bound by the results of the Resolutions, but is asked to report the results of the Resolutions to the Board of Visitors, if appropriate.

### The Commission for Student Affairs

The charge of the Commission for Student Affairs is to study, formulate, and recommend to University Council policies and procedures affecting graduate and undergraduate student life and morale. Areas for consideration include: student relations with peers, staff, faculty, administrators, alumni, and the community; student organizations, social life, and recreation; employment, placement, and counseling; residential life, health, safety, and quality of student related services; and other matters affecting student life. CSA is comprised of the following members:

- Chair - The chair will be elected from among the non-administrative faculty, staff, graduate student and undergraduate student members of the Commission by the Commission membership
- Three ex officio members
- Two A/P faculty from the Division of Student Affairs appointed by the Vice President for Student Affairs (three-year term)
- One elected representative by the Faculty Senate (three-year term)
- One non-ex officio A/P faculty representative elected by CAPFA from: General Administration, Academic Support, Student Affairs, Extension (three-year term)
- One staff senator elected by Staff Senate (three-year term)
- President of the Student Government Association (one-year term)
- Vice President of the Student Government Association (one-year term)
- President of the Graduate Student Assembly (one-year term)
- Vice President, Graduate Student Assembly (one-year term)

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## REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF STUDENT GOVERNANCE

- Two representatives elected by the Graduate Student Assembly (must include one master's and one doctoral candidate; one-year term)
- Student organization representatives (by virtue of position; one-year term)

### The Board of Visitors

The Board of Visitors (BOV) is the governing authority of Virginia Tech and consists of influential public and private-sector leaders, many of whom are alumni. Some of the board's responsibilities include appointment of the President of the university; establishment of fees, tuition, and other charges paid by students; and the approval of university policies including those related to student life. As non-voting representatives to the BOV, the student representatives attend all open meetings of the board and the committees of their choice. The representatives act as facilitators and champions of issues faced by their constituency. Issues that cannot be solved at the SGA and GSA levels, or by other commissions, and issues that need official sanction from the BOV are the representatives' niche. Additionally, the representatives work with the administration, various departments, constituencies, and the community to enhance academic and student life experiences at Virginia Tech. The Board of Visitors has two non-voting student representatives:

- One undergraduate student (one-year term)
- One graduate student (one-year term)

### CONSIDERATIONS OF KNOWN ISSUES

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Over the years, the three branches of the SGA have become quite decentralized and at times, disconnected, which does not always allow for a positive experience with student governance. Unlike the majority of college campuses across the country, the President and Vice President campaign together on a ticket, in which students elect the student body President, but the other officers are selected at the discretion of the President. The officers selected by the President include: Secretary, Treasurer, Chief Justice, and all Directors. In this model, the President selects all executive officers, not the students. Currently, there are 100 positions in the Student Government Association at Virginia Tech. Over the past few years, many positions have not been filled. Moreover, unlike other institutions, the SGA at Virginia Tech generates the majority of its budget from shirt sales but does not oversee the administration of program funds to other student groups and organizations. Most allocation of university-provided support of resources flows through the Student Budget Board, a sub-unit of the Commission on Student Affairs. The lack of access to resources limits the influence of the SGA.

During listening sessions from a broad array of students, it was indicated to the Task Force that the current model of student government does not represent the interests of all students. Another repeated Task Force discussion was the concern that when there is an issue where institutional leadership needs feedback, it's quite difficult to understand which opinions to adopt as the voices vary between SGA, the Commission on Student Affairs (CSA), and many of the University Chartered Student Organizations (UCSOs).

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## REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF STUDENT GOVERNANCE

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### THE TWO-PART TASK FORCE PROCESS

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The Task Force met regularly during the 2020-2021 academic year and included two primary stages, taking about four months for each component.

First, the Task Force participated in a thorough education process that included meeting with campus constituents who represented current and former student leaders. It also read broadly about shared governance, especially the influential role of students in these systems. To confirm our understanding of the national landscape, the Task Force met with Butch Oxendine, Executive Director at the American Student Government Association. It also met with the current Faculty Senate Chair, a member of the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors, the Undergraduate and Graduate Representatives to the Board of Visitors, as well as the Presidents and Vice Presidents of the Student Government Association and the Graduate Student Assembly. Throughout the process, the Task Force consulted with the President's Committee on Governance, including regular briefings with committee member Bob Hicok, who serves as Vice President of Faculty Senate.

Second, the Task Force distilled key themes from our learning, developed a student governance "straw model" of key issues, including structural concerns, and began testing and refining these ideas through multiple and iterative meetings with campus student groups. Over several months of feedback from students and other constituents, the Task Force was able to agree on a series of findings and recommendations, detailed below and separated under the categories of "Undergraduate Student Governance" and "Graduate and Professional Student Governance."

The Task Force believes these recommendations facilitate a culture of collaboration between Undergraduate Student Governance and Graduate and Professional Student Governance, while also strengthening their separate contributions due to their significant differences. Similarly, the recommendations align with the university commitments to diversity and inclusion.

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### KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT GOVERNANCE:

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1. **Separation between undergraduate student governance entities (the Student Government Association, the Commission on Student Affairs, the Undergraduate Representative to the Board of Visitors, and the Student Budget Board) inhibited a coherent, coordinated, diverse, and influential student voice in the Virginia Tech governance process.**

#### **Recommendations:**

- a. The Student Government Association should sunset in May 2021 and reconstitute as an Undergraduate Student Senate (USS) that integrates the Commission for Undergraduate Student Affairs, the Student Budget Board, and the Undergraduate Representative to the Board of Visitors. Further, it is recommended that the existing Student Budget Board be divided into a Graduate/Professional Student Budget Board and an Undergraduate Student Budget Board, with funds allocated between the two entities as directed by the Vice President for Student Affairs.

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## REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF STUDENT GOVERNANCE

- b. Create two different funds for emergency assistance within the Dean of Students office. One fund would be for urgent needs related to rent, utilities, etc. The other fund would be specific to food and provide students with funding on their Hokie Passport that could be used to access dining centers on campus.
- c. During the Summer of 2021, a “Student Government Association to Undergraduate Student Senate” Transition Team should be created to draft a new constitution, develop USS cabinet job descriptions, and design an election process.
- d. The Undergraduate Student Senate should design a structure that emphasizes collaboration and service to students. The chief outcome of the USS should be focused on strengthening the overall student experience. In this spirit, the task force offers the following charge for the USS:
  - The Undergraduate Student Senate shall be representative of the entire undergraduate student body and have the authority and responsibility to act on their behalf through legislative recommendations concerning campus life; academic policies and regulations; student conduct; campus and infrastructure development; student health and wellness; institutional financial planning and stewardship (including the dissemination of a portion of the student activity fee to registered student organizations); matters of equity, inclusion, and access that affect student and campus environments; and the learning conditions of the undergraduate student body. Further, USS shall have the opportunity to provide programs, services, and traditions that benefit the undergraduate student body. The USS shall comprise undergraduate student leaders who are elected by their peers to represent and champion their needs, wants, and hopes for Virginia Tech.
- e. The Commission on Student Affairs should be restructured into two organizations. The Commission on Undergraduate Student Affairs would be linked with the Undergraduate Student Senate, and a separate body, the Commission on Graduate and Professional Student Affairs, should be created. The future structure for the two commissions will be approved as part of the revised University Council Constitution and Bylaws, which is expected to progress through the governance system during 2021-22.
- f. Within a newly created Undergraduate Student Senate, a senior leadership cabinet should be established that includes Vice President positions for the Undergraduate Representative to the Board of Visitors, the Commission on Undergraduate Student Affairs chair, and the chair of the Undergraduate Student Budget Board (who will also serve the overall financial interests of the USS). All cabinet positions will be elected in some manner (i.e., no longer appointed, as many had been by the SGA President.)
- g. University Chartered Student Organization (UCSO) leaders, who currently sit on the Commission on Undergraduate Student Affairs, should become full voting senators in the newly created and integrated Undergraduate Student Senate.
- h. USS policies, processes, structures, and communication should unite the voice and integrate fully the needs and participation of undergraduate students in: Blacksburg; Roanoke; the National Capital Region; extended campus locations across the commonwealth; and, wherever else they may be located.

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## REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF STUDENT GOVERNANCE

2. Interest in undergraduate student government has been declining as indicated by eroding participation in elections, unfilled positions, and a general perception that the Student Government Association has not adequately represented growing student diversity at Virginia Tech. Students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds are opting out of participating in senior student government positions, as these roles necessitate forgoing paid work commitments.

### Recommendations:

- a. Virginia Tech should promote vigorously the opportunity to run for, and participate in, the Undergraduate Student Senate by widely disseminating information about candidates, holding candidate information forums, elevating student leadership voices in the VT News (student edition), and lowering barriers for voting through technology.
  - b. The Undergraduate Student Senate should explore creating multiple pathways to becoming a Senator, including: being elected by an academic college; elected at large; by becoming a UCSO leader; or through application/lottery (to limit influence of voting blocs).
  - c. By raising University Chartered Student Organization (UCSO) leaders to the status of full voting Senators, the USS will emphasize the perspective of cultural organization leaders to increase awareness of and engagement with the student body, particularly students in underrepresented and underserved groups.
  - d. In a conscious effort to make student governance more inclusive, the position of Director for Inclusion and Belonging should be added to the Undergraduate Student Senate senior leadership cabinet. This new role will be a crucial representative for championing all student voices with an unwavering commitment to the student experience in governance.
  - e. Students serving in cabinet President and Vice President positions should receive a reasonable stipend each semester to offset potential lost income from student employment when holding time-consuming leadership roles.
  - f. Students serving in USS positions should be offered, and encouraged to participate in, financial wellbeing programming and coaching through Hokie Wellness, in addition to other relevant personal and professional development programming.
3. The professional support structure for the Student Government Association has been inadequate and opportunities for leadership development, mentorship, and coaching have been limited given the complexity of serving in these student leadership positions.

### Recommendations:

- a. Student Affairs at Virginia Tech should establish an Undergraduate Student Senate advising team, led by a senior Student Affairs Officer, to provide high-level support and guidance to USS leaders. This guidance will also promote institutional and organizational memory, facilitate continuity, and encourage leaders to grow professionally and personally over time.
- b. Student Affairs, in partnership with the Provost's Office, Office of the VP for Policy and Governance, Graduate School, and other relevant offices, should develop a comprehensive leadership development program for students involved at all levels of the student governance process, including undergraduate and graduate/professional students.
- c. Student Affairs should establish an alumni advisory board to provide additional mentorship and support for USS leaders.



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## REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF STUDENT GOVERNANCE

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### KEY FINDINGS AND ASSOCIATED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL STUDENT GOVERNANCE:

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1. Separation between graduate and professional student governance entities (the Graduate Student Assembly, the Graduate Representative to the Board of Visitors, the Commission on Student Affairs, and the Student Budget Board) inhibited a coherent, coordinated, and influential student voice in the Virginia Tech governance process.

#### Recommendations:

- a. The Graduate Student Assembly should sunset in May 2021 and reconstitute in fall 2021 as a Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS) that integrates the Graduate Student Assembly and the Graduate Representative to the Board of Visitors. In this spirit, the task force offers the following charge for the GPSS:
  - The mission of GPSS is to serve as a voice for all graduate and professional students through advocacy and community-building in a culture of inclusivity and support; ensure access to the resources necessary for scholarly and professional success; and foster a network of coalitions among all graduate and professional students to help achieve these goals:
    - Advocacy - Work with decision makers to address needs of the graduate student body.
    - Community Building - Host events to connect people, and to help with issue resolution.
    - Scholarly and Professional Development - Support through events and programs, and
    - Movement Building - Guide graduate and professional students in forming departmental structures for advocacy.
- b. The Commission on Student Affairs should be restructured into two organizations. The Commission on Undergraduate Student Affairs would be linked with the Undergraduate Student Senate, and a separate body, the Commission on Graduate and Professional Student Affairs, should be created. The future structure for the two commissions will be approved as part of the revised University Council Constitution and Bylaws, which is expected to progress through the governance system during 2021-22.
- c. During the transition period in 2021-22, a “Graduate Student Assembly to Graduate and Professional Student Senate Transition Team” should be created to draft a new constitution and bylaws, develop GPSS cabinet job descriptions, and design an election process for leadership positions and a nomination process for senators.
- d. GPSS policies, processes, structures, and communication should unite the voices and integrate fully the needs and participation of graduate and professional students in Blacksburg, Roanoke, the National Capital Region, and other extended campus locations across the Commonwealth and beyond.
- e. Within a newly created Graduate and Professional Student Senate, a senior leadership cabinet should be established to advise the Graduate and Professional Student Senate President that includes the Graduate Student Representative to the Board of Visitors and Presidents of graduate and professional student senates at extended campuses, and other graduate and professional student leaders invited by the Graduate and Professional Student Senate President.

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## REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF STUDENT GOVERNANCE

2. Interest in graduate and professional student government is hindered by the distributed nature of graduate/professional education, which is largely centered at the departmental or programmatic level; the diversity of the graduate/professional student population, (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, nationality, etc.); and the inherent differences in graduate/professional students' experiences and needs, based on degree program (e.g., master's, doctoral, etc.).

### Recommendations:

- a. Virginia Tech should vigorously promote the opportunity to run for and participate in the Graduate and Professional Student Senate by widely disseminating information about its purpose and meaning for the graduate/professional student experience. This must be a multi-faceted communications effort involving faculty and all relevant offices in order to engage a broad and decentralized population.
- b. The Graduate and Professional Student Senate should create a Director of Advocacy position on its Executive Board to work with departments and programs to facilitate the creation of departmental/program groups (or to communicate with already established groups) and to connect these groups to GPSS by nominating students to serve as GPSS senators.
- c. Senators from departments and programs should be organized into caucuses within GPSS to facilitate advocacy at the institutional level around common issues.
- d. Leaders from culturally based graduate/professional organizations should be included as Senators to ensure the inclusion of diverse voices and advocacy for diverse needs.

3. Graduate and professional students are opting out of participating in leadership positions in student government because these roles require a significant investment of time, which may conflict with academic, research, and assistantship obligations; in many cases, students are discouraged from participating by advisors, who do not see the relevance of service in student government to a student's graduate work.

### Recommendations:

- a. Virginia Tech should work with academic deans, department heads, and faculty to promote the importance of graduate and professional student participation in governance. This should include potential incentives for faculty advisors who encourage and support graduate and professional student participation in governance. This could be accomplished by providing an opportunity for faculty to include such activities within their Faculty Activity Report and promotion and tenure materials.
- b. The time commitment required of students serving in the highest leadership positions within student governance may prevent them from also being employed. Students serving in the highest leadership positions should receive a reasonable stipend each semester to offset potential lost income from student employment, thus ensuring that students are not precluded from pursuing those positions for economic reasons. Moreover, provision of a stipend reinforces the professionalism of these time-consuming leadership roles as part of promoting graduate and professional student development.
- c. In defining executive board roles, the Graduate and Professional Student Senate should balance the workload to promote efficiency.

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## REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF STUDENT GOVERNANCE

4. Graduate and professional students are opting out of participating in leadership positions in student government because these roles require a significant investment of time, which may conflict with academic, research, and assistantship obligations; in many cases, students are discouraged from participating by advisors, who do not see the relevance of service in student government to a student's graduate work.
  - a. Student Affairs and the Graduate School should establish a Graduate and Professional Student Senate advising team to provide high-level support and guidance to GPSS leaders. This guidance will also promote institutional and organizational memory, facilitate continuity, and encourage leaders to grow professionally and personally over time.
  - b. Student Affairs in partnership with the Provost's Office, Office of the Vice President for Policy and Governance, Graduate School, and other relevant offices should develop a comprehensive leadership development program for students involved at all levels of the student governance process, including undergraduate and graduate/professional students.
  - c. The Graduate and Professional Student Senate should document best practices for new GPSS leaders and establish a leadership transition process that includes documentation of issues and initiatives, including the status of the work (i.e., not started, in progress, complete) and information to facilitate continued momentum.
  - d. The Graduate and Professional Student Senate should explore options for election cycles in order to stagger the terms of the GPSS President and Graduate Representative to the Board of Visitors.
  - e. The Graduate and Professional Student Senate should establish the position of Past-President to keep former leaders engaged and establish an alumni advisory board to promote institutional memory.

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## APPENDIX I – GLOSSARY

- **SGA - Student Government Association:** The Student Government Association was established by the student body of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in order to provide an effective organization for the administration of student activities, to promote academic freedom and academic responsibility, to establish and protect student rights, to foster awareness of the student's position in the campus, local, state, and national communities, and to provide a liaison between the student body, faculty, and administration.
- **USS - Undergraduate Student Senate:** The newly developed model for student governance at Virginia Tech
- **GSA - Graduate Student Assembly:** Working to improve campus life, scholarly development, and community for our constituency, the GSA serves as the liaison between graduate students and University Administration.
- **BOV - Board of Visitors:** The Board of Visitors is the governing authority for Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.
- **SBB - Student Budget Board:** The Student Budget Board is a standing committee of the Commission of Student Affairs (CSA). The board manages the allocation process of a portion of the student activities fee to Registered Student Organizations (RSO), University Chartered Student Organizations (UCSO), and University Student Life Programs (USLP). SBB is a policy board that strives to fund organizations in a fair and equitable manner.

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## REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE FUTURE OF STUDENT GOVERNANCE

- **UCSO- University Chartered Student Organization:** an organization composed primarily of students but which, by constitutional design, has a specifically established direct relationship to the university. This relationship includes, but is not limited to, policy review, special programs, governance, and paid faculty/staff advisers/coaches.
  - Examples include: Asian American Student Union (AASU) · The Big Event (TBE) · Black Organizations Council (BOC) · Black Student Alliance (BSA) · Class Systems · Council of International Student Organizations (CISO) · Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) · HokiePRIDE · Homecoming Board · Jewish Student Union (JSU) · Latino Association of Student Organizations (LASO) · Muslim Student Union (MSU) · Residence Hall Federation (RHF) · Virginia Tech Union (VTU)
- **CSA - Commission on Student Affairs:** The charge of the Commission on Student Affairs is to study, formulate, and recommend to University Council policies and procedures which affect graduate and undergraduate student life and morale. Areas that are considered by CSA include: student relations with peers, staff, faculty, administrators, alumni, and the community; student organizations, social life, and recreation; employment, placement, and counseling; residential life, health, safety, and quality of student related services; and other matters affecting student life.