Eugenia explained the format of the meeting – we will be taking minutes and will keep the call open until 8:00PM for anyone to join as they find necessary. Speaking order will be maintained by people noting in the chat that they want to raise a point. The point of this call is to get additional concerns, comments and other information related to how the COVID-19 situation is affecting graduate students such that the GRO can actively advocate on those issues.

We are aware of the petition currently in circulation by TRU. We previously shared that petition with the administration (last Thursday) – and have not received any additional information than others. The most recent email from the Provost earlier today contains as much information as the GRO has been provided.

Jo Giardini asked for a summary of what advocacy the GRO has undertaken so far, what the GRO has learned from the administration, and how the TRU petition has been addressed by recent University communications.

Eugenia responded: the co-chairs met with Christine Kavanaugh as soon as the undergraduate closure was announced, at that time they raised certain graduate-specific issues, but did not receive any particular responses. The TRU petition was raised for consideration at the GRO E-board meeting by an e-board member. The Co-Chairs then met and spoke with Christine Kavanaugh and Renee Eastwood regarding that petition, as well as all of the changes to the on-campus status of graduate students. They pushed for maintained transportation for students required to travel for work due to being deemed necessary – that concern has been elevated to the higher administration but not fully. One of the concerns that was raised in the petition was with regards to funding for graduate students, and in the Provost’s email they answered some of these issues.

The Co-chairs spoke about the petition with both Christine and Renee last night. With some of the concerns: such as students on probation, funding, et cetera – the administration has scheduled meetings to discuss and make decisions on these matters, but they have not been able to make these decisions as of yet. Some of the people in charge of these are VP Nancy Kass and VP Steven Gange. On Wednesday, both TRU and GRO will be meeting with VP Kass and Gange, and we can push them on making these decisions – stressing the need for urgent action and clarity. Elliot noted that they also met with Sri Sharma and Matt Roller about how policies were being communicated, rather than the specific policies.

Jo Giardini responded: the role of advocacy is not to request information about policies, but to push for the policies that we desire. How has the GRO been advocating with regards to these respects, such as funding for those whose research is affected and? Will you be meeting with deans above those VPs?

Eugenia responded: we are not sure that there are deans above the VPs, but we are pushing for as many meetings as possible. We are doing information gathering as well as pushing for action, but because much of the problem is not that the determined policy is bad but that information is lacking, we are of the mind that pushing for what is desired alongside requesting information about what is happening is a reasonable approach.

Alex Parry made a comment: A comment about the email from VP Kass and Provost Kumar – most of the ‘solutions’ provide by the email are to ask people from your department. Within many departments, there may be significant gaps in knowledge or decision making and they refer back to the administration. Both TRU and GRO are trying to work to apply pressure to the administration and departments; what is the GROs strategy and how can GRO and TRU work together on those fronts?

Eugenia noted that our strategy so far has been to demand and continue to push for clear and consistent answers – particularly at our meeting with the VPs. By that time, GRO will have completed its vote regarding the TRU petition. However, this is really TRUs meeting, and we do not want to feel like we are taking over. Regarding the departmental run-arounds; we have been experiencing similar things within the administration – that those we have pushed and spoken to so far cannot make decisions, and therefore the information cannot be released. Eugenia noted that one issue with respect to the petition was that we received push-back regarding the demand to health-insurance. One main issue is that there is Maryland law that stops us having non-students on student health insurance. The administration may be willing to work on providing other insurance options for those who would otherwise lose insurance due to graduation.

Elliot added that if TRU wants to push COVID-19 related issues at the meeting on Wednesday, the GRO is happy to do so – however, this was their meeting and it is up to TRU whether they want to stay close to or far from the original agenda. VP Kass and VP Gange have much more authority than others we may deal with and can push for policy within the departments underneath their jurisdiction.

Alex Parry noted that it would behoove the GRO and TRU to get together and discuss before the meeting to determine the joint agenda and discussion point. Putting the meeting off seems like a really bad option as it would lose valuable time. He does not think it should be a concern about choosing between the original agenda and the COVID-19 related issues. Many of them overlap a lot, and therefore the actions/discussions are relevant now as they were before. TRU is currently doing most of its work remotely, and will be holding an OC meeting tomorrow to make final decisions about the meeting. Alex highly recommends that they have a joint meeting with the GRO members who will be present at the meeting.

Eugenia responds that she is fully in favor of having such a conference call such that GRO and TRU can be on the same page regarding this conversation. She may be the most challenging to schedule because she has been deemed essential personnel.

Maya (ChemBE rep) wanted to raise some additional problems that have been brought up which have not yet been discussed. One of those is research-track masters students. Most of those students now cannot make any progress towards their degree, but have high tuition costs and may not be able to make sufficient research progress to defend their Master’s thesis at the appropriate time. This could be an additional $25,000 in tuition for those students. The petition so far was focused mostly on PhD students, but we have a lot of masters students and we should not be overlooking them. Another concern is that many of the University’s responses have been “discuss with your advisor” and that makes the situations vary dramatically across different advisors and departments. She raised a specific instance in the past when a student who was critically ill was forced out of lab for ‘insufficient progress’ which was coverup for a poor working relationship – it is worrisome that this same kind of thing could happen during this situation.

Jack responded – we discussed this at the E-board meeting, but it is a challenging thing to assess over all. Many departments where this is an issue have been told to try to be “creative” with solutions for those master’s students. However, there is a sense among many master’s students that there is not a good resolution available – many of them would want to leave at the expected time.

Eugenia discussed this issue with Christine – the results may be WSE specific – advisors are being told that anyone who was on-track to graduate this semester should be allowed to (or encouraged to) graduate this semester, and to be ‘creative’ in completion of their thesis. She is not sure what the best solution is – adding available time for students to finish their degrees can still put in a big financial burden for students, particularly if they were meant to have a job immediately.

Shane asked if any of the students who are doing research masters degrees would generally want to stay extra to finish their work, or if instead they would like to graduate with whatever they are able to complete in this method.

Jo noted that we should be able to push for both of these things – to allow for tuition relief for students who want to continue as well as to allow for master’s students to finish with less work than is typical.

Eugenia and Elliot respond that they are comfortable pushing for both such that options are available for each student per their needs/desires. One challenge is that so far it has been pushed down to the departmental level, but we can try to push the administration to ensure that there are options available across all departments.

Maya noted that she believes that we should try to force the administration to provide as many options for people to pursue as possible since it is unlikely that there will be a one-size fits all solution.

Jack added that he likes the idea of advocating for a variety of acceptable solutions. The University may not be willing to treat everything on a case-by-case basis.

Eugenia asked: who do we want to have the right to make this decision – should it be the individual student, the advisor, the department? Should Christine and Renee be involved in each case?

Alex Parry noted that even if we are just limiting/reframing the material to be raised at the GRO/TRU meeting – the current expected time of 1 hr is going to be woefully inadequate. We should be forthright at the beginning of the meeting that 1 hour will be insufficient and to push for another meeting or a much longer meeting. We should start roping in GSA to these conversations to provide a unified graduate student front on this.

Elliot and Eugenia agree, and they will reach out to Katie Wood (president of GSA). Eugenia noted that she agrees that we should push as hard as possible for more meeting time with VP Kass and VP Gange, but we should expect that they will likely end the call directly on time. Eugenia and Alex agree that they should ensure that Katie is on board with and knows the plan for the meeting to keep everything on message.

Adeshola noted that we need to have additional meetings to discuss some of these issues directly – for instance, the question of Masters’ students finishing on time or not having a thesis may have a really dramatic effect on these students and should be treated very dramatically on their own. We should, in that case, speak to the individuals in charge of these decisions and make sure that each PI/advisor who is going to make decisions about students completing their degrees are well informed.

Eugenia noted that since we have this meeting guaranteed, we need to make sure we get as much into it as possible. We may not be granted another meeting for a long time. Eugenia wanted everyone’s opinion on changing the agenda focus.

Alex approved sending the original TRU agenda message to the entire GRO/E-board.

Shane noted that he strongly agrees with what Alex said earlier that all of the current COVID-19 issues relate back to the long term problems raised in the original agenda. He proposed that the meeting raise both the long-term problems and the immediate concerns, with a slightly stronger focus on the specific issues related to COVID-19.

Elliot raised a comment about involving a second ‘advisor’ or external professor for decision making about some of these problems (such as the completion of a degree for a research Masters student). This was previously discussed with the GRO advisors. Maya asked for clarification. Eugenia clarified that she envisions this as being a way for a second person to review a situation such that if a main advisor is unwilling to accept a body of work as sufficient for graduation, the student can still get fair treatment.

Wangui noted that having a backup/secondary advisor to help address issues with having only one advisor that is in charge would be valuable outside of COVID-19. This may be the case in BME first years (according to Eugenia). GRO should consider pushing this as a broader approach.

Jack asked a question about social interactions – at the E-board there was a discussion about holding online social events to allow for students to continue to interact with one another in this situation. The E-board discussed having a list that the GRO would maintain to advertise different events, discord channels, *etc* to allow for students to interact if they are removed from their social circles due to the COVID-19 situation. One thing would be a virtual hangout hour during the normal coffee-hour time. Jack asked for input from non e-board members on what their thoughts about this are.

Eugenia noted that a lot of other large organizations (Philharmonics, broadway musicals, etc) are making performances available freely online. It is not the same as direct interaction, but can provide an additional resource.

Benj commented about the virtual coffee-hour. One big Zoom meeting may be challenging – in real coffee hours, people break off into groups. Instead of one coffee hour zoom, what if we host several (5)? That may enable people to break off into groups in the way that is more normally.

Eugenia noted that one concerns is our responsibility to moderate those sessions.

Shane commented that discord would likely be a better platform for those kinds of social events.

Elliot noted that for the JHU TRU meeting we should be certain to take very detailed minutes. Shane will be present to take minutes. We can inquire if they will allow us to record the meeting. Maryland is an all-party consent state.

Jo Giardini asked a question: in the conversations that have gone on so far regarding academics – have grading standards been discussed yet? If so, what are the responses?

The SGA started a petition to provide pass-fail as a voluntary option for undergraduate students. We have been told that it was under discussion for undergraduates and Eugenia felt that it was likely to be approved there. For graduate students, it was not yet decided. It would need to be decided high up – VP Gange, VP Kass – then go down to Deans/divisions.

Shane added that during his lab’s group meeting today his advisor (a senior faculty member) asked whether we thought that graduate students should be allowed the option to switch their classes to pass-fail.

Benjamin Taylor asked if we could have the GRO put out a petition regarding the option of pass/fail for classes. Can we vote on that electronically?

Eugenia and Elliot said that we could – it is certainly something we can vote on electronically. So far people have been slow to vote, but we can push for it. Elliot noted that students should be given the option rather than being forced to change to pass/fail.

Wangui agreed that we can/should push for it. She is aware of some similar initiatives at other Universities.

Eugenia noted that during the original meeting with the administration, they pushed back that if students take the courses pass/fail it will suggest that ‘JHU cannot provide the same caliber of education online’ and that students may make a poor decision in moving to pass/fail and be punished when applying for jobs/positions later on.

Jenna noted that she does not think that JHU can provide the same caliber of education online. All students should be provided the option of pass/fail if they want it

Shane agreed and stated that if their concern is students making poor decisions, they should instead provide sufficient information to make sure students are aware of the potential ramifications but that overall this rationale is weak.

Jo Giardini asked for confirmation that the GRO is committing to having the 6 PM April 6th meeting and that the entire graduate student population will be informed, that the GC will be informed so that they can ensure representation if the normal representatives cannot attend.

Eugenia/Elliot responded that they are committed to holding that meeting, and will have to frontload all of the GRO-specific material (such as the constitution, budget powers to E-board, etc). Eugenia commented that we would ask anyone who wants to come to a meeting with an issue or a discussion point, we will need to have that information provided in advance to allow for the material to make it onto the agenda. We will of course allow everyone to participate, but any attendee may only speak when called upon by the Co-Chairs. We frequently are just on the edge of quorum during in-person meetings, which is part of why we are concerned about online meetings.

Shane responded that having a person try to stand in as a GC representative for only one meeting is not in line with our policies. If a departmental representative is not able to continue in their duties, they can have a replacement named – but that needs to be an approved process, not just a student showing up and saying that they are from that department and act as a representative.

Alex Parry noted that we should definitely have GC meetings and additional ‘listening sessions,’ and that there should be continued GC meetings. There should be quick action after the GRO-TRU meeting, and so moving the GC meeting up one week might be worth considering. Regardless, the GC needs to consider

Jo Giardini noted that some of the responses went beyond the questions asked. They further asked if the GRO E-board was willing to canvas all of the GC representatives to determine if they are still able to serve and if not to seek for replacements.

Shane responded that he believed he already said that he would do that, but confirmed that he was willing to do that.

Wangui suggested that we consider moving the meeting to March 30th at 6 PM.

A straw-poll was taken, and it was approved that we move the meeting up. The chairs will inform people of this. One challenge will be dealing with the budget.

Shane noted that if we pass the bylaws first, we can grant ourselves the privileges to deal with it through the E-board or other electronic methods.

Alex Parry asked, given that everything needs to be done rapidly, is there any accountability mechanism to replace people who are not fulfilling their duties and are not attending meetings to ensure that they will be replaced.

Eugenia noted that the only method we had was denying future travel grant eligibility and encouraging people to come using pizza. Neither of those are currently at play.

Shane noted that if he does not receive a response from the GC representatives, he can apply pressure through the departmental coordinators, but beyond that we do not have any particular power.

Alex suggested that in the email sent to the GC representatives, that this is an *extremely* important time to have the GC acting on student concerns and therefore that they need to be willing to act and participate. If there is one time where people are expected and need to step up and do work towards our common goals, this is that time. It would also benefit the GRO and all graduate students if we make sure that we have some way of expediting action during critical times.

Shane will draft policies for emergency measures.

Wangui asked if we will continue having GC meetings after next week or if it will be just listening sessions. Eugenia responded that we are not confident, we will probably try to schedule GC meetings but they may fall apart and only become listening sessions.

Alex proposed that if giving emergency powers to the e-board is not possible, we can consider relaxing quorum to allow meetings to occur.

Shane said that he is open to either possibility, and would like any input from the GRO as to the best method to deal with this.

Wangui noted that we already told GC members that meeting attendance post April 6th will not be considered. How do we address that going forward?

Maya noted that if we structure the bylaw for reduced quorum such that it is clearly limited to situations of this kind, GC representatives are unlikely to have issues with them. We should not penalize people who cannot attend, but we should emphasize how important it is for people to continue to attend and participate and help all their fellow students.

Shane agreed with Maya’s points.

Elliot noted that in this case the GC gave itself the right to vote online in advance – we cannot always be certain such a thing will occur. We could change quorum such that it is not a fixed number.

Eugenia countered that we could reduce quorum to the number of E-board members, thus in theory the full E-board could at least hold a functional GC meeting. Eugenia noted that the E-board is WSE heavy – and has been so for a long time. As such, having the GC provide additional power to the E-board may disadvantage KSAS.

Alex responded that he understands that concern, but that business is so far from usual right now – in an emergency situation, it is preferable to have a sub-par solution than no solution.

Ben asked what the method/timing would be to reduce quorum. Would it be an online vote?

Shane responded that the easiest way would be to pass the new bylaws. These could include a specific provision about emergency situations *or* we could then temporarily reduce the quorum requirement by invoking By-law VII.1.2.

Eugenia provided a summary of the meeting and specific action items for the GRO E-board. She thanked everyone for their time and input.