



April 5, 2016

Dr. Gena Chandler-Smith
Chair, Commission on Undergraduate Studies and Policies

Re: Resolution CUSP 2015-16O, Resolution to Establish Guidelines
for Independent Study and Undergraduate Research

Dear Gena,

I am writing to you to convey the Faculty Senate's preliminary recommendations on Resolution CUSP 2015-16O, which would establish limits and parameters on Undergraduate Research (UR) and Independent Study (IS) courses. Specifically, the proposed policy would:

- 1) Limit the total number of credit hours of IS and UR an undergraduate student can count toward their degree to nine.
- 2) Mandate that each UR and IS course specify a tangible output that can serve as a basis for a grade.
- 3) Specify that students spend a certain minimum time working on their UR or IS course per credit hour.

From supplemental material that was circulated and through a visit by Dr. Beilee Watford to the Faculty Senate on Tuesday March 29, we understand that this policy proposal has been formulated in response to a recommendation by an audit performed of Virginia Tech's academic programs in the aftermath of the cheating scandal at the University of North Carolina, and are designed to preclude the possibility of anything similar taking place here.

We thank the Commission on Undergraduate Studies and Policies for its work on this important issue, and Dr. Watford in particular for personally discussing this issue with the Faculty Senate. Clearly, ensuring the academic integrity of our programs must be a top priority for the University, and we are therefore fully supportive of this initiative.

However, we believe that the nine credit limit in the current proposal is too restrictive. We understand from Dr. Watford that CUSP plans to raise this to twelve credits, which is certainly better, but we remain wary of enshrining a hard limit in difficult-to-change university policy, particularly when the University has a stated ambition to increase experiential hands-on, minds-on learning like what is provided in UR and IS courses.

The proposed policy could also have adverse consequences for individual programs that might be in legitimate need of a higher limit. Future programs may find themselves restrained by this policy in ways that are detrimental to their academic goals, something that cannot be predicted today. In addition, we are aware of two existing programs that would be stymied by a 12 credit UR/IS limit. First, the Nanoscience major *requires* eight credits of undergraduate research, which leaves students in this program with a margin of only four additional credits toward IS, which is needlessly restrictive. Second, and more seriously, the Foreign Languages and Literature program is able to attract many of its majors largely thanks to the ability to offer numerous UR/IS courses for degree credit. A hard limit, even one as high as 12 credits, could be very damaging to this program.

Invent the Future

Therefore, the Faculty Senate *recommends* that the proposal be modified so that

- by default, up to 12 credits of UR and IS can count toward an individual degree, but
- individual programs can raise or lower this limit through their check sheets, if this is motivated by programmatic or academic considerations, and
- it allows appeals that would afford flexibility –with accountability– where those are needed.

This would achieve the same result as the current proposal, but preserve flexibility for departments and colleges to design their programs in the manner best suited to their students and their academic goals.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Faculty Senate,



Rami Dalloul
Faculty Senate President