

Interview with Sarah Wood for *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*
July 10th 2020.

Petition Link: <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSe5-IgKWEr872iCTml7dihak22gImVBSJh3YsWwhZlcT-wkWw/viewform>

Petition writers:

Dr. Doe Polanz, Associate Professor of French, James Madison University



Dr. Thomas Adajian, Associate Professor Philosophy, James Madison University



Dr. Jennifer Lang-Rigal, Associate Professor of Spanish, James Madison University



Q: Why did you decide to create the petition?

A: The main reason was growing anxiety over fall plans at our and other Virginia public and private institutions, regarding cuts, teaching loads, health measures, and decisions to teach online or in-person (see petition points 1-3). Though we wrote several letters to our administration since the pandemic started, faculty were still not included to a significant extent and as a result, many colleagues reached out to us with concerns over very practical issues, since they will be the ones in the classrooms this fall. They expressed dissatisfaction with the top-down and rather opaque process through which decisions are made, often by administrators who are not full-time instructional faculty. The second reason, equally important to us, was a desire to bring faculty across the state together in a common effort. We worked intensively in creating space for everyone to share concerns, organizing virtual meetings for our faculty and that of several VA institutions, drafting a consensual petition, sending emails, keeping ourselves informed about what other institutions are doing across the country. The petition itself was inspired by letters and statements from our colleagues at Penn State, VCU, and UNC-Chapel Hill.

Creating a petition for the whole state of Virginia was already a challenge because of the lack of communication channels between and within each university. We also realized that discrepancies between instructions and guidelines at schools within the same state are considerable; certainly, drafting a common petition helped us communicate better.

Despite these challenges, we feel it is important to address the issues on a state-wide level: in 10 days, 20 colleges and universities of VA have joined in, culminating on July 10 at over 1150 signatures.

Q: What do you hope to accomplish with it/your goal?

A: More generally, the petition also sends a signal to establish healthier practices in higher education, in terms of transparency, shared governance, economic security of all faculty (academic professionals, graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, and all those engaged in teaching and research in higher education). Our colleagues privately express much anxiety, which they do not often wish to voice for fear of losing their job; it seemed important to reassure them and offer a venue to air their concerns.

With this successful petition, we hope to make clear to administrators, politicians, and the public that there is much at stake for colleges and universities, in the short term and longer range. While health and working conditions in the COVID-19 era are primordial, shared governance in setting university priorities appears especially important now. If there are to be budget cuts, furloughs, etc. in Virginia, as there have been across the country, then faculty must have a role in the decision-making process. Unfortunately, in such time of crisis, principles of transparency and shared governance, clearly inscribed in Faculty Handbook policies tend to be set aside. Our goal is to promote faculty participation in the decision-making process, which can only help the institution.

Q: What kinds of reactions have you received from it?

A: Overwhelmingly positive! Too often, faculty, especially in non-union states like Virginia, tend to accept administrative decisions taken without their input. But we see signs that this is changing: we received donations to support our work, several colleagues in DC have forwarded the petition to their colleagues or faculty Senate and expressed their support. The petition is mentioned in a Washington Post article: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/07/01/college-professors-fall-remote-teaching/> and we have given a couple of interviews, including one for the local TV station of WHSV: <https://www.wHSV.com/video/2020/07/04/educator-petition/>

Q: How do you think universities should help faculty during this time, especially those who don't feel comfortable returning to campus?

A: First of all, I refer you to the petition items 1, 2 and 3. These conditions are not being met in the overwhelming majority of universities, which is why so many faculty members are signing it. Universities must gather faculty input — relying on their expertise in matters of health, science, student relations, listening to and responding to their concerns, prioritizing safety and academics. Teachers know best what takes place in their classroom, and how their students feel and react. Whether they wish to teach in person or online, their perspective, concerns and questions are at the core of the academic mission.

Petition Items:

1. All faculty members must be allowed to make their own professional and prudential judgments about whether to teach in-person classes in the fall, without having to petition administrators. Faculty will not face negative repercussions from administrators for deciding to teach remotely. Faculty workloads will not be increased without full faculty consultation and adequate compensation. Institutions will maintain full employment, pay, and benefits for all instructional faculty.

2. Faculty must approve all instructional plans for returning to campus. All decision-making processes must be fully transparent, in accordance with normative principles of shared governance. Appropriate input and review by faculty, including existing faculty bodies, must precede policy changes, which must be publicly posted.

3. Adequate safety measures for all members of the institutional community -- students, staff, contract workers, and faculty -- must be in place. This includes, at minimum, free testing on request and daily community reporting from administration regarding new cases on campus. If a mandated on-campus presence results in a COVID-19 infection of an employee, the institution must make specific provisions for covering health costs, above and beyond what the individual's current insurance provides, and including mental health support. These medical provisions will apply to all employees, even those without university/college health insurance, regardless of their contract type.

Q: Have you seen changes come out of the petition so far?

A: It is difficult to speak for all institutions involved. The Faculty Senate at JMU has responded very positively to our initiative and has used it to help increase faculty participation and push for much more shared governance and transparency. Our President and Provost have yet to react to it. Other higher ed institutions in VA asked us to use the petition language to create their own internal document. We also have been giving advice to secondary school faculty who wish to start their own petitions.

Q: Anything else you'd like to add?

A: We are very grateful for all the support and encouragement we have received, personally thanking us for our service. Indeed, we have been working voluntarily for hours, while still teaching online classes, conducting research and preparing for the fall classes. Like everyone, we would have liked to simply go on vacation, but this matter seemed too important and we wanted to act preemptively to make sure that faculty concerns throughout VA are being taken into account. This is not just for the benefits of those who teach, but for our students as well.