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'TIME FOR CHANGE'

LIMITED SGA FUNDING CAUSES SOME ORGS TO FUNDRAISE, OUTSOURCE MONEY

The Student Government Association's deadline for spring semester funding is Friday, but some student organizations are still struggling with budget deficits. Photo by Jon Mirador

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With the deadline for student organizations to request spring semester funding on Friday, many are still struggling to make up for the money they weren't allocated earlier in the semester.

For the fall semester, the funding for student orgs was cut by 20% due to a budget deficit. The Student Government Association, or SGA, determines the money allocated to student organizations through the Student Activity Fee and enrollment.

SGA Chair of Appropriations Xaneya Arroyo said that due to a drop in enrollment, the allocated budget for student org funding was cut by 20%.

"That's why more student orgs this year may have seen from our annual or fall semester funding that they haven't gotten as much as they have in previous years," said Arroyo, a junior international business major.

The Student Activity Fee is used to support student activities such as concerts, plays, student organizations and publications. The fee ranges from $4 to $90 depending on the student's campus, credit hours and housing. Arroyo is hoping the fee will be raised.

"In the flowchart of how VCU's money is breaking down, there just hasn't been as much funding as there has been in the past," Arroyo said. "I think that that is a huge deficit, especially since we've been getting the same activity from students for a long, long time. So I think it's time for change. I really do."

For full-time undergraduate students, the Student Activity Fee is based on what campus they attend. For Monroe Park students with private and on-campus housing, the fee is $90. MCV students are charged $36. Others, such as graduate, masters and doctoral programs, have lower fees ranging between $36 and $56. Students who live off campus do not have to pay the fee, according to the VCU 2019-2020 budget.

Colleen Connolly of Catholic Campus Ministries said the organization still receives school funding, but it decreased significantly this year.

"Our funding has been decreased by a couple thousand dollars," Connolly said. "We do a free Sunday supper every evening that's open to all students and not just our club specifically, and as long as we push that enough, we're not being hit as hard by [funding cuts]."

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> Virginia Moore,
> Italian Club president

Connolly said the organization may have to forgo some of the events it has had in the past due to funding cuts.

"We have had a conversation recently about trying to fundraise," Connolly said. "I know some bigger events like our haunted house may not happen this year because funding is not up to par."

Vivek Kuruvilla, who served as SGA president last year, said that SGA recently changed its system of allocating funds in order to "make sure everyone got a piece of the pot."

The change encouraged student organizations to budget their spending for the year instead of the semester, and the funding limit for each org is based on the budget created at the beginning of the year. Budgets outline expenses such as operational, travel and program funding and planning for the year rather than per semester would give organizations access to a larger amount of money.

"It was to simplify [the process]," Kuruvilla said. "It was to make sure that orgs add more access [to funding]."

Kuruvilla, who is a fifth-year mechanical engineering student, said the process involved a lot of work with their internal appropriations bylaws.

"It came with all the best intentions," Kuruvilla said. "I'm not sure specifically how it worked out from an individual student org perspective, but it came with the intentions of trying to make sure every single org had access to the resources that each other had."

Many student orgs, like the Italian Club, say they are struggling with funding and the new RamsConnect system.

RamsConnect, an online space for student organizations, departments and community partners, can assist organizations with event planning, campus involvement and financing.

In their first semester of receiving funding, the Italian Club's president, Virginia Moore, said they have already experienced problems with the new RamsConnect system.

"We deal with budgeting through the student office, which has been difficult," Moore said. "They've redone the system, and it's a whole new layout."

Moore said her club — which has about 40 members — was listed in RamsConnect as having requested $4,000 for the fall semester. The website later listed that $3,000 was granted to them, which Moore says was more than they needed.

"We were very happy with that amount of money, and we planned our events," Moore said. "Our most recent event was a cooking night where we divided into teams in the kitchen, one team cooked cacio e pepe and the other cooked carbonara. There was a judge, but mostly it was a night where we cooked, ate and hung out together."

'No apology' after SGA changes group's funding

The night after this event, Moore said she logged into RamsConnect to request reimbursement for the event costs and saw that the amount of money in the club's account had decreased to $320.

"There was no apology, no notification that they'd even messed up," Moore said. "They just said we had that amount of money until we didn't. Each event is about $300, so we don't need $3,000 to run three events [per semester], but it would have been nice for them to admit their mistake and try to fix it."

Moore said that two weeks later the club has not yet received the reimbursement they requested for the cooking event. Before the club recieved funding from the school, she said they had to pay for events like this out of pocket.

"We've had some issues with registering too," she said. "This entire new system isn't understood by users."

Ellaiza Antonio, sophomore and vice president of the Asian and Pacific-Islander Student Alliance, or APSA, said her organization has had trouble getting funding from the school because of its small size and lack of a treasurer.

"Right now, we're not getting any funding at all," Antonio said. "The other board members and I feel like the smaller organizations don't get enough funding, and that kind of hinders them from growth."

APSA has about 10-20 members. Only three members are on the board of the organization.

"Another thing is that with RamsConnect, it's hard to keep organizations registered," Antonio said. "Smaller organizations have to do more work for their group in order to stay registered on RamsConnect."

President of the Student Veterans Association James Grubb said his org saw a 20% cut to the money that was requested. Grubb said to make up for the money, the club has turned to fundraising and local organizations such as Veterans of Foreign Wars, Epic 360 and the Richmond Kickers.

"We were told that funding from the SGA was a lower amount this year than usual and granted what they could," said Grubb, a senior political science major. "We were lucky to have the SGA really understand our requests"

This semester, SGA helped with all of the club's general body meetings and about 50% of their events. Grubb said they also received their funding later than usual, around a month after the deadline for approval.

"We weren't sure if we had any funding at all," Grubb said. "It got to the point that our faculty advisor started contacting SGA to see what was going on. As a student org, we never received a reply from SGA, whether about funding or anything else."

The VCU chapter of Virginia21 — which has about eight members — gets some funding from Virginia21, but Chapter President Adam Lockett says that it is limited. He said he heard similar things about SGA funding.

"You can apply for things like funding and reserving space on campus," said Lockett, a junior graphic design major. "But I did not go ahead and apply for any SGA funding, because in the past, I've been told it's going to be very limited."

Virginia21 is a nonprofit that provides information about voting, elections, safety and economic opportunity.

Some clubs, such as the VCU Cycling Club are funded completely by VCU Rec Sports.

"We feel comfortable with the amount of funding we've received this year and don't have any current plans to fundraise," said club president Alex McClanahan.

Not all organizations at VCU are funded by the university. For example, the VCU chapter of Planned Parenthood Generation Action is funded by a grant from Planned Parenthood Advocates of Virginia, according to the organization's president Malena Llamos.

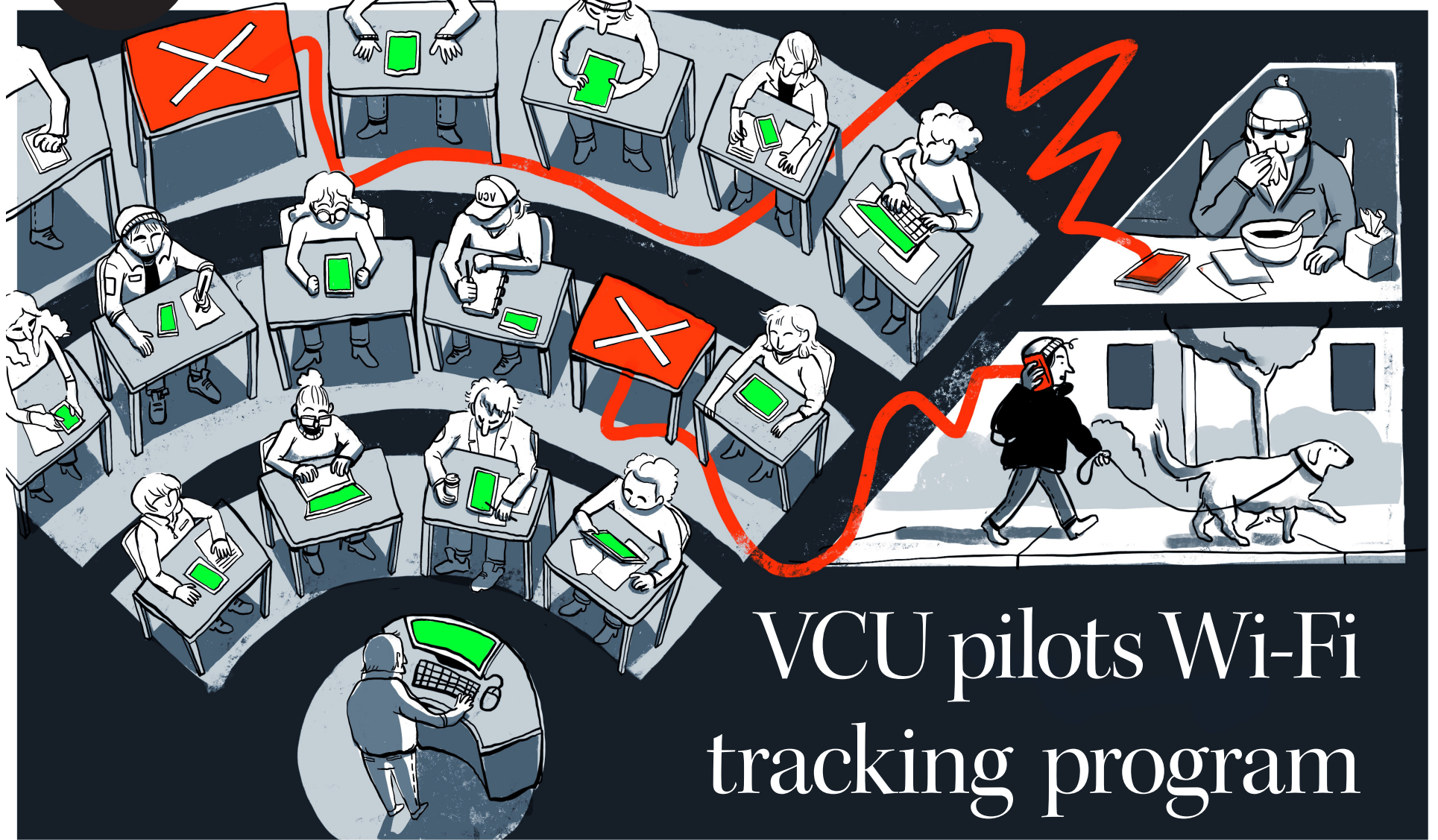The last day for student organizations to register for spring semester SGA funding is Friday.

VCU pilots Wi-Fi tracking program

Illustration by Sammy Newman

Ram Attend will track connections for class attendance

KATIE HOLLOWELL
Contributing Writer

Some students are uncomfortable with a $96,000 pilot program that tracks Wi-Fi connections to automate class attendance, questioning why the university "needs to have our location."

Through Ram Attend, which piloted Nov. 8, when students connect their devices to the VCU Safenet Wireless network, a Wi-Fi access point is automatically recorded. The access point is then compared to class times and locations to specify attendance.

According to VCU's student success page, Ram Attend is being introduced to track regular class attendance, "one of the most important indicators for student success." The pilot is being used in smaller classrooms to test accuracy before introducing it in larger classes.

The website states that connection data is not used outside of designated classroom locations and times. The current pilot is using data for attendance, but it is unclear if the data will be used for other purposes.

"Aggregate (de-identified) data may be analyzed at the university level to improve other areas of student success," the website states. "Additional details will be available after the fall 2019 pilot."

Only focused inquiry classes — UNIV 111, 112 and 200 — are testing the new program. Since these classes are generally smaller in size, the professors can take attendance manually and compare it to Ram Attend results. Students whose classes were selected for the program were notified by email.

Some VCU students, such as sophomore Sarah Pritchard, don't understand why the program began so late in the semester.

"I understood they just wanted another way to track us and take attendance, but why they were doing it so late in the semester was confusing to me," Pritchard said. "Because that is not really an effective way to go about piloting something at least [to me] personally."

Pritchard, an environmental studies major, sees this as another way for the university to keep an eye on students. VCU tracks students when they log into SafeNet and records when and which access points your device connects to, according to the student success page.

"I feel like we are really already micromanaged, and I really don't want that," Pritchard said. "What's the problem with normal attendance or doing [something] like Top Hat attendance?"

Pritchard opted out of the program, not allowing VCU to track her location for class attendance.

Students are protected through the Family Educational Records Protection Act, or FERPA, which gives students the rights to their educational records. University officials will not have access to the data unless it is required under their job duties, which would apply to instructors and advisers.

There are also guidelines set by the vendor, Degree Analytics. VCU spokesperson Mike Porter said in an email that the university signed a one-year, $96,000 contract with Degree Analytics that would not affect tuition.

If a student decides to opt-in to the program, Degree Analytics will only record when the student logs in to the Wi-Fi for their class time and then filter out the rest of the data. Before the data is sent to the vendor, it will strip the student's eID and only show a V-Number.

Students selected for the pilot program can opt-out of having their attendance and Wi-Fi connection tracked through a Google Form link, which was included in a notification email about the program. Students not included in the pilot can also opt-out before the program extends to other classes.

Junior Samantha Son said the new program is causing a lot of anger and confusion on campus.

"I feel like while it may streamline attendance procedures," the fashion merchandising major said, "many effective tools like Top Hat or other things are already set in place."

Undocumented students could start enrolling next school year

"

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Sybil Halloran,
senior associate vice provost for strategic enrollment management

I STAND WITH IMMIGRANTS BECAUSE...

UndocuRams co-founder Yanet Limon-Amado says the change is a "step forward."
Photo by Wessam Hazaymeh

UNDOCUMENTED

VCU considering enrollment for undocumented students

GEORGIA GEEN
Executive Editor

VCU might begin accepting and enrolling undocumented students in time to affect fall 2020 applicants, depending on the results of a review of the university's admissions practices that began this semester.

As the practice stands, the university admits but does not enroll undocumented students who cannot provide some sort of legal documentation. Beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program — which gives temporary legal protections to people brought to the U.S. as children — already are allowed to enroll in the university.

Sybil Halloran, senior associate provost for strategic enrollment management, said she hopes the review will be finished before winter break and anticipates changes will be made.

"One thing VCU prides itself on is access … This [policy] doesn't really fit into that," Halloran said. "I would like to see us enrolling undocumented students. This practice that we currently use is over a decade old, it's dated." Halloran said the university will reference the practices of other Virginia schools that enroll undocumented students, such as George Mason University. The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia allows individual universities to establish their own admissions policies for undocumented students and those with DACA status.

Yanet Limon-Amado, co-founder of UndocuRams — an organization that advocates for undocumented VCU students — said the organization's members are glad that the practice could be changed. She noted that if the current process were outlined on the admissions website, undocumented students would have saved time and money by knowing ahead of time they would not be able to enroll.

The enrollment processes DACA recipients go through at VCU aren't consistent, Limon-Amado said, and each member of UndocuRams has had a different experience. After being accepted on the spot at her community college, Limon-Amado went through a straightforward process, she said.

UndocuRams co-founder Yanet Limon-Amado said there are inconsistencies in VCU's enrollment process for undocumented students.
Photo by Wessam Hazaymeh

"Luckily my admissions counselor who took my application sent me to the correct person in order to reapply for domicile and get in-state tuition," Limon-Amado said.

As part of revisions to admissions' practices, Halloran hopes to ensure staff members have a better understanding of the university's processes for DACA and undocumented students, including the difference between the two classifications. In a few cases, uncertainties regarding a student's legal status have led to some being sent erroneously to the international students office, which Halloran said admissions is trying to prevent in the future.

"That's part of the problem with not having a clear path for undocumented students," Halloran said. "We're trying to make sure it doesn't [happen] going forward."

VCU's review of its practice of not admitting undocumented students comes as the Supreme Court's conservative majority signals it may allow the Trump administration to end the DACA program. In the 2018-19 school year, VCU had the second-highest number of DACA students among four-year colleges at 72. George Mason University had

the highest amount with 267.

The court is expected to reach a final decision no later than June 2020, according to the National Immigration Law Center. If the court sides with the Trump administration, the program would likely be phased out, and current recipients would lose their protections as their two-year statuses began to expire.

Limon-Amado said UndocuRams hopes to see VCU President Michael Rao speak in favor of bills that would guarantee in-state tuition for DACA recipients and undocumented students. DACA recipients qualify for in-state tuition in Virginia thanks to a 2014 letter from Attorney General Mark Herring that gives them the opportunity to establish domicile, but undocumented students don't have the same benefit, and a law would set the policy in stone.

Aside from university support for in-state tuition, other demands from the organization include:

• The establishment of a private scholarship for undocumented and DACA students

• Clarity on the admissions process, including on why immigration officials were involved in the admissions process for one student

• The establishment of a dedicated staff or staff member to handle admissions and enrollment for DACA recipients and undocumented students

• Additional mental health resources for undocumented and DACA students

• Admissions staff and administrators attending a training on how to be an ally for undocumented people, in addition to financial assistance for those giving the training.

The political climate is taxing for undocumented students and DACA recipients, Limon-Amado said, making the potential revision on VCU's enrollment policy a welcome change.

"This is a step forward to actually having a more inclusive university for students regardless of immigration status," Limon-Amado said.

DACA students enrolled at public four-year institutions, 2018-19

VCU, which is considering allowing enrollment for undocumented students, has the second-highest number of DACA students among four-year colleges in Virginia.

George Mason: 267

James Madison University: 24

University of Mary Washington: 7

University of Virginia: 25

Virginia Commonwealth University: 72

Longwood University: 2

William and Mary: 24

Christopher Newport University: 2

Radford University: 13

Old Dominion University: 18

Statewide total: 454

Source: State Council of Higher Education in Virginia, Information compiled by Georgia Geen, Infographic by Kamryn Gillham