COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF GENERAL STUDIES STUDENT COUNCIL

GSSC

NOVEMBER 21ST, 2023

FALL 2023 COURSE SEARCH & REGISTRATION REFORM STATEMENT

We, the members of the General Studies Student Council, write to the University Senate, Faculty of Arts & Sciences, Columbia University Information Technology, Office of the University Registrar, and wider university administration to encourage the University to adopt a new course search platform to replace the current Vergil course-search system in order to facilitate much-needed improvements to registration and enrollment for Columbia undergraduates.

Across the 4 undergraduate Schools at Columbia, as well as at our affiliate institutions, the strain on course sizes, offerings, and waitlists continues to mount. Every semester, students report facing an increasingly more difficult set of decisions to enroll in classes, often getting desperate and enrolling solely on the minimal information that is made available to them. The decisions students make for classes are largely uninformed, as access to course information is severely limited and frequently unavailable.

In this statement, GSSC focuses on 3 main issues and provides a suggested solution to these issues. Three substantial limitations of the Vergil system are the following:
1. Disorganized, unintuitive, and difficult-to-navigate course search Vergil platform
2. Inconsistent and unorganized course reviews displayed on Vergil
3. Lack of access to course syllabi and booklists for courses through Vergil

With the newly-updated Vergil this semester, these three fundamental issues have not been properly addressed by the university administration. When using the current Vergil system, classes are still difficult to find by name, and displayed results are in a completely disorganized and illogical order. Reviews for courses and professors are not accessible for many classes, and, for classes that do have reviews, the data is not and cannot be aggregated due to its PDF nature. Furthermore, the reviews are presented in a way that effectively gives students qualitative and quantitative information about their course experience. Finally, syllabi are rarely available for any classes throughout the registration process. Not only does this prohibit students from obtaining proper information about their class, assessments, course goals, and other related information, but it also denies students the opportunity to obtain booklists, which are a New York State legal requirement for college courses, and learn about the waitlist process for each course.

We believe, with the encouragement and support of faculty and administration, that syllabi, once prepared and uploaded at the professor's discretion, should be readily available to <u>all Columbia students</u> up through and including the Change of Program Period ("Add/Drop" or "Shopping

Period"), a standard that our peer institutions exceed and that we fall behind on. The newly-updated Vergil system has implied greater access to course syllabi, and, after repeatedly discussing with numerous faculty members that syllabi are not accessible despite them believing syllabi were always accessible, GSSC decided to test the new Vergil's increased access to course syllabi. In a survey of 575 Fall 2023 lecture courses and 513 Spring 2024 lecture courses, of which all lecture courses in the Arts & Sciences were included, as well as lecture courses required by the Columbia College and School of General Studies majors, the following data was collected:

- For Fall 2023, of the **575 courses surveyed,** only **5.04% (29)** of classes have a booklist, and **5.56% (32)** of classes have a syllabus on Vergil
- For Spring 2024, of the **513 courses surveyed**, only **1.34% (7)** of classes have a booklist, and **1.17% (6)** of classes have a syllabus on Vergil

As evidenced by our research, student feedback, and the increased frustrations that students have had during the registration period, GSSC fundamentally believes that a new system needs to be adopted by the university so that the access to academic information -allowing for informed course decisions- can be improved. In this regard, Columbia is far behind our peer Ivy League institutions, and we must treat these services as vital to the primary purpose of the University: *as a site of education*.

Through our research into better systems adopted by other universities, GSSC strongly encourages the University to adopt the CourseLeaf PATH Registration system, used by the University of Pennsylvania, Brown University, and Yale University. This system works seamlessly to solve all 3 of the aforementioned issues Columbia undergraduate education is facing and can be tested out through the following link to Brown's course search website. CourseLeaf not only provides a service to tackle the issues the University is currently facing, but Columbia College and the School of General Studies already contract with CourseLeaf to create the Columbia College and School of General Studies academic bulletins.

By investing in a new platform for course search, course review analytics, and syllabi access, the University will help resolve some of the ever-growing stress on the registration and waitlist system. Investment in an improved system will be for the betterment of students, advisors, and faculty, who will all benefit from increased transparency and access to academic information befitting of a world-class institution.

Respectfully,
The General Studies Student Council, 2023-2024