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March 14, 2024

Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost  
The University of Texas at Austin  
110 Inner Campus Dr.  
STOP G1000  
Austin, Texas  
78712-1701

Dear Provost Sharon L. Wood,

We, the undersigned students of the Computer & Data Science Online (CDSO) program, are writing to express our deep concern and disappointment regarding the recent decision to separate online students from our on-campus peers at the upcoming convocation hosted by The Graduate School (GS). For reasons outlined below, we strongly believe this decision undermines the significance of our academic achievements, and deviates from the promises made by the university in official materials.

Convocation is a pivotal moment for all graduates, serving as a celebration of our dedication and perseverance over multiple years. The choice to relocate online students to a separate, lesser ceremony in Welch Hall, as opposed to the Bass Concert Hall with the other graduating students of The Graduate School, signifies that the university does not equally value our graduation experience.

This shift contradicts the expectations set by prior communications from CDSO administration and the CDSO Student Handbooks issued by the university. The handbook affirms the inclusivity of all graduates in The Graduate School convocation, without distinction of mode of study, online or not. It is difficult to motivate this as a logistical issue; the Bass Concert Hall boasts a maximum occupancy of 2900, while we have been informed that not even 100 CDSO students have confirmed their attendance to the convocation, a small fraction of the GS graduating body.

Furthermore, the notification of this policy change was delivered with insufficient notice, merely two months before the convocation ceremony. Many of us have already made significant preparations, including purchasing regalia, securing travel arrangements, and inviting family members to witness this milestone. The abrupt redirection to a lesser venue is not only inconvenient but also places us in a position of embarrassment and frustration before our loved ones.

Separating online students sends a detrimental message about the university's perception of its online programs, insinuating that our degrees are less significant and that we as online

students are not fully integrated members of the graduate community. This is in stark contrast to similar online degrees at other reputable institutions, such as Georgia Tech OMSCS, which explicitly welcome all graduates to participate in unified ceremonies. The fallout of this recent decision has inflicted significant reputational damage to the program on social media. Numerous prospective students have since mentioned reconsidering their applications to UT CDSO, calling out the convocation as an indicator for future changes that further distance the programs from residential equivalents.

The lack of transparency, the lack of timeliness, and the evasiveness displayed by the administration regarding this matter has not helped build trust. As graduate students, we expect the administration to engage with us openly and honestly. Issues such as a lack of seating for a large cohort are inevitable and understandable, but we expect the administration to engage with us on matters such as these, especially with regards to important topics such as graduation. Moreover, we expect all students within their respective colleges to be treated equally; capacity issues should be fairly resolved by field of study, not mode of study.

In light of the above, we respectfully request either:

1. a total reversal of the decision to separate online students from The Graduate School convocation, or
2. the separation of all graduates from the College of Natural Sciences (CNS), online or not, to their own convocation.

We urge the administration to honor the commitments previously made to us, allowing all graduates to celebrate their achievements together, irrespective of their residency. Our request is not only for the benefit of the current graduating class but also to uphold the integrity and reputation of the university for future cohorts.

We appreciate your prompt attention to this matter and look forward to a positive resolution that respects the achievements of all graduates, equally.

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J	REDACTED	MSAI
E	REDACTED	MSDS
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Full Name	Email Address	Program
M	REDACTED	MSAI
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J	REDACTED	MSCS
S	REDACTED	MSDS
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