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Community, Solidarity, and Collective Power: The Role of Graduate Student Organizations and Graduate Worker Unions

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Introduction

This encyclopedia is a compendium on how to survive and thrive in graduate school. In this section, we turn to the relationship between you and your graduate school as an employer, organization, and community. We first discuss the role of graduate unions, before discussing governance at the department and university level. We focus especially on how you can make change within your graduate program and university. Although this is drawn from our own experiences as graduate students and employees in US PhD programs, we believe it can still be of interest to those outside the United States.

Graduate Unions: What Your Union Can Do for You

A significant portion of the graduate school experience is the production of labor for money, whether as a teaching assistant, solo instructor, research assistant, or other role. In the United States, admission offers to PhD programs will generally include a description of the type of work to be expected, as well as the types and amount of support the admittee can expect to receive. When considering which graduate school to attend, we highly encourage applicants to be mindful of what labor will be expected, in what form, and at what rate of pay and benefits (see also chapters 2 and 4 on the admissions and application processes). The stress of graduate school is not just the amount of work as a student, but often has more to do with basic existence, high demands both in academics and labor, and inconsistent respect from supervisors and the institution, combined with low pay and poor benefits.

As a result of increasingly poor working conditions, graduate workers have formed *unions* to collectively advocate for themselves. The earliest unionization movement occurred at the University of California, Berkeley in 1965 as part of the larger Free Speech Movement, and in 1969, the University of Wisconsin–Madison became the first higher education institution to voluntarily recognize its graduate student union, the Teaching Assistants' Association (Singh et al. 2006). In 2016, the National Labor Relations Board overturned its 2004 decision and ruled that graduate workers at private universities also have the right to unionize (NLRB 2016). As of 2021, there are some 50 recognized graduate worker unions in the United States, including 12 at private universities, along with several other unionization movements that have not yet been recognized (GAU 2021; Chang and Xu 2021).

Graduate workers unionize for several interrelated reasons. First, the temporary nature of graduate employment can lead to employers not seeing graduate worker issues as worth seriously addressing.

Previous research has identified both the corporatization of the university setting, and the rapid expansion of the use of temporary labor, as predictors of graduate worker unionization (Wickens 2008; Dixon, Tope, and Van Dyke 2008). Individual workers come and go with time, and so the temptation for supervisors is to attempt to alleviate issues (or shut down the complainers) at the individual level, in spite of the possibility that that issue may be affecting many workers. Second, an individual graduate worker's capacity to advocate for themselves within the university bureaucracy is affected by how complex university policies and procedures tend to be. The time commitment necessary to understand how to file a complaint, the process by which that complaint might be adjudicated, and the energy needed to engage that dispute can easily be prohibitive (Lafer 2003). Additionally, graduate workers are also simultaneously graduate students, and so the demands of a student's curriculum are significant. Moreover, the person who may be the cause of a labor issue may also be the person grading the complainant's papers or writing letters of recommendation! Graduate worker unionization thus interacts with the university as an institution both in confronting the institution's treatment of labor, but also potentially moderating the relationship between faculty and students (Julius and Gumpert 2002, cf. Hewitt 2000; Rogers, Eaton, and Voos 2013).

The prospect of union activity is something that universities generally work to avoid and may be willing to spend significant resources to prevent. This is because unions *work*: unionized graduate workers receive better pay, more academic freedom, and a higher level of personal and professional actualization (Rogers, Eaton, and Voos 2013; Kroeger et al. 2018). The permanent presence of a collective organization for workers and students who are often otherwise isolated from each other is essential to correcting issues and improving workers' lives. At a fundamental level, this formation of community can break through the isolation of graduate school and make workers aware that their concerns may not be one-offs or unique to them.

The second way unions alleviate difficult conditions is through a *contract*. Through a contract, the union becomes the recognized party empowered to bargain on behalf of graduate workers, which may include teaching assistants, research assistants, graduate student lecturers, hourly graders, or some combination. Insufficient pay, improper health insurance, or unclear, murky, or unfair disciplinary policies are common issues that graduate worker unions agitate against (Wickens 2008, Dixon, Tope, and Van Dyke 2008). The bargaining process provides the opportunity to workers to highlight the issues at hand and produce a binding agreement. The stability of the clarified terms of labor that is set down in a contract runs counter to the academic industry's preference for contingent labor, particularly graduate labor (Bousquet 2001, Lafer 2003). If anything, this stability is more valuable than the specific provisions within the contract, as this works to prevent disputes about the meaning of the terms of employment, or unequal treatment between similarly placed workers.

What You Can Do for Your Union

Unions do not just “exist” without the work of committed union volunteers. While the time constraints of graduate school are demanding, and the political situation at your workplace may initially discourage you from active participation, we want to highlight some of the benefits to both you and your fellow workers in serving as a union volunteer, however much or little time you can commit.

To begin, the existence of a union on a campus (or not) is a reflection of several things. Has there been previous organizing—in other words, have grad workers gotten together, talked about their shared struggles, and agreed to collaboratively agitate for solutions? If there is no union, is there a sense of dissatisfaction with workplace conditions that is common to graduate students? If a union is in place, what work does it do, and what work needs to be done? A union may also have suffered from turnover: on average, the unit of grad workers at a university will turn over completely within five to seven years. Thus, the imperative of union members, and particularly union leaders, is not just the work of the day, but also of preparing the next generation.

Activists, sometimes referred to as “rank and file” members, are the core of the union or organizing effort. These members serve in a multitude of roles, such as speaking with fellow workers about the union, volunteering time to whatever community outreach the union engages in or participating in

demonstrations or advocacy to university or political officials. Nearly all unions will charge activists membership dues. These dues fund the union's activities, and depending on the structure of the union, may also help with the costs incurred by either a state federation or a national federation. Dues also provide the resources necessary to hire professional staff to support your effort, and may range as far as legal support in the event the union has a dispute with the employer, as well as covering lost pay after a strike.

Political Science Graduate Students and Unions

The political science graduate student brings special skills to the union that may be quite valuable. Perhaps you've worked on political campaigns in the past or are in the weeds with understanding how legislatures write policies. Whatever your experience or line of research, the way that political scientists are taught to think lends itself well to organizing, both externally and internally.

The union must be able to support itself financially, and so the perennial task of holding conversations with current and prospective members is a must. If you have experience with door-knocking campaigns, especially organizing them (cutting turf, training volunteers, etc.), you may find this task rewarding.

Similarly, for students of legislative or executive politics, each union will require members who are able to navigate bureaucracy, understand how and why actors in the university act and react as they do, and work to advance the interests of graduate workers by engaging in the political process, or through contract negotiations. Knowledge of Robert's Rules is a plus, and the opportunity to learn and apply that knowledge may be appealing to students of legislative politics. Others may find a conciliatory role a good use of time. Service as a steward will place you in contact with workers in need and allow you to serve the needs of the union in defending workers and the contract. This work may also help you feel that you are "doing something" practical, especially if your day-to-day research is more abstract in nature.

Strong leadership, the tolerance and skill to deal with the frustrations of resistance to progress, and the creativity and resourcefulness to "figure it out" are all skills worth developing in graduate school, and union leadership service will teach these skills with hard-earned experience.

Graduate Student Organizations

Whereas unions bring together graduate workers from across the university, departmental graduate student organizations (GSOs) can advocate specifically for political science grads. GSOs are created by political science students to represent themselves within the university-wide graduate student association/senate/council. They can also be created in order to distribute funds from the university to individuals within their respective program. Chartered organizations with affiliation to the university's graduate student senate usually receive a distributed stipend based on the number of graduate students enrolled in the respective department. These funds can then be given to individuals or used by the student group. Chartered associations are also able to access grants and other sources of money that the university or graduate student council reserves for those specific groups. One author's departmental association had been a formally chartered organization for years and used university funds accumulated during that time to redistribute amongst students in emergency need during the pandemic.

Departmental associations can also be a way to raise concerns with faculty. The extent that these concerns will be heard depends on how formal the association is. Just because a departmental association is currently relatively weak does not mean that it cannot become more important in the future. For one of the authors, their departmental association changed from a group with no formal role in the department beyond organizing parties to a group that fought for graduate student representation on department level committees over the course of several years. This level of representation is important, because program decisions affecting graduate students should involve the input of those who will be directly affected.

Graduate student associations, specifically at the department level, may also be used to create a sense of community within a department. Graduate school can be a period of intense solitude, and this is especially true for the field of political science, where students do not have the opportunity to form connections with their peers within labs (Brandes 2006). In our own experience, departmental graduate

associations have held semi-regular events of varying levels of formality, which can be a great way to meet people outside of your cohort. University-wide graduate student groups hold similar social events as well, although they tend to be more formal.

Departmental associations vary considerably between universities and programs. Though many are chartered organizations, as described above, others may be informal groupings of students within a department with no constitution or governing rules outside of created norms. The way they operate depends on both student needs and capacity. Some organizations may choose to host panels in order to share knowledge on publishing (see also chapters 24 and 25) or comprehensive exam studying (see also chapter 12), while others may focus on community-building through departmental socials and other more informal events. These can be important for morale in the department and are a good way to build networks with peers (see also chapter 7).

University Governing Bodies

Graduate students may also have the opportunity to sit on university governing bodies. It is common for universities to have some general governing body, often referred to as a senate or a council, to represent faculty (and sometimes staff) interests in the governance of the university. The authority of university councils varies significantly across institutions, and they are chiefly involved in making academic decisions. As policies engage more closely with budgetary decisions, university senate authority tends to shrink (Tiede 2021).

The final decision-making authority within universities rests not with senior administrators but instead with a governing board of trustees. These trustees will be the final decision-maker in any major financial decisions and will hire and fire the university president. For public universities, boards can be made up of individuals elected by alumni, elected by state residents, appointed by governors, or selected by state legislators. Boards sometimes have student representatives, including graduate students. While this can often be a role of title rather than substance, it is one way of obtaining direct contact and discussion with an administrative board. (For a larger discussion about academic administration, see chapter 8.)

What Are You Expecting to Get or Change?

There are a number of reasons one would choose to get involved with either a GSO or a union. If you are aiming to complete some university service, getting involved with the campus graduate senate would be to your benefit. If you want to help distribute university funds to yourself and your peers, your departmental graduate student association is where you should get involved. If, however, your interests lie in creating substantive change within the university—for example, wage raises or institutional changes for title IX reporting—the best way to utilize your time and energy is within a graduate worker union.

Friendship and comradery are often overlooked as a need in graduate school, but the isolation and self-depreciation that come with graduate degree programs make friends a necessity (for more information about overcoming academic isolation, see chapter 63). Both unions and GSOs are great ways to make connections with other students who are most likely going through the same trials and tribulations that you are experiencing. While departmental graduate associations may only connect you with students from your own program, graduate worker unions have members from different departments across campus. Additionally, the sense of comradery that you form within a union is hard to find elsewhere.

Activist Backlash

Though there are many benefits to joining a union or GSO, activism is not without its risks. Despite depictions in popular media, universities remain largely neoliberal institutions and as such do not take kindly to attempts at structural change. Graduate students involved in on-campus activism may be labeled as “difficult,” “distracted from their research,” or “not team players.” Of course, the very concerns that graduate student activists fight for—a living wage, for example—are prerequisites to doing one’s best

work in other areas of the academy. Academics in secure positions may nevertheless feel unsettled by graduate students who challenge the individualized narrative of academia by working together. Faculty who have spent decades of their lives at an institution often feel a linked fate with that institution; thus, even faculty with histories of activism may not be supportive of your activism.

Costs can be especially high for non-cisgender male, non-white, and/or non-United States citizen graduate students. These can range from faculty disapproval to legal action by a student's home country for joining a union or participating in certain kinds of protest, and unions must take these possibilities seriously and prioritize protections for the most vulnerable. Nevertheless, historically excluded students tend to be at the forefront of activist efforts—after all, it is their well-being that is most directly on the line (for more discussions about concerns for minoritized and underrepresented groups, see chapters 54–61). For such students wanting to get more involved, we encourage cultivating community beyond one's home department and university. Despite appearances, many corners of the discipline are activist-oriented and can be found on Twitter and through more specialized conferences on race, ethnicity, and politics; gender; Marxism; and critical and postcolonial studies (see also chapters 26 and 27 on using academic Twitter and chapter 21 on attending conferences). Support from mentors and allies in the wider discipline can also protect activists who face backlash on their own campuses; unfortunately, the degree to which one's activism is tolerated may be contingent upon being perceived as a successful scholar.

Graduate students may further hear that mentioning their activism on the academic job market will hurt their chances. One of the authors found, to the contrary, that their activism helped them get interviews at liberal arts and community colleges, where wider campus or community involvement is expected. At the same time, they were branded a nuisance in their own department and written off by some faculty who could have been helpful in their job search. Other graduate students have faced far more serious backlash: one student-activist was even forced out of their program.¹ Activism is safer in numbers, but for individual tasks like going on the job market, whether or not to mention one's activism is a personal choice that comes at a potentially high cost (for additional information about the job market, see chapter 34). We encourage departments to see activism as a strength: student-activists bring invaluable experience in collective advocacy for policies that improve working conditions for all academics.

Conclusion

Graduate school is an isolating endeavor. Increasing focus on individual success, with ever-more-unrealistic standards for publications and grants achieved before a graduate student completes their training, can lead grads to feel that any challenges or roadblocks they face are their own fault. Graduate worker unions and graduate student organizations, in contrast, subvert this narrative by providing support and empowerment, underscoring that problems that appear personal are often caused by exploitative structures that treat grads as automatons rather than full humans with full lives. In this sense, unions and GSOs subvert a key narrative of the graduate school experience: that it must be pursued and completed alone.

Resources

Below we share a number of resources for those wishing to learn more about graduate worker organizing in the United States:

National associations

- Coalition of Student Employee Unions (CSEU) <https://www.cseu-csee.org>
- National Association of Graduate-Professional Students (NAGPS) <http://nagps.org>

National unions with locals representing graduate employees

- American Association of University Professors (AAUP) <https://www.aaup.org>
- American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) <https://www.afscme.org>

- American Federation of Teachers (AFT) <https://www.aft.org>
- Communication Workers of America (CWA) <https://cwa-union.org>
- National Education Association (NEA) <https://www.nea.org>
- Service Employees International Union (SEIU) <https://www.seiu.org>
- United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW) <https://uaw.org>
- United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE) <https://www.ueunion.org>
- UNITE HERE <https://unitehere.org>

General labor organizing help

- Labor Notes <https://labornotes.org>
- The Forge <https://forgeorganizing.org>

Endnotes

- 1 We thank this activist for sharing their story anonymously.

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