
GRADUATE STUDENT UNIONIZATION FACULTY BRIEF

DEC. 21, 2022

The purpose of this Faculty Brief is to help faculty understand their rights and responsibilities when discussing unionization with graduate students, to summarize the current support Northwestern provides to graduate students and to discuss some of the potential impacts of unionization and additional key points.

As a starting point, we reiterate that Northwestern deeply values the contributions graduate students make to its research and teaching missions, and we are proud to provide firsthand experiences that serve as excellent preparation for a range of career outcomes. Regardless of the outcome of the upcoming union election, the University remains steadfast in its commitment to support, mentor and prepare graduate students for future success.

A labor union — the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) — filed a petition with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) seeking to represent certain graduate students enrolled in degree programs. Since the petition was filed, the University and the Union have agreed that the appropriate unit includes those enrolled graduate students who are “providing instructional and research services” at the University. Eligible students will vote for or against union representation by secret ballot in an upcoming election scheduled to take place in person on the Evanston and Chicago campuses on January 10 and 11, 2023. Election details may be found [here](#).

DISCUSSING UNIONIZATION

Everyone, faculty included, has the right to discuss their opinions regarding unionization. However, faculty and staff should remember that Threats, Interrogation, Promises and Surveillance (TIPS) are prohibited. You can read more about TIPS on the University’s graduate student unionization [website](#).

No Threats	No Promises
Don’t make explicit or implied threats or treat students differently because they support or oppose a union.	Don’t make explicit or implied promises of good things to come if students vote against union representation.
No Interrogation	No Surveillance
You can listen if students want to talk to you about unionization, and you are free to express your opinions (subject to the TIPS rules), but don’t question students about whether they are for or against unionization.	When students are discussing unionization, don’t eavesdrop.

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CURRENT GRADUATE STUDENT SUPPORT

The minimum (base) annual stipend for PhD students has increased 61% over the past 10 years and falls within the minimum (base) annual stipend of the top 10 private peer institutions based on research conducted by The Graduate School. In addition to Northwestern, this top 10 group includes Stanford, Princeton, Columbia, Brown, MIT, Cornell, Yale, Harvard and Johns Hopkins.

All PhD students currently receive a minimum (base) annual stipend of \$35,196 for a minimum of five years (20 quarters), full tuition scholarship and a subsidy to cover the NU-SHIP annual healthcare premium (an annual value of \$4,698). As of this fiscal year, MFA students also are fully funded when registered full-time in a funded registration. This is a combined benefit of \$39,894, plus the cost of tuition, which is \$74,756 for four quarters. The advanced tuition rate (starting in Year 3) is currently \$18,688 for four quarters. This represents a total investment of \$114,650 per student per year for first- and second-year PhD and MFA students.

In a similar manner, Northwestern's Bienen School of Music provides DMA students with \$7,200-\$9,000 annually depending on degree program and is one of very few universities to guarantee full tuition scholarships with a stipend to all admitted DMA students.

Additional ways The Graduate School supports the needs of graduate students are summarized on the University's graduate student unionization [website](#). They include graduate student childcare grants, paid medical leave of absence and paid parental leaves of absence for funded students, a subsidized U-Pass transit program, complimentary legal services and access to the Office of the Ombudsperson, funding for approximately 40 TGS-affiliated graduate student and postdoctoral organizations, access to English Language Program (ELP) services, more than 20 interdisciplinary graduate assistantships for students to extend their funding and obtain professional development experience, multiple competitive fellowship programs, graduate student research awards and graduate conference travel grants.

POTENTIAL IMPACT

Below are some of the ways a graduate student union could impact the faculty/student relationship. You can read more about the potential impact on the University's graduate student unionization [website](#).

- Financial support for each graduate student could increase, decrease or stay the same.
 - For faculty members who are funding students from their grants, the union negotiation and contract may impact the level of financial support for these students.
 - An increase per student may result in smaller student cohorts; a decrease may result in larger cohorts.

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- Faculty may be limited in their ability to work directly with an underperforming graduate student who is struggling with their teaching or research without a “union steward” present.
- Faculty may be limited in their ability to grant special requests, such as a change or accommodation to the schedule, hours, assignment or other facet of a graduate student’s teaching or research appointment.

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Please encourage all eligible graduate students to vote in the upcoming election.
 - The election outcome is determined by a simple majority of *those who vote*, not the majority among all eligible students.
 - The election outcome will impact all graduate students who fit the bargaining unit definition, regardless of whether or how they voted.
 - Each potential bargaining unit member is free to vote as they choose during the election, regardless of whether or not they previously signed an authorization card expressing support for union representation.
- If a majority of eligible voters cast ballots for union representation, students included in the bargaining unit will not have the opportunity to opt out from representation.
 - These students would be *represented* by the union even if they choose not to *join* the union or pay dues.
 - Unions usually require “non-members” to pay a fee to the union called an “agency fee.”
- Having graduate students represented by a union presents upsides and downsides, knowns and unknowns.
- Please encourage eligible graduate students to read and think critically about the information included on the University’s [website](#) and other sources of information, such as nlrb.gov, and to independently research to reach sound conclusions and make well-informed decisions.
- Faculty members can discuss their opinions, but must avoid threats, interrogations, promises or surveillance.

QUESTIONS?

[Frequently asked questions](#) are posted on the University’s graduate student unionization website. Faculty who have additional questions are encouraged to use this website [form](#). Please include your contact information if you request an individual response.