

Episode 45 – Should I Join My Graduate Student Union?

Welcome to Grad-post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

That's Bayou and Eubie in the background barking at squirrels. They are both card-carrying members of the Squirrel Chaser's Union Local 101. The only union I ever belonged to was the musician's union that allowed me to play in the local municipal band back in high school. Enjoy!

Other than that, graduate student and faculty unions were not really a thing at the institutions I went through, but they are much more common now. As a new graduate student, one of the first decisions you may have to make is whether to join the graduate student union on your campus. For continuing graduate students, you may be facing this same question if you are on stipend for the first time in a unionized workplace. And others of you may be facing questions about whether or not to unionize on your campus. These are all slightly different questions, but let's start with some background on graduate student unions, look at some examples, talk briefly about pros and cons, then conclude with some questions to help you make your decision.

Insofar as background is concerned, an excellent report was just issued by the [National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions](#) that summarizes the current state of graduate student unionization in the United States. I invite you to check out this report for yourself as it contains a lot of interesting information on collective bargaining statistics for more than just graduate student workers. But pulling a few facts from this report helps frame our conversation. As of 2024, there are about 150,000 graduate student workers represented by a union in the United States. That number represents almost 40% of the graduate student employees according to the report, which would put the number of graduate student workers at around 375,000. That number seems low to me – meaning the 40% seems inflated – given that there were nearly six times that many graduate students enrolled in [Fall 2023 according to IPEDS](#), which is the latest report we have. Now, most of those 2.2 million graduate students do not hold assistantships, and the number who do that are classified as “employees” and are thereby eligible for collective bargaining is far smaller. Unfortunately, we don't have good statistics on how many graduate student employees there really are, much less how many graduate students are receiving specifically teaching or research assistantship stipends. We've run into the wall of semantics. Are you a graduate student employee even if your university classifies you as a student? I will stipulate that the number of graduate students who are technically categorized as “employees” by their universities may be as low as 375,000, but I still maintain that the number of graduate students on stipend at any given time is much higher, and the number of graduate students who have been on stipend at some point in their career is even higher. I'm not trying to call out the National Center on Collective Bargaining for inflating percentages, my point is simply that the number of graduate students impacted by unionization is probably much larger than 375,000. But, let's roll with their numbers just to look at some of their other findings that are equally interesting.

The percentage of union-represented graduate student employees is about twice as high at private institutions as public. There are more **total** union-represented graduate students at public institutions, but the corresponding percentage of graduate employee representation is only about 30% according to this report. Where those students are represented across the country is as telling as who is represented. The largest number of collective bargaining units (unions) are found in Massachusetts, New York, Illinois, California, and Oregon – in decreasing order. The list of most unionized graduate students by state is very similar, with one exception: Florida. Why is it interesting that there are around half a dozen collective

bargaining units representing over 10,000 graduate student workers in Florida? Because [Florida is a right-to-work state](#). I'm not going to dig into the legalese on right-to-work laws, but basically right-to-work says that you don't have to belong to the union to work in the unionized workplace. Some view right-to-work laws as anti-union, meaning you're less likely to find unions in right-to-work states, and that is generally true. But there are some notable exceptions for graduate student workers. Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Kansas, and North Carolina are all right-to-work states with graduate student worker unions. Unlike that popular perception, right-to-work laws don't technically prohibit unions. So, if you are at an institution in a right-to-work state and are looking to start a graduate student union, don't let anyone tell you that you can't. If you are **not** in a right-to-work state, then you are much more likely to face a decision to join a graduate student union.

For example, the largest graduate student union in the country is the University of California (UC) system. There, over 36,000 graduate student researchers and teaching assistants are represented by the [United Autoworkers \(UAW\) Local 2865](#). [Union dues are currently 1.44%](#) of the monthly pay, and there is a one-time fee of \$10 to join the union. The UAW also represents graduate employees at [New York University \(NYU\) where their monthly dues are 2% of total compensation](#) for full membership. These two rates represent roughly the lower and upper bounds of current union dues across the country. What does that translate to in real money? Graduate student researcher [monthly rates for a 50% appointment at the University of California at San Diego](#), for example, ranged from \$2,880 to \$4,184 for the 2024-25 academic year. That means a monthly deduction of \$40 - \$60 from their paychecks. What do you get for those dues?

Unions claim responsibility for providing tuition remission, health insurance, protection against workplace harassment, higher wages, and expanded family benefits as a result of their contract negotiations. These are pretty common negotiating points for graduate student workers. It goes without saying that higher wages are better. But benefits like tuition waivers and health insurance are a little more nuanced. Let's look more closely at these two items.

Tuition remission is a huge deal financially. State laws vary widely with respect to tuition waivers – some public institutions can offer them and some cannot because of state statute. Even way back in the mid 1980's, I received a tuition waiver as a senior undergrad for being a teaching assistant in a freshman chemistry class. But the very next year I had to pay tuition as a graduate student teaching assistant at a different institution. Tuition rates were much lower then, but so were stipends. Ironically, the first student employee union in the United States was founded in [1969 at the University of Wisconsin](#), but I was never asked to be a part of it all time I was there. At private institutions, however, tuition has routinely been waived in many disciplines for a long time. It's simply written off to the bottom line. There is growing interest in tuition recovery from grants, but we won't go into that here. For the graduate student, where you go to school – public or private and in which state – is a large driver in what you will pay for tuition, even before the union situation comes into play. It is true that unions can negotiate tuition waivers where none existed before or can bring this existing benefit to a wider category of student workers. But in some instances, tuition waivers may already exist thereby rendering the point moot.

Health insurance is also a big deal, although its importance varies by individual. Some have serious health concerns and would categorize it as the most important factor in choosing a graduate program. Others may still be on their parents' health insurance plans, never see a doctor, or could just care less. None of those are good reasons not to have a good graduate student health insurance plan, so let me tell you a story. When I first became a graduate dean, there were no institutional requirements that health insurance had to be provided to our graduate students. There was a university requirement that all students had to **have** health insurance, either through the university-provided health insurance or through proof of insurance by an outside provider, but there was no obligation to provide a plan option specifically for graduate students

much less pay for it. I heard from graduate students that there were a lot of problems with these policies. First, the university student health plan was expensive – much more expensive than the faculty and staff plan not only because of a smaller group of enrollees but because the faculty and staff plan was progressive – you earn less you pay less – and was subsidized to some extent by the university. The student health plan was a flat premium with minimal coverage. Second, that minimal coverage did not account for the differences in the health needs of graduate students compared to undergraduate students. As I outlined in [Episode 8](#), there is a greater need for mental health counseling in the graduate student population than in the undergrad population. There are also differential needs for pregnant or international students, the percentages of which are both higher at the graduate level than for undergrads. And that doesn't even account for married students who need coverage for their family but couldn't get it through the student plan. And on and on. The first thing I did was establish a health care plan specifically for graduate students and postdocs. That was relatively straight forward and didn't require any special approvals but negotiating that plan was a frustrating and futile experience because premiums for **all** health care plans were rising by 20-30% each year while coverage was being reduced. What I found more effective was to establish university health insurance policies that monetarily benefited graduate students. Working through the faculty governing body for graduate education – the Graduate Council – we instituted a policy that **all** graduate students on stipend - either teaching or research assistantships – had to have 50% of the graduate student health plan premiums paid by the program. Why only 50% and not 100%? It was a compromise. That money had to come from somewhere, and for students on research stipends that meant grant money. Some faculty were not happy that we were cutting into already scarce research funds. There's more about institutional overhead rates and other taxes on grants that we don't need to get into, but suffice it to say that even a 50% contribution was controversial. More on that in a moment. Luckily, enough level-headed faculty saw that it was the right thing to do. I'm happy to say that thanks to the efforts of others, the mandatory health insurance coverage today has worked its way up to 100%, but it may still be zero if we didn't start nearly two decades ago. I tell you that long-winded story to tell you this: you don't necessarily need a union to lobby on your behalf. Despite what Reddit would tell you, not all university administrators and faculty are evil, and they will work with graduate students to improve working conditions where they can. It is true that unions can provide coverage to larger cohorts that carry more leverage and can lead to lower health care premiums, but if you are at an institution without a union in sight, start with your graduate dean. They are there to help you. I would put other benefits like family leave policies, vacation policies, and increased pay in this same category. Changes are possible with the right people in charge.

Whether due to actions by administrators or pressure from a union representative, change comes with a cost. I'm not going to weigh in significantly on the impact of graduate researcher unions on the economics of the research enterprise at universities. As I mentioned earlier, some faculty and administrators like to raise the concern that the money has to come from somewhere and that somewhere is usually research grants. Less money for students on grants means fewer students. At a recent presentation by [Ina Ganguli and Raviv Murcian-Goroff at a National Bureau of Economic Research](#) conference they reported that negotiated wage increases did indeed lead to a reduction in the number of employed graduate students, but that was offset by a decrease in time to degree without a decrease in scholarly production. Regardless of these trade-offs, I say that as a graduate student you shouldn't worry about potential reductions in the number of future positions. The university will only agree to what they can make work and the number of graduate students a program should have depends on more than just the size of research grants. Besides, in today's research funding environment paying graduate students 10% more is hardly the biggest impact on grants or university budgets. It is true that we are entering a time of constrained university resources and that graduate student enrollments will suffer. See Episodes [35](#) and [38](#) for that doom-and-gloom scenario,

but for the here and now graduate students should be able to afford to get their degrees and do so under equitable working conditions.

What I will say, though, is that graduate student workers are somewhat unique in the employment sector. Unlike a worker at an auto assembly plant, you have a dual role as both a consumer and provider of the educational expertise a college or university has to offer. Some call this the role of “trainee.” And those components of being a trainee are not totally unrelated. Your learning experiences in the library or laboratory as a graduate student impact your ability to effectively teach others. And teaching experiences can have positive impacts on graduate students’ research skills development, like self-efficacy. That’s not just my opinion, there are the scholarly works of [Mark Connolly and others at the University of Wisconsin Center for Educational Research](#) and peer-reviewed publications from [Shortlidge and Eddy](#) that prove it. The point is that being a graduate student worker is not just about collecting a paycheck. Yes, you want to be equitably compensated for the work you do and no one should have to work in an oppressive environment. But once those basic needs are satisfied, there are benefits to being a graduate student worker that no union can lobby for on your behalf. Make sure that dual role and the benefits of being a trainee are not being bargained away.

A related issue with the dual-role status of graduate students is that like any other form of campus government, your representation can be subject to high turnover. One benefit of having an established union represent you is the continuity in their higher administration. But you will still want local representatives and those people don’t hang around for more than a couple of years. Campus policies and situations can change as well, so you want representatives who have the ability to convey those needs to the union leadership doing the collective bargaining. The transient nature of graduate student representatives and the disconnect between unions who traditionally represent other industries can be potential difficulties to navigate.

There are certainly graduate employees themselves who have concerns about unionization, both from campuses currently considering unionization and [from those who have had unions for a while](#). Then there is the question as to whether union membership is voluntary or mandatory, and the related issues of who should pay dues: only those who opt in to membership or [all students represented by the union](#). And although the [Reddit contributions on this topic are overwhelmingly in favor of unionization](#) and the benefits they provide, there are a few detractors. The most relevant comment that I see coming in these exchanges is related to the pre-existing inequities in compensation across disciplines. As I’ve noted previously on many occasions, graduate students in STEM fields are more well compensated than graduate students in other fields – particularly the humanities. That means there’s less to be gained for STEM students by unionizing, and the potential cost-benefit analysis can actually tip against unionization if you are paying hundreds of dollars a year in dues for no additional benefits, pay increases, or job security. Should STEM students help their colleagues in the humanities obtain better benefits? Absolutely. But make sure the fine print doesn’t commit you to something you never had to do before – like being required to teach as a condition for your degree as can occur in the humanities and social sciences.

If my narrative today comes across as anti-union, that is absolutely not my intent. I just want to be balanced in how I present the current situation. As one of my dean colleagues put it when I asked how the graduate student union negotiations they just completed went, they said “I learned a lot!” I interpreted this to mean that the dean had a greater appreciation for what graduate students wanted and needed, and how the institution could be responsive to their concerns. Other grad ed leaders have said that unionization has helped them look more closely at how their graduate school operates. But I recognize that not all faculty advisors and university administrators are sympathetic much less responsive to graduate student concerns. In those cases, unions play an important role.

So, if you are a first-year graduate student faced with the option of joining your graduate student worker's union, here are the questions to ask yourself. What do I gain by joining the union? Even if I stand to gain nothing by joining the union, is the union something I want to support for other reasons? Will I face repercussions if I don't join the union, either immediately or down the road? As I've outlined today, the answers to these questions can vary by location, discipline, and stage in your career. Consider your options carefully.

Thank you for joining me today. All of the links provided in my podcasts can be found in the transcript available on my website at grad-post.com. There you'll find additional information and resources to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree.

Whether you belong to a union or not, every degree counts!

Links

<https://research-data.hunter.cuny.edu/ncscbhhep/2024DirectoryofBargainingAgentsandContractsinInstitutionsofHigherEducation.pdf>

<https://uaw2865.org/about-our-union/>

<https://makingabetternyu.org/become-a-member/>

https://grad.ucsd.edu/_images/financial-support/employment/10-01-2024.pdf

<https://criticalgsu.wordpress.com/six-arguments/i-union-will-leave-us-financially-worse-off/>

<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2025/6/26/hgsu-agency-shop-proposal/>

https://www.reddit.com/r/labrats/comments/1c88llg/grad_student_unions_whats_the_benefit/

https://links.imagerelay.com/cdn/2210/ql/bb8ba5ac40984f4fa1121cbe01223940/Building_a_Better_Future_STEM_Faculty.pdf

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0199576>