

Financial and Administrative Policy Committee
Committee on Graduate Studies and Research
Minutes #11
Tuesday, November 22, 2022, 2:00 pm
Meeting held remotely; Zoom meeting ID: 960 6087 3656

Members FAP: David Spanagel (HUA, Chair), Hal Walker (CEAE), Tanja Dominko (BBT, COG Appointee), Rob Dempski (CBC), Kris Sullivan (Associate VP of Academic Affairs), Mike Horan (Executive VP and CFO, *Ex Officio*) arrived at 2:30pm

Members CGSR: David Medich (PH, Chair), Rodica Neamtu (CS), Scarlet Shell (BBT), Yunus Telliel (HUA), Loris Fichera (RBE), Bogdan Vernescu (Vice Provost for Research, *Ex Officio*), Terri Camesano (Dean, Graduate Studies, *Ex Officio*), Khizar Mohammed (RBE, Graduate Student Government appointee)

Guests: Alex Wyglinski (ECE, Associate Dean, Graduate Studies), Mark Richman (AE, Secretary of the Faculty, Melissa Terrio (Executive Director of Graduate Recruitment, Graduate Studies), Nicholas Blank (Director Academic Programs, Undergraduate Studies)

Graduate Workers Union representatives: Abhinav Gandhi (RBE, Graduate Student), Sabine Hahn (BBT, Graduate student), Andrew McReynolds (SSPS, Graduate Student)

Absent FAP: Joe Sarkis (BUS)

Absent CGSR: Sarah Olson (Mathematics)

1. Meeting was called to order at 2:02pm
2. Agenda was approved as distributed
3. FAP Chair Spanagel welcomed representatives of WPI Graduate Workers Union and members of Committee on Graduate Studies and Research.

After brief introductions of all the participants, Sabine Hahn, Andrew McReynolds and Abhinav Gandhi reviewed the timeline and WPI actions since 2020 that led to student workers organizing and culminating with a vote (96% of those voting in favor) in November 2022 to form a bargaining unit (Unit) represented by the United Auto Workers (UAW). UAW represents 100,000 members nationally, 40,000 of them are student workers (University of California System, Harvard and MIT and others). The membership includes Research Assistants (RAs), Teaching Assistants (TAs), Peer Learning Assistants (PLAs) and graduate student hourly workers. WPI Unit has currently 650 members. The graduate student presenters reviewed some of intended and anticipated impacts that collective bargaining will have on their living and working conditions. They outlined the series of actions that will ensue over the coming weeks and months:

- a) Election of a bargaining committee (completed as of today 11/22/2022): Sabine Hahn, Andrew McReynolds, Abhinav Gandhi, Jake Scarponi, and Gabriela Rovi
- b) Identifying bargaining priorities by surveying/consulting with all the Unit members
- c) Negotiate the contract with WPI administration
- d) Members vote whether to accept the contract

The Unit is currently conducting a survey to identify and prioritize concerns that would be proposed for negotiations. Most frequently, concerns relate to wages, wage equity, leave of absence, health insurance benefits, tuition, and working conditions. Each one of these concerns may be negotiated to reflect priorities of different groups of student workers. Currently, graduate student stipends vary across departments and programs and some graduate assistants are compensated for 9 months, others for 12 months, whereas most hourly workers are paid minimum wage. Additional concerns include unreasonable expectations for excessive working hours, low wages, job security that is not related to academic performance, and tuition and fee waivers.

Members of both committees inquired about whether the Unit would seek to negotiate regarding academic conditions for graduate students, such as graduate program requirements (courses, credits, credit distribution...), criteria defining good academic standing, and other program-defined educational requirements. The Unit representatives stated that these are defined and approved by WPI faculty vote and will not be subject to bargaining.

Concerning expectations, the Unit representatives expressed their hope that when requested, WPI administration will be forthcoming and would schedule bargaining meetings in a timely fashion. Depending on the progress of negotiations, some negotiated terms may need to be implemented immediately, while other may require implementation in the next academic year. WPI is legally obligated to bargain with the Unit and once negotiated, working conditions for student workers cannot be changed without consulting with the Unit. If the accepted contract is breached, or if good faith progress toward reaching an agreement is not forthcoming in the first place, collective action may be undertaken by the Unit.

Practical consequences of some negotiated terms may have significant financial impact on the operating budget. Increases in stipends for approximately 170 TAs, for example, from current \$24,000/year could require an amount in excess of a million dollars, depending on the negotiated contract terms. Similarly, negotiated terms for RAs may impact the operating budget if wages are negotiated at rates higher than allowed by federal funding agency guidelines (NIH, DoD, NSF). While federal agencies have been incrementally raising stipend limits, there is still a great disparity between different funding opportunities within the same agency; some still not exceeding the minimum wage.

Members inquired about how the Unit will determine reasonableness of requested changes and recommended that it explore benchmarking with similar institutions. The representatives described that there are tools that are currently used by MIT, e.g. a living wage calculator, that considers local and regional cost of living in addition to wages competitive with peer institutions.

Members of both committees thanked the student representatives for their efforts and congratulated them for their accomplishment and for their professionalism in undertaking the challenge. The student representatives thanked faculty for their support and willingness to continue these discussions as negotiations get underway.

4. The meeting was adjourned at 2:58pm.

Respectfully,

Tanja Dominko
FAP, Secretary