

**STANDARDS  
OF GOOD PRACTICE  
IN THE EMPLOYMENT  
OF GRADUATE  
EMPLOYEES**

# **RECOGNITION & RESPECT**



*A Union of Professionals*

**AFT Higher Education**

## **AFT HIGHER EDUCATION**

A Division of the American Federation of Teachers

**Sandra Feldman**, President

**Edward J. McElroy**, Secretary-Treasurer

**Nat LaCour**, Executive Vice President

## **HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAM AND POLICY COUNCIL**

Chair: **William E. Scheuerman**, AFT Vice President, United University Professions, State University of New York

Vice Chair: **Norman Swenson**, AFT Vice President, Cook County College Teachers Union

**Barbara Bowen**, AFT Vice President, Professional Staff Congress, City University of New York

**Maureen Dinnen**, AFT Vice President, Florida Education Association

**Jason Blank**, Rhode Island College Chapter/AFT

**Ora James Bouey**, United University Professions, SUNY Stony Brook

**Bob Congdon**, Alaska Community Colleges Federation of Teachers

**William Cutler**, Temple Association of University Professionals

**Daniel Georgianna**, University of Massachusetts Faculty Federation

**Martin Hittelman**, California Federation of Teachers Community College Council

**Susan Kaufman**, University Professionals of Illinois

**John McDonald**, Henry Ford Community College Federation of Teachers

**Derryn Moten**, Alabama State University Faculty-Staff Alliance

**Alyssa Picard**, Graduate Employees' Organization, University of Michigan

**Mark Richard**, United Faculty of Miami-Dade Community College

**Karen Schermerhorn**, Faculty and Staff Federation of the Community College of Philadelphia

**Edward Schones**, United Technical College Educators

**Sandra Schroeder**, AFT Washington

**Raymond Spoto**, The Association of University of Wisconsin Professionals

**Louis Stollar**, United College Employees of the Fashion Institute of Technology

**Donna Swanson-Hurtado**, Albuquerque Technical-Vocational Institute Faculty Federation

**Nicholas Yovnello**, Council of New Jersey State College Locals

## **STAFF**

**Lawrence N. Gold**, AFT Higher Education, Director

**Craig P. Smith**, AFT Higher Education, Associate Director

**Lindsay Albert**, AFT Higher Education, Senior Associate

**Annette Licitra**, AFT Editorial, Copyeditor

**The American Federation of Teachers**

**June 2004**

**STANDARDS  
OF GOOD PRACTICE  
IN THE EMPLOYMENT  
OF GRADUATE  
EMPLOYEES**

**RECOGNITION  
& RESPECT**



Copyright © AFT 2004. Permission is hereby granted to reproduce and distribute copies of this work for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that copies are distributed at or below cost, and that the author, source and copyright notice are included on each copy.



# Summary of Standards of Good Practice

## *SETTING STANDARDS FOR COMPENSATION*

1. Graduate employees should be paid a fair salary that covers their school and living expenses.
2. Graduate employees should receive full tuition waivers and not be required to pay student fees for academic terms in which they are working. Additionally, if graduate employees have worked a complete academic year, institutions should waive tuition and fees for the subsequent summer term.
3. Employment expectations should be clearly delineated to ensure that all work completed by graduate employees is compensated.
4. Compensation should be timely. Institutions should develop systems that allow graduate employees to be paid, at a minimum, within the first month of employment.
5. Graduate employees should receive full healthcare benefits with minimum, if any, employee contribution. Graduate employees who work the full academic year (fall and spring) should receive year-round coverage.
6. Graduate employees should receive proportional retirement benefits, with contributions beginning reasonably soon after the graduate employee begins working at an institution. Contribution and vesting options should make sense given the salaries, responsibilities, and typical time of stay for graduate employees at particular institutions.
7. Graduate employees should have access to long-term disability and life insurance.
8. Institutions should provide childcare options for graduate employees whenever work requires them to be on campus.

## *ESTABLISHING FAIR EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES*

1. All employment practices should be subject to guidelines for nondiscrimination set forth by equal employment opportunity guidelines, and should be subject to review through the appropriate due process and grievance procedures.
2. Institutions should have clear and rational hiring practices for graduate employees including a) a reasonable posting system; b) adequate time for graduate employees to apply for open positions; c) clear job criteria and selection processes; and d) notification of appointments early enough before a term begins so that graduate employees have sufficient time to prepare.
3. Institutions should clearly define the workload expectations for graduate employees by department and provide a mechanism for compensating work beyond that maximum.
4. Clear lines of supervision should be established for graduate employees and routine and fair evaluations should be conducted.
5. A probationary period should be established for graduate employees and after that period is passed, graduate employees should achieve some form of job security. Graduate students make a multi-year commitment when they enroll in a program of study. As employees, they should receive the same commitment from the institution.
6. Institutions should not reclassify graduate employees as adjunct faculty members as a means of moving them out from under the protections of a collective bargaining contract.

## ***PROMOTING STANDARDS OF PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND SUPPORT***

1. Institutions should provide a substantive, paid orientation for all new graduate employees prior to the beginning of their assignment.
2. Institutions should provide English as a Second Language training for students accepted into a program who require or request such training. This training should be paid as well. English language competency at the end of such training should be evaluated by someone trained to make a fair assessment.
3. In addition to initial orientations, institutions should provide ongoing training and professional development opportunities for graduate employees, particularly during probationary periods. Graduate employees should be provided with a variety of training and mentoring opportunities as they develop their instructional skills.
4. Graduate employees should have access to administrative and technological support services necessary for the fulfillment of their responsibilities as well as to adequate supplies, library and other campus privileges.
5. In instances where graduate employees are involved in distance education, they should receive adequate training for which they are compensated, have sufficient preparation time, and have input into course design.
6. Graduate employees who have full responsibility for courses or discussion sections should enjoy the same academic freedom as other instructors and faculty, as well as full control of the grading for those courses and sections.
7. The intellectual property of a graduate employee should remain solely with that employee.
8. Graduate employees who have passed probation should be given the opportunity to serve on department and institutional committees.

## ***ENSURING FULL RIGHTS FOR GRADUATE EMPLOYEES IN THEIR UNION***

1. National unions should commit to organizing graduate employees along with all other aspects of the academic workforce, and be prepared for long-term, hard-fought organizing campaigns. Graduate employees who seek to build a union that represents their interests need to be prepared for such an effort, and national unions must be prepared to invest enough time and resources to support a campaign from first contact through first contract.
2. Faculty and professional staff unions on campuses where graduate employees are unorganized should encourage unionization and assist graduate employees in that effort.
3. Where graduate employees are members of a local union that includes other higher education employees, graduate employees must have full voting rights on all union matters, including the election of officers and the ratification of contracts. This policy also should be reflected at the state and national levels of the union.
4. Given the modest compensation graduate employees receive for their work and the simultaneous need for a local union to raise enough dues to sustain the local, dues should be set at an appropriate level to support the union's needs while taking into account the economic situation of most graduate employees.
5. Graduate employees have the right to expect their union at every level to advocate for the implementation of the standards outlined in this report.

# Introduction

*“Given our status as university instructors, graduate employees deserve to be treated with the dignity and respect that is our due. Because we have a union, we have been able to ensure that our work is adequately compensated, our jobs protected, our rights respected, and our voices heard.”*

**Chris Goff, Past president, Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation,  
University of Oregon**

*“I used to think graduate students were apprentices learning scholarship and not employees in the normal sense of the word. But over the last 20 years or so, we have turned graduate students into a very significant and very underpaid part of the academic workforce.”*

**Clara Lovett, President, American Association for Higher Education**

## Graduate Employees and the Academic Staffing Crisis

The trend in higher education of replacing full-time, tenure-track faculty with part-time/adjunct and other nontenure-track faculty is well documented. The most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that a large proportion (44 percent) of the approximately one million faculty are not in full-time positions and that the majority of faculty (62 percent) are neither tenured nor on the tenure track.

This picture is incomplete, however, as it does not include another growing component of the instructional workforce: graduate teaching and research assistants. In the same year as the above data were reported, approximately 260,000 teaching and research assistants were “employed on a part-time basis for the primary purpose of assisting in classroom or laboratory instruction or in the conduct of research.”<sup>1</sup> With the addition of this group, the total instructional workforce in the United States is just over 1.3 million employees with the following breakdown:

Table 1. Total postsecondary instructional workforce, by employment type

Category	Number	Percent of total
Full-time tenure/tenure-track faculty	405,805	30
Full-time nontenure-track faculty	198,787	15
Part-time/adjunct faculty	468,890	35
Graduate employees	259,567	20
Total	1,333,049	100

US Department of Education, NCES: *Fall Staff Survey*

Some people, however, argue that graduate teaching and research assistants should not be considered employees. Those putting forward such arguments, most notably university administrators and trustees, contend that the teaching and research that graduate students do should be considered training and a part of their development as students. This argument is the basis for several ongoing legal challenges against graduate employee unions (who have fairly won union recognition elections or the right to elections) by institutional administrations and trustees (who are disputing the graduate employees' right to organize).

These claims continue despite the fact that both federal and state entities have recognized graduate teaching and research assistants as employees. For example, the U.S. Department of Education's definition of this group indicates that teaching and research assistants are distinct because they are "employed." In addition, state labor boards have repeatedly recognized the rights of graduate employees to organize a union under the protection of state statutes. More recently, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) also has come to the same conclusion for private institutions of higher education, although elite private research institutions continue to pour untold amounts of money into the appeal process to fight graduate employee unionization at the NLRB and in the courts.

Beyond the legal and institutional definitions, the argument that graduate teaching and research assistants are students, not employees, and that their work is training as part of their student experience is problematic on at least two levels. First, graduate employees are responsible for a critical university function: undergraduate education. To suggest that they are not qualified to teach courses, run discussion groups, lead labs, etc.—that is, that they are untrained apprentices who should not be considered employees—is both demeaning and contradictory. Institutions want graduate teaching and research assistants to be valued employees when it comes to undergraduate education, but want them to be students when it comes to unionization. Second, the notion that employees learn on the job should not affect their employee status. There is no doubt that graduate employees develop as better teachers and researchers while working for colleges and uni-

versities. This should be true of any employee in a new position. All employees should be offered mentoring, training and professional development to allow them to develop whether they are full- or part-time,

brand new to the profession or experienced. However, they are still considered employees from the moment they begin providing a service to an employer in exchange for wages.

Ultimately, what perhaps is most telling is that if graduate employees did not do the teaching and other work they do for universities, those institutions would necessarily have to hire more part-time or full-time faculty to cover courses, discussion sections and labs that graduate employees currently cover. No one disputes the fact that faculty are employees. To suggest that one person doing a job is an employee while another person doing the same job is not an employee is simply untenable.

Establishing that graduate employees are, in fact, employees is only one fight in the larger struggle, since graduate employees make up a significant portion of the new instructional labor force in higher education that is largely contingent, underpaid, and professionally marginalized. Graduate employees, in particular, are penalized twice in this system. First they are exploited in their current jobs, carrying a significant portion of the undergraduate instructional load for minimal compensation and recognition. Second, if they survive in that system and complete a degree program, they graduate only to find a shrinking number of good employment opportunities in their chosen profession as faculty. They can move from the position of graduate employee to contingent faculty member, but fewer and fewer are able to attain a full-time, tenure-track faculty position.

AFT believes that systemic reform is required

---

Graduate employees need to be fully supported as they carry out their important duties as instructors, discussion leaders, and researchers.

---

in the face of this academic staffing crisis. First, we need to return to a staffing model based on a corps of full-time, tenured faculty who have the protections of academic freedom and a full voice in decision-making at our institutions of higher education. This is the structure that our renowned system of higher education was built on, and it is the structure that must be restored. Second, graduate employees need to be fully supported as they carry out their important duties as instructors, discussion leaders, and researchers and as they progress toward faculty positions. They should not have to worry about covering their institutional and living expenses while working toward their degree. Unfortunately, faculty hiring trends and the treatment of graduate employees do not reflect a similar commitment to these standards at institutions of higher education in this country.

## The Growth of Graduate Employee Labor

The number of graduate employees has grown steadily over the past decade. As Table 1 shows, the number of graduate employees in 2001 was nearly 260,000. This represents a 29 percent increase in the number of graduate employees since 1993. One explanation could be increasing undergraduate enrollments. Another could be large numbers of full-time faculty retiring. Both of these trends could create a demand for more faculty, resulting in more graduate students working toward faculty status and therefore the need for more assistantships to support those graduate students. Unfortunately, the data do not support either explanation. The percentage of full-time faculty with tenure or on tenure track has, in fact, decreased by 5 percent since 1993 rather than increased to meet enrollment demands. Another telling statistic is that the

number of new full-time faculty positions filled over the last two decades has not kept pace with the number of Ph.D.s awarded. This fact is true even in the late 1990s when enrollments continued to increase, state and institutional budgets were relatively strong and full-time faculty hiring was beginning to recover.

The decreasing opportunities for full-time faculty positions suggests that the growing number of graduate employees is more a matter of bolstering the undergraduate teaching force than training future faculty (at least not full-time faculty with tenure). As Gordon Lafer points out, this has led to new and somewhat illogical arguments for encouraging individuals to pursue a graduate degree. “While universities may not need so many graduate students for future faculty, they do need them to teach classes, lead discussions, grade papers, and conduct laboratory research. Therefore, instead of cutting [graduate] admissions, administrators have begun promoting the virtues of non academic careers for graduate students. ... Except for private-sector science research, however, there is no reason to endure the travails of earning a doctorate unless one intends to become a professor.”<sup>2</sup>

The increasing reliance on graduate employees is particularly evident at research institutions that employ graduate students at significantly higher rates. At public research institutions, graduate employees were responsible for teaching 14 percent of all undergraduate credit hours in 1998.<sup>3</sup> In 2000, the Coalition on the Academic Workforce surveyed nine disciplines in the humanities and social sciences and also found that on average, 14 percent of all undergraduate courses in those disciplines were taught by graduate employees. However, when the focus was more specifically on introductory courses, the average went up to 20 percent of all instruction.<sup>4</sup> These numbers increase even

Table 2. Doctorates awarded vs. new full-time faculty hires and undergraduate enrollment: 1977-97

	1977	1993	1995	1997	Percent change
Ph.D.s awarded	33,232	42,132	44,446	45,876	38%
New full-time faculty hired	37,302	34,557	30,785	36,252	-3%
Undergraduate enrollment	9,717,000	12,324,000	12,232,000	12,298,000	27%

US Department of Education, NCES: *Fall Staff Surveys*



more significantly when the largest research institutions are examined. For instance, at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, it is estimated that graduate employees teach 22 percent of all undergraduate instructional units and 40 percent of all 100-level courses. Even more remarkable, at the University of Florida, an analysis of the Student Evaluation and Instructor Database showed that graduate employees taught 42 percent of the University's undergraduate course sections in 2002, up from 35 percent in 1995.

But looking just at teaching responsibilities only tells part of the story. Institutions also rely on graduate employees as graders, discussion leaders, lab specialists, advisors, community outreach specialists, administrative assistants and many other positions necessary for the full functioning of today's university.

## Graduate Employee Work and Working Conditions

Graduate employees, who stay at institutions for significant periods (doctoral students average seven years), provide valuable instruction and research. In fact, the term "assistant" is often a misnomer. In 2000, nearly half (46 percent) of all graduate employees had full responsibilities for one or more courses. In addition, nearly half (46 percent) led discussion sections for one or more faculty-taught courses, and approximately 70 percent held office hours and assisted faculty with grading or other activities.<sup>5</sup> They averaged 15 hours a week in contact hours with students, office hours, or assisting faculty. This number does not include outside preparation and other work related to courses or sections taught. Graduate employees typically have multiple responsibilities. "For example, among those who assisted faculty by teaching discussion sections, 83 percent also hold office hours, and 89 percent assisted faculty with grading or other instruction related activities."<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, these responsibilities are often not coupled with fair and professional treatment.

### *Salary*

Graduate employees typically do not earn enough to cover their basic living expenses, causing many to incur significant student loan

debt. For example, doctoral students, who hold the largest proportion of assistantships, earned about \$11,700 in assistantship money

and received, on average, \$5,525 in tuition waivers. So, the two primary sources of income that graduate employees in Ph.D. programs earn provide an average of \$17,225 a year. However, the average annual expenses—including tuition and fees, books and other supplies, and living expenses—routinely exceed this institutional support. The average annual expenses for a doctoral student in 2000 totaled \$26,805,<sup>7</sup> nearly \$10,000 more than the student receives in assistantship money and tuition waivers. Although these numbers represent the averages, it is still telling that based on these figures, graduate employees only earn 64 percent of the cost of being a doctoral student.

So, how do graduate employees bridge this gap? In some cases, institutions supplement the assistantship with a grant. However, too often, graduate employees shoulder this burden themselves. They forego health insurance. They deplete their own savings. And more than a third of graduate employees who had assistantships relied on loans to supplement their income. The size of the average loan for those who borrowed in the 1999-2000 academic year was nearly \$14,000.<sup>8</sup>

### *Benefits*

One benefit frequently missing in graduate employees' compensation is health insurance. Given their income and the cost of health insurance, it is safe to assume that without some form of additional assistance, outside employment, or coverage from a family arrangement, many graduate employees cannot afford to purchase adequate health insurance. Information in this area is limited. However, we do know this. The best-case scenario indicates that well over half of graduate employees are receiving no insurance of any kind from their institution.

---

Graduate employees typically do not earn enough to cover their basic living expenses.

---

Only just over one-third (36 percent) of teaching assistants and a slightly higher percentage of research assistants (42 percent) had *some* type of insurance available at some time by their employing institution.<sup>9</sup> That insurance could be health or life insurance (or, in some cases, both). And in those cases where graduate employees indicated that insurance was available, there is no information about the cost or quality of that coverage.

In some instances, graduate employees are offered health insurance through the university student plan. These plans, designed as stopgap measures for students who still carry health insurance through their parents or guardians, rarely represent the type of comprehensive health insurance that graduate employees, whose average age is 33 and a third of whom have dependents, need. For example, many student health plans do not cover partners or dependents, do not include vision or dental insurance, and typically do not cover pre-existing conditions. For a student who may have other coverage options, these deficiencies may not be a problem, but graduate employees need a healthcare option that will meet their needs while not resulting in additional burdens on their already low salaries.

### ***Professional Support***

Many graduate employees are teachers, researchers, discussion leaders, or lab facilitators for the first time. Yet, a recent survey of more than 32,000 graduate students and recent Ph.D.s conducted by the National Association of Graduate and Professional Students, showed that 45 percent of the graduate employees responding reported not receiving appropriate preparation and training before they enter the classroom. Forty-nine percent said they lack appropriate supervision to help improve their teaching skills. Further, 39 percent do not feel their needs and interests are given appropriate consideration in determining which courses they are assigned to teach.<sup>10</sup>

## **AFT and Graduate Employees**

AFT has long recognized that graduate employees, as a part of the higher education workforce, deserve recognition and the rights that a union

and a collective bargaining agreement guarantee. Collective bargaining is the surest route to achieve fair and equitable treatment of employees and thereby improve the educational environment of an institution. AFT stands committed to working with graduate employees who wish to form a union to represent their interests collectively.

Graduate employees have been a part of AFT from the earliest successes in obtaining collective bargaining in higher education in the late 1960s. There now are more than 20 recognized graduate employee unions across the country representing over 40,000 graduate employees. Many of those graduate employees belong to one of the 14 AFT affiliated locals, including some of the oldest graduate employee locals, such as:

- Teaching Assistants' Association at the University of Wisconsin, Madison;
- Graduate Employees' Organization at the University of Michigan; and
- Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation at the University of Oregon.

These locals are joined now by numerous other AFT affiliates representing thousands of graduate employees around the country working to achieve better working conditions. AFT continues to work with graduate employee groups that want to organize a union. (For a list of AFT affiliated locals, see Appendix A.)

These locals, along with many current AFT graduate employee campaigns, are networked in a unique body known as the Alliance of Graduate Employee Locals (AGEL). AGEL members share information, assist each other with training and mentoring, and work to forward the causes of graduate employees. In addition, AGEL has a representative who sits on the AFT Higher Education program and policy council, the official representative body providing advice and recommendations on higher education issues to the AFT executive council. The AGEL representative ensures that graduate employee issues are brought forward within AFT and that developments at the national level are communicated with graduate employee locals. This integration is critical both to AFT's ongoing commitment to graduate employee organizing and, AFT believes, to the long-term higher education union movement. By organizing gradu-

ate employees, we expand our current membership and power in higher education, and we organize potential future members. In addition, graduate employees bring tremendous energy and diversity to the union movement, which only strengthens our organization.

The real impact of the graduate employee union movement is reflected in a variety of significant gains in local collective bargaining agreements. Here is just a sample:

- Several locals have greatly improved the salaries of graduate employees. For example, the Temple University Graduate Student Association secured salary increases of 13 percent to 22 percent in the first year of its first contract.
- The Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation at the University of Oregon negotiated to get out of a subsidized student health plan and into a comprehensive plan that includes prescription drug benefits, coverage for dental and vision, and the option to extend the plan to partners and dependents.
- The Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) at the University of Michigan has worked to improve undergraduate instruction. Its contract includes a Joint Committee on Graduate Student Pedagogy to help graduate students develop and improve their teaching skills, and four hours of compensated training for all graduate employees who are first-time instructors. In addition, the GEO has negotiated compensation for international graduate students who attend English as a Second Language training prior to beginning employment at the university.
- At the University of Wisconsin at Madison, the Teaching Assistants' Association has negotiated extensive leave provisions (care for family members, paternity, etc.), as well as childcare provisions.
- The Graduate Employees Union at Michigan State University bargained a first contract including effective workload provisions and a seniority-based pay scale, which it has successfully protected with a strong grievance procedure.
- The Milwaukee Graduate Assistants Association bargained additional salary for graduate employees with off-campus or weekend assignments.

These are just a few examples of the types of benefits that graduate employees have gained from collective bargaining. More can be found at each local union's Web site. More information about AFT

and graduate employees can be found in our short publication, *Working Together: The American Federation of Teachers and the Graduate Employee Labor Movement*. Links to AFT graduate employee locals and a downloadable version of the publication are posted at [www.aft.org/higher\\_ed](http://www.aft.org/higher_ed).

---

Graduate employees should be supported so that they can cover their tuition and fees as well as living expenses without incurring large amounts of debt.

---

## Standards of Good Practice

These standards, by setting benchmarks for the fair and equitable treatment of all graduate employees, affirm what AFT and our affiliates have fought for since the earliest days of collective bargaining in higher education. They are based on institutions recognizing, first and foremost, that teaching and research assistants are employees and should be invested in with fair pay, benefits and adequate professional support—just as any other member of the higher education instructional workforce should be. The standards also are based on the premise that setting high standards coupled with fair treatment will lead to a better quality undergraduate education and provide a better environment for the professional development of graduate employees.

In spring 2003, AFT sponsored a national conference focused on these issues. This unique conference, "Graduate Employees and Undergraduate Teaching: Identifying Best Practices," brought together AFT graduate employees and other union activists. The purpose was to examine the economic and professional working conditions of graduate employees

and the impact of those conditions on undergraduate education. Participants shared what graduate employee unions have already achieved at their campuses, as well as how they are proposing to improve professional standards.

Based on this conference, and in close consultation with AFT graduate employee leaders, the AFT Higher Education program and policy council developed the following standards. They are divided into two sections:

1. Promoting Fair Working Conditions for Graduate Employees
  - Setting Standards for Compensation
  - Establishing Fair Employment Standards

- Promoting Standards of Professional Responsibility and Support

2. Ensuring Full Rights for Graduate Employees in Their Union

The general principle underlying all of these standards is that graduate employees, because of the nature of their work and studies, should be supported in such a way that they can cover their tuition and fees as well as living expenses without incurring large amounts of debt. These standards offer concrete criteria by which to measure whether graduate employees are treated fairly.

---

---

## **SECTION ONE**

# Promoting Fair Working Conditions for Graduate Employees

## Setting Standards For Compensation

**1. Graduate employees should be paid a fair salary.** Graduate employees make a serious commitment to an institution when they accept an assistantship, and they should not be expected to take on additional responsibilities outside of the institution. The time graduate employees need to fulfill the requirements of an assistantship, along with their class load, limits the possibilities for earning additional income from outside employment. In fact, outside employment is often prohibited by institutions as a condition of the assistantship. International graduate employees are not eligible to participate in federal grant and loan programs and their visa status typically prohibits work beyond their assistantship. Institutions need to recognize these conditions and take on the responsibility of a primary employer. Institutions should be committed to ensuring that graduate employees earn fair compensation that covers their school and living expenses. If institutions do not fully waive

tuition and fees as suggested below, then compensation levels should be increased to cover such costs.

2. **Graduate employees should receive full tuition waivers and not be required to pay student fees for academic terms in which they are working.** Graduate employees are paid a very low wage. Institutions should not add to the burden by then requiring graduate employees to cover tuition and fees. Additionally, if graduate employees have worked a complete academic year, institutions should waive tuition and fees for the subsequent summer term.
3. **Employment expectations should be clearly delineated to ensure that all work completed by graduate employees is compensated.** Institutions should clearly define what work is expected of a graduate employee as a means of ensuring that all work is compensated. Institutions should not blur the line between a graduate employee's work and



studies or use “training for future employment” as a pretext for not compensating graduate employees for their labor.

4. **Compensation should be timely.** Institutions should develop systems that allow graduate employees to be paid, at a minimum, within the first month of employment. In addition to living expenses, fees and other charges from the institution often reach the graduate employees before their first paycheck, creating an additional financial burden. If these fees are not waived as suggested above, then no fees should be charged before graduate employees receive compensation.
5. **Graduate employees should receive full healthcare benefits with minimum, if any, employee contribution.** Current salary levels are not sufficient for most graduate employees to afford adequate healthcare. Here again, this is of particular importance to international graduate employees who are required to maintain adequate healthcare coverage and are unable to attain health insurance from another employer given their visa status. Therefore, institutions should recognize their obligation as the main employer and provide full health benefits for individual graduate employees and subsidized options for families. If institutions require an employee contribution, then such contribution should be considered in determining salary. Graduate employees who work the full academic year (fall and spring) should receive year-round coverage.
6. **Graduate employees should receive proportional retirement benefits, with contributions beginning reasonably soon after the graduate employee begins working at an institution.** Graduate employees, whose average age is 33, invest several years of their working lives to attain a graduate degree. Doctoral students, in particular, spend a significant number of years (typically seven) pursuing their graduate education, a time when most working adults with undergraduate degrees already have access to some form of retirement plan. Financial planners uniformly will point out that even small, early investments are critical to building up an adequate amount of retirement savings. Institutions should provide graduate employees with the same opportunity by offering retirement benefits with contribution and vesting options that make sense given the salaries, responsibilities, and typical time of stay for graduate employees at particular institutions.
7. **Graduate employees should have access to long-term disability and life insurance.**
8. **Institutions should provide childcare options for graduate employees whenever work requires them to be on campus.** One-third of all graduate students reported having dependents in 2000.<sup>11</sup> Affordable childcare services should be available and subsidized for the hours graduate employees are required to be on campus. Childcare services should be near to where graduate employees work, ideally on-site.

## Establishing Fair Employment Practices

1. **All employment practices should be subject to guidelines for nondiscrimination set forth by equal employment opportunity guidelines, and should be subject to review through the appropriate due process and grievance procedures.** Employment practices can only be fair and effectively implemented if they are accompanied by a reasonable enforcement process. Institutions committed to pursuing fair employment practices should ensure that nondiscrimination and other policies are followed and enforced through an appropriate procedure that protects the employee’s due process rights.
2. **Institutions should have clear and rational hiring practices for graduate employees.** Those practices should include, at a minimum:
  - a. A reasonable posting system that includes advertising open positions so that all graduate employees have information about available jobs.

- b. Adequate time for graduate employees to apply for open positions.
  - c. Clear job criteria and selection processes to ensure that all interested graduate employees have equal opportunity for positions and to ensure that the most qualified graduate employee is hired for an open position.
  - d. Notification of appointments early enough before a term begins so that graduate employees have sufficient time to prepare.
3. **Institutions should clearly define the workload expectations for graduate employees by department and provide a mechanism for compensating work beyond that maximum.** A maximum workload per semester relative to the appointed assistantship should be established. All work should be included in that calculation, including class preparation, office hours and grading. Graduate employees should have access to a mechanism with which they can document work beyond that maximum and be compensated for such work. Ultimately, if that system demonstrates that graduate employees are consistently working more hours than can be fairly expected, departments should re-evaluate graduate employee assignments.
  4. **Clear lines of supervision should be established for graduate employees, and routine and fair evaluations should be conducted.** Graduate employees should have a clear job description with an identified supervisor who is responsible for a particular employee or employees. They should not be placed in the position of responding to any request for assistance in a department or school. Furthermore, graduate employees should receive routine evaluations based on that job description, as well as expectations and criteria for teaching and research set forth at the department level. Evaluations should include input from the graduate employee's supervisor as well as student evaluations, and graduate employees should have the right to comment on their evaluations. In cases where evaluations indicate areas for improvement, graduate employees also should have access to professional development opportunities to address such areas.
  5. **A probationary period should be established for graduate employees.** After that period has passed, graduate employees should achieve some form of job security. Graduate students make a multi-year commitment when they enroll in a program of study. As employees, they should receive the same commitment from the institution. To ensure that commitment, a probationary period should be established that includes training and mentoring as well as evaluation. Upon successfully completing such probation, graduate employees should be guaranteed re-employment as long as they remain in good academic standing. That re-employment should be subject to overrule in two instances only: financial exigency and for cause. In either case, the institution should follow all rules of due process.
  6. **Institutions should not reclassify graduate employees as adjunct faculty members as a means of moving them out from under the protections of the contract.** If a graduate employee is still working toward his or her degree while teaching, then that person should remain in the category of graduate employee and, where applicable, should remain in the graduate employee union and under the protections of the union contract.

## Promoting Standards of Professional Responsibility and Support

1. **Institutions should provide a substantive, paid orientation for all new graduate employees prior to the beginning of their assignment.** Institutions should recognize the need for extensive orientation, not only to provide administrative information but also to give graduate employees a chance to learn and practice different pedagogical and research techniques.
2. **Institutions should provide English as a Second Language training for students who**

have been accepted into a program and require or request such training. When institutions take on new employees, they also take on a training obligation. As part of that obligation, institutions should provide English as a Second Language (ESL) training and compensate those students who participate in the training. English language competency at the end of such training should be evaluated by someone trained to make a fair evaluation. If the graduate employee has been offered an assistantship but is not deemed to have competent English language skills, then an alternative position with equal compensation should be provided as well as opportunities to improve his or her language skills. Where ESL training is provided for international graduate employees, institutions should provide them with adequate time, compensation and housing options so they can establish their residence prior to the orientation.

3. **In addition to initial orientations, institutions should provide ongoing training and professional development for graduate employees, particularly during probationary periods.** Graduate employees should be provided with a variety of training and mentoring opportunities as they develop their instructional skills. These could include class observations, one-on-one mentoring, recordings of instructional settings with feedback from a supervisor, peer groups, or other options. These activities should be structured in as part of the graduate employee's workload and compensated.
4. **Graduate employees should have access to administrative and technological support services necessary for the fulfillment of their responsibilities as well as to adequate supplies, library and other campus privileges.**
5. **In instances where graduate employees are involved in distance education, they should receive adequate training for which they are compensated and have input on course design, management and the use of technology.** Too often, graduate employees (and other contingent faculty) are asked to monitor a predesigned distance education course with little pedagogical training or support. Distance education courses require a partic-

ular knowledge and a significant amount of time and energy to make them successful. Therefore, graduate employees assigned to distance education courses should receive adequate training, sufficient preparation time and input into course design.

6. **Graduate employees who have full responsibility for courses should enjoy the same academic freedom as other instructors and faculty.** They also should have full control of the grading for those courses and sections. One of the strengths of U.S. higher education is the diversity of teaching perspectives and styles that students get to experience. If graduate employees are asked to take on the responsibility of an entire course, they should enjoy the same latitude to employ different methodologies and perspectives as any other instructor within the generally agreed-upon curriculum in a department. Additionally, grades given by graduate employees should not be overruled unless a clear error in judgment can be identified through a clearly delineated process into which the graduate employee has significant input.
7. **The intellectual property of a graduate employee should remain solely with that employee.** Institutions should develop clear guidelines for how intellectual property that is developed by graduate employees during their tenure at an institution will be handled. Those guidelines should respect the innovative work of many graduate employees—whether it is writings, works of art or new research—and develop guidelines that allow those employees to benefit from their work.
8. **Graduate employees who have passed probation should be given the opportunity to serve on department and institutional committees.** At many institutions, graduate employees make up a significant part of the instructional workforce and the academic staff in general. As such, they have an informed and unique perspective and should have formal input at both the departmental and institutional level. At a minimum, they should be allowed to provide input on curriculum development and policies that affect students.

# **SECTION TWO**

## Ensuring Full Rights for Graduate Employees in Their Union

Like other higher education employees, graduate employees began organizing and continue to organize as they see the strength and stability that a union and a collective bargaining agreement can bring to the precarious employment environment most of them experience. At the same time, there are unique characteristics of graduate employee unions and graduate employee organizing campaigns.

With some exception, graduate employees typically belong to unions that represent only graduate employees. They are not in “mixed units” with faculty and/or professional staff. This is due, in part, to state laws that define graduate employees as having a separate community of interest from faculty and so must legally be in a separate union. Graduate employee locals also routinely experience up to 25 percent turnover every year as assistantships come to an end and new graduate students become employed at the university. This expands the number of people who need to be organized in a union drive that extends beyond one academic year, and presents an ongoing organizing need for established locals. While such turnover can be seen as an obstacle, it also can be advantageous. AFT graduate employee locals are continually in organizing mode and continually working to develop new activists and leadership to carry on the work of the union.

The nature of graduate employee locals, particularly their independence and high membership turnover, make it all the more important that their affiliates at the state and national level show a deep commitment to helping them stay strong and feel a sense of solidarity and voice in the larger union. To that end, AFT sponsors the Alliance of Graduate Employee Locals (AGEL). As described in the introduction, AGEL includes all AFT locals that represent graduate employees as well as all ongoing organizing campaigns affiliated with the AFT. AGEL meets twice a year at different local and campaign sites to commu-

nicate about local union developments, attend training, assist in organizing, and promote graduate employee issues to the national affiliate.

Still, graduate employees are small in number by comparison with other groups that national unions represent, including the AFT. Consequently, national unions need to make a concerted effort to ensure that graduate employees are treated fairly within their ranks, that policies and procedures are clear, and that graduate employees have an adequate voice. To that end, we offer the following standards to outline what graduate employees should be able to expect of their local, state and national unions.

- 1. National unions should commit to organizing graduate employees along with all other elements of the academic workforce and be prepared for long-term, hard fought organizing campaigns.** Graduate employees who seek to build a union that represents their interests need to be prepared for such an effort and national unions need to be prepared to invest enough time and resources to support a campaign from first contact through the first contract. From the onset of a campaign, graduate employees have the right to know what level of commitment they can count on from a national union.
- 2. Faculty and professional staff unions on campuses where graduate employees are unorganized should encourage unionization and assist graduate employees in that effort.** Faculty and staff unions understand the institutions they work at and are often the best resource for other employees who are not organized. Leaders of existing higher education unions, where possible, should encourage graduate employees at their institution to unionize.
- 3. Where graduate employees are members of a local union that includes other higher edu-**



cation employees, graduate employees must have full voting rights on all union matters, including the election of officers and the ratification of contracts. This policy should also be reflected at the state and national levels of the union. Graduate employees, often excluded from full participation in the institution where they work, should never be excluded from full participation in their union.

4. **Given the modest compensation graduate employees receive for their work and the simultaneous need for a local union to raise enough dues to sustain the local, dues should be set at an appropriate level to support the union's needs while taking into**

**account the economic situation of most graduate employees.** This should be true for graduate employee-only unions as well as unions that represent a variety of academic professionals including graduate employees.

5. **Graduate employees have the right to expect their union at every level to advocate for the implementation of the standards outlined in this report.** Standards are an important first step, but they must be publicized, bargained for, and generally insisted upon. Unions should work to educate their institutions and the community about the use and exploitation of graduate employees and promote the standards in this report as a guide for correcting these conditions.

---

---

## Conclusion

**A**s Clara Lovett's quotation points out at the beginning of this report, the use of graduate employees over the past 20 years represents another systematic shift to employ and under-support yet another group of contingent employees in higher education. As we have argued in other publications regarding part-time/adjunct faculty and full-time, nontenure-track faculty, there is an urgent need to address this academic staffing crisis, and that effort must include addressing the treatment of graduate employees.

We must first significantly improve the working conditions of graduate employees so that they have the necessary economic and professional support they need to succeed. We need to ensure that graduate employees have the chance to advance during their employment, as would be expected in any profession, so that they can widen their experience and develop a broader educational résumé.

At the same time, we need to continue to work on finding ways to reverse the trend

toward contingent labor in higher education and restore a sound corps of full-time, tenure-track positions. These faculty members have been the bedrock of our higher education system and it is these positions that most graduate employees aspire to attain. It is wrong to mislead graduate employees into thinking that years of work for an institution and labor in their studies will lead to secure employment when, at the same time, states and institutions continue to cut the number of these positions.

AFT is committed to continuing the fight to both give more graduate employees the opportunity to be represented by a union and also to restore the full-time faculty corps so that graduate employees will have a real opportunity for full-time employment with all of the protections of tenure. We call on all unions and institutions to adopt these standards and work to treat graduate employees fairly and equitably and to work toward rebuilding our system of higher education.

# Endnotes

1. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics. 2002. *2001 Fall Staff Survey*.
2. Lafer, Gordon. 2003. "Graduate Student Unions: Organizing in a Changed Academic Economy." *Labor Studies Journal*, Summer, Vol. 28, No. 2.
3. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. 2001. *Institutional Policies and Practices: Results From the 1999 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty, Institution Survey*.
4. For information on the Coalition on the Academic Workforce Staffing Survey, see <http://www.aarweb.org/departement/acadreldocs/CAWBrochure2003.pdf>.
5. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. 2002. *Student Financing of Graduate and First-Professional Education, 1999-2000: Profiles of Students in Selected Degree Programs and Their Use of Assistantships*.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. National Association of Graduate-Professional Students. 2000. *The National Doctoral Program Survey*. Available electronically at <http://survey.nagps.org/about/execsummary.php>.
11. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. 2002. *Student Financing*.

For more information about the American Federation of Teachers' work on graduate employee issues, visit the AFT Higher Education Web site at [www.aft.org/higher\\_ed](http://www.aft.org/higher_ed).



# Appendix A:

## AFT Locals Representing Graduate Employees

**Professional Staff Congress, Local 2334**  
at the City University of New York

**Teaching Assistants' Association, Local 3220**  
at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

**Graduate Employees' Organization, Local 3550**  
at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

**Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation, Local 3544**  
at the University of Oregon

**Milwaukee Graduate Assistants Association, Local 2169**  
at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

**Graduate Assistants United/United Faculty of Florida, Local 7463**  
at the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University

**Graduate Assistants United/United Faculty of Florida, Local 7463**  
at the University of Florida

**Graduate Assistants United/United Faculty of Florida, Local 7463**  
at the University of South Florida

**Graduate Teaching Assistants Coalition, Local 4565**  
at the University of Kansas

**Graduate Employees Organizing Committee, Local 6123**  
at Wayne State University

**Coalition of Graduate Employees, Local 6069**  
at Oregon State University

**Temple University Graduate Students' Association, Local 6290**  
at Temple University

**Graduate Employees Union, Local 6196**  
at Michigan State University

**Graduate Employees Organization, Local 6300**  
at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign



*A Union of Professionals*

AFT Higher Education  
555 New Jersey Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20001

Ask for item no. 36-0716  
\$3.00 per copy