

Graduate Student Support: Myths, Facts and Essentials

In this time of budget uncertainty, myths about funding for graduate teaching assistants are making the rounds among some administrators and faculty in TAUP schools and colleges. These spurious stories blame the Temple University Graduate Students' Association (TUGSA) for the confusion about whether grad students can have assistantships or can teach as adjuncts. TUGSA should not be blamed for any part of Temple's inconsistent and confusing practices on graduate student support, nor for any shortfalls departments and programs are facing.

MYTH: *TUGSA forced Temple administration to change its policy in March 2010 so that graduate students are banned from teaching as adjuncts and can only teach if they have assistantships.*

FACT: Temple administration made the decision to change its policy unilaterally, and TUGSA was not consulted prior to the change. Since 2002, the Temple-TUGSA contract has stated that graduate students who are teaching at Temple should be included in the TUGSA unit and compensated with the appropriate stipends, benefits, and tuition remission. However, until 2010, that agreement was not enforced by either side in the case of grad students teaching as adjuncts. That is, grad students who did not have assistantships or were ineligible to continue receiving an assistantship were regularly hired as adjuncts and not compensated according to the TUGSA contract. TUGSA is not responsible for the administration's decision.

MYTH: *An individual graduate student (or several students, in some accounts) teaching as an adjunct, having read the TUGSA contract and acting with TUGSA's knowledge, sued the university (or filed a grievance) to enforce the inclusion of grad student teachers in the TUGSA bargaining unit. This suit or grievance forced the administration to change its policy and obey the language of the Temple-TUGSA contract, thereby barring graduate students from teaching as adjuncts and requiring those teaching to have assistantships.*

FACT: TUGSA has no knowledge of such a suit or grievance, nor has the administration acknowledged one when asked about it. Any such claim would have to be filed as a grievance under the terms of the TUGSA contract. No such grievance was ever filed. If any "grievances" were brought up with the administration, say, of the Graduate School, it would be a violation of the TUGSA contract for management to deal with them without notifying and involving TUGSA. We call on those repeating this tale to either provide specifics or stop spreading falsehoods.

ESSENTIALS: Temple needs a comprehensive policy and adequate funding for graduate education

When the no-grad-students-as-adjuncts policy was announced, faculty members, particularly department chairs, made clear their displeasure with this unfunded and disruptive mandate. TUGSA talked with the administration about the impact of the new policy on grad students. In response, President Hart set aside funds for one year to allow graduate students who had been teaching as adjuncts to become teaching assistants this academic year. These teachers have become unofficially dubbed as “gradjuncts.” However, this funding was temporary. Serious questions remain about the future of this policy and the graduate funding that it will require. TUGSA bears no responsibility for the uncertainty and confusion.

TUGSA has been doing all it can to ensure adequate funding for all graduate programs. They want the contract language to be enforced, so all teaching grad students are included under the protections and guarantees of their contract. TUGSA also wants graduate students to obtain financial support, rather than to be threatened with aid cutoffs.

TAUP supports those efforts. TUGSA is a sister organization to TAUP, as both are affiliates of the AFT. However, this is not just a matter of one union sticking up for another. TAUP has its own concerns. For instance, was it just a coincidence that Temple’s new policy last March was announced just days before our own Adjunct Organizing Committee started collecting signatures for a petition to call for union representation for adjunct faculty? Even if it was a coincidence, the administration cannot be unaware of the appearance of impropriety and the very real effects of this spasmodic policy-making. Their action last spring certainly tilts the playing field in its favor by sowing confusion about who was and who was not an adjunct.

Temple administration needs to articulate a coherent and uniform policy on how to support graduate students who come to Temple without independent means. Before issuing the new policy last year, they should have thought through much more carefully the implications for budgets and programs and should have consulted with faculty and TUGSA. What is the rationale for making a new policy without assuring a consistent set of funds over the long term to carry it out? Now departments and programs are threatened with reductions in gradjunct positions, which will affect many grad students, particularly those in the dissertation phase of their studies. This, in turn, affects the programs as a whole, and some faculty are wondering about their viability.

Both TAUP and TUGSA want Temple to be a great university with great programs. Strong graduate programs are essential to our identity as a world-class research university. Graduate teaching assistants, part-time/adjunct faculty, and adequate numbers of full-time faculty are essential to deliver high-quality education to our undergraduates. This means that all faculty and staff should be treated and compensated fairly. Temple’s commitment of financial support for graduate students should be consistent from year to year and in compliance with the TUGSA contract.

The time to set priorities and to ensure adequate support is now. It shouldn’t wait until we see what Governor Tom Corbett proposes for Temple’s appropriation on March 8. **Graduate education is not discretionary spending.**

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