

gsu news

winter 2009

A quarterly newsletter of Graduate Students United at the University of Chicago

This first issue of GSU News appears in the wake of massive budget cuts announced by the U of C. administration. Talk of change is everywhere — but change for whom and according to whose priorities? GSU is still celebrating the victory of major wage increases last summer, but our situation remains precarious, given high fees and health insurance costs and inadequate healthcare. There is still a long way to go in our organizing efforts. To raise consciousness about graduate student labor and GSU's work, we've put together this newsletter for our members and for the campus at large. In this issue, we offer some recent campus news from here and around the world; a tale about what our university could have been; a personal story by one GSU activist; one member's critical view of the notion of "privilege"; and a game to play with administrative banality. But first, some all-too-familiar-feeling inspiration from one of our predecessors who got bored with school...

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The Tables Turned

Up! up! my friend, and quit your books,
Or surely you'll grow double.
Up! up! my friend, and clear your looks;
Why all this toil and trouble...

Books! 'tis a dull and endless trifles:
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it...

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things—
We murder to dissect.

Enough of Science and of Art,
Close up those barren leaves;
Come forth, and bring with you a heart
That watches and receives.

—William Wordsworth, honorary member of GSU

Why Join GSU?

GSU Member #2 recounts why he got involved with GSU, at the height of concerns over stipend inequality and the lack of administrative democracy...

I was very upset when President Zimmer first announced the Graduate Aid Initiative in 2007. Designed to improve the university's bidding position when recruiting graduate students, Dean Martha Roth declared that the GAI would give prospective graduate students the space to "make an intelligent decision based on where they want to go—and with whom they want to study—without having to think about money." That same year—due to financial issues—my good friend was forced to withdraw from the History program. She had just finished her first year, and was one of the unlucky students who did not receive a stipend. Someone could take a legalistic analysis of her case and argue that she had signed a contract and should've known better. Cold contractualism goes completely against the spirit of the Graduate Aid Initiative: namely, "to take money out of the equation." But if anything, the negligence of the University brought the material concerns of graduate students into stark relief.

Without taking a moment to consider whether everything was in order for current students, the university flashed us with millions of untouchable dollars. It was disenchanting to see a good scholar forced to leave while tremendous effort went into aiding students who had yet to walk through the campus gates. Personally what was even more infuriating was that they clearly expected students to do nothing about it.

The issue over student stipends was just the first to expose to me the systemic negligence at the University of Chicago. Low teaching wages, arbitrary residency fees, absolute absence of child services, inadequate

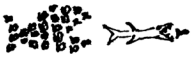


health services, lack of job availability and failure to standardize job requirements has proven to be the general experience for advanced graduate students. Some have concluded that "it's just the way things are" and nothing can be done about it. But since GSU started in Spring 2007 we have pressed the university for improvements to graduate student quality of life, successfully pushing for the increase of teaching wages, most notably the doubling of teaching assistants' pay from \$1,500 to \$3,000 per course.

However, through the struggle for material improvement, we also realized the need to build a stronger sentiment of community across the university. Holding megabashes on May 2 (best party of 2008, ask somebody) and implementing bi-weekly pub nights at the University Pub (with membership discounts!) we've taken steps to bringing a sense of commonality and camaraderie to a traditionally isolationist and individualizing business.

And trust me, it most certainly is a business that we're a part of. The University is an immense landholder and employer with serious political power. That's precisely why I'll most likely graduate before GSU realizes its ultimate goals of a newly constructed university community, featuring adequate material conditions and genuine student decision-making power; all the result of an effective graduate student bargaining unit (the creation of which is itself a hefty task). So why stay in GSU? Sure, the extra pay takes care of the rent and I'm grateful for the strong cadre of friends the experience has created. But more importantly, because there's still plenty of work to be done! And if GSU never existed, there is no doubt the University of Chicago would be a much colder place.





The State of Campus Labor

Graduate student employees: you are not alone. Other employees have been organizing for years to improve their lives and work at the University of Chicago. Here is a partial list of the organizations they have formed and joined.

Teamsters Local 743

www.743teamsters.org

U. of C. workers first joined the Teamsters in 1979. There are about 1500 Teamsters at the U. of C. Medical Center and 1000 on the U. of C. campus, including clerical, custodial and dining services workers. After a long campaign for reform within the union, a new leadership slate took office in Local 743 on Jan. 1, 2008. Until that time, reformers employed at the U. of C. fought hard and successfully to improve working conditions even without formal recognition by the administration and without support from their union leadership. Active organizing and student solidarity helped win a raise for dining services workers of 10.5% over 3 years, instead of 9% originally offered by the administration.

SEIU Local 73

www.seiu73.org

The Service Employees International Union Local 73 has about 250 members in building trades (construction and maintenance) on campus, at the Medical Center, and in Real Estate Operations, steam plants, chiller plants, and dorms. SEIU members also take

care of all the grounds and cover athletics with aids and locker room attendants. Their mission is to “keep the University looking good and running smooth.” Their mission would be much easier if the University followed city guidelines requiring one building engineer for every 70,000 square feet, rather than the 150,000 sq. ft. SEIU engineers are presently covering. On the campus side the management has grown from around 20 in the 1990’s to 110 at present, while union positions have declined. Members of Local 73 recently signed a contract which will expire in 2011.

SEIU Local 1

www.seiu1.org

SEIU Local 1 represents janitors at buildings owned by the U. of C. and managed by university Real Estate Operations.

AFT Local 2062

www.aft.org

Faculty at the U. of C. Laboratory Schools have been represented by the American Federation of Teachers since 1972. Membership presently includes over 200 teachers and assistant teachers in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. They recently completed negotiations on a new three-year contract that will expire in 2011.

INA

www.illinoisnurses.com

Nurses at the U. of C. Medical Center are organized with the Illinois Nurses Association.

(point, awaiting counterpoint) “You Are Never too Privileged for Solidarity”

The notion of privilege is one of the noblest notions to emerge in political thought in the last 40-some years. It is also one of the most debilitating. Its main practical effect is to demobilize precisely those people who think most about oppression—those who, by other measures, would seem most likely to fight for social change. And no one is more likely to think in such noble terms than a privileged student. The notion of privilege tries to convince us that we aren’t really oppressed, since after all there is always someone worse off than we. What if we based our politics not on “privilege” but on—*solidarity*?

Financial Crisis Hits Universities

How is the economic crisis affecting universities? At the University of Chicago, the most striking sign of change was the recent layoff of 450 hospital employees, unceremoniously escorted off premises by security. The Hospitals cut their budget by 7% (from \$1.5 billion), while Campus Life has cut its budget 6% (from \$60 million), and layoffs are expected there, too. The university's endowment of \$6.39 billion, eighty percent of which was in equities (stocks and the like), has fallen by about 25%, returning to its 2006 levels. Although President Zimmer has promised that college and graduate aid will be unaffected, there are rumors that graduate admissions will be reduced to compensate, and that the economic crisis serves as an opportunity to make cuts that administrators wanted made anyway.

The financial crisis resonates across the country. State universities everywhere are facing 4-10% budget cuts from their legislatures, which means hundreds of millions lost in big systems in New York and California. Wisconsin and North Carolina, among others, are proposing reducing undergraduate enrollment, while in Connecticut, the governor proposed an administrative merger of the community college system with the technical high schools. Unpaid employee furloughs are planned everywhere from Maryland to Utah to Arizona to Maine, and some academic programs are being cut. Brandeis, controversially, announced plans to sell its \$300-million art collection, but has since backed off slightly.

Things look particularly bad for new Ph.D.s on the job market. Job searches are down 15% in history, 22% in English, and 20% in foreign languages. In departments with large undergraduate teaching loads, there may be pressure to increase graduate enrollments to provide cheap teaching labor. Conceivably, there may be new work for low-paid adjuncts, but the horizon is

dark for them too, as adjunct pay has been decreased at some schools. Paradoxically, a few universities and colleges, such as Tufts and Emerson in Boston and Augustana College in Illinois, are conducting especially vigorous searches for tenure-track positions. Apparently, they are finding especially good candidates who are desperate for jobs they might not otherwise consider. From the candidate's point of view, of course, this only means that competition is stiffer than ever.

As is evident in all this, the economic crisis does not hit everyone equally. At the UC Hospitals, staff with union contracts were less vulnerable to immediate layoffs because of their already-signed contracts. The most privileged campus workers, presidents and provosts, have in a number of exceptional cases offered to take pay cuts, ranging from 5% to 30%. However, median pay for university presidents remains around \$427,400, and rose on average 7.6% last year, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education. Major questions linger, therefore, about equity and democracy in campus resource distribution.

Modest cost-cutting proposals

Deans and vice-presidents, according to Provost Rosenbaum's email of Jan. 15, are to "work to identify, wherever possible, ways to increase efficiency, reduce or eliminate certain lower priority activities, and increase revenues." We suggest, for example:

- Redirect the \$300 million Booth donation to needier divisions.
- Make administrative posts into elected positions accountable to students and faculty for their mistakes.
- Require 5 hours of weekly custodial labor from every trustee (and offer five votes on the Board of Trustees to every custodian).
- Stop buying up real estate that the university won't use.



News Briefs

Obama's NLRB

With University of Chicago adjunct lecturer Barack Obama in the White House, grad students at private universities will likely once again be recognized as employees under by Federal labor law. We already knew that Obama was a strong supporter of grad student collective bargaining: in the Senate he co-sponsored legislation to give grad students that right. On the first day of his presidency Obama designated Wilma B. Liebman as chair of the National Labor Relations Board, which governs national academic labor policy. Liebman strongly opposed a 2004 NLRB ruling determining that grad student teachers and research assistants are “primarily students” rather than employees. This ruling reversed a 2000 ruling that had for the first time given students at private universities the right to unionize (grad student unions at public universities, regulated by state law, have been recognized for decades). Three of five seats on the board are currently vacant, and the Liebman appointment signals that Obama will likely fill them with grad student union-friendly folks.

York University strike ends

TAs and contingent faculty went on strike Nov. 6 at York University, one of Canada’s largest educational institutions. Throughout the strike, the York student government supported the union and its demands for increased wages. On Feb. 2 striking teachers were forced back to work by the Ontario provincial government, which passed a bill calling for binding arbitration between the administration and the strikers. The union is appealing the legality of the back-to-work legislation. Students have also filed a class action lawsuit against the university, asking for a refund of tuition for the time when classes were not being held.

National strikes shut down French universities

“Knowledge isn’t a commodity,” read an orange and black banner in a French protest the other day. On Feb. 2nd, strikes broke out all across the French system to protest government reforms of teaching and research. There is widespread agreement that university reform is needed, but the current reforms, introduced by the Sarkozy government in 2007, are seen by many as an attempt to privatize and corporatize higher education. And plans to give more power to university presidents are denounced as an unwanted use of a teacherous “American model” of education. At the time of writing the strikes continue, and classes have been canceled for weeks.

New School occupation

On Dec. 17, 2008, students occupied the New School of Social Research in New York, after the faculty voted no-confidence in the president, Bob Kerrey. Students claimed that Kerrey’s administration lacked transparency and accountability, and that he valued education less than the bottom line. But Kerrey retained support from his trustees, and the protest ended with only a few minor administrative concessions.

(a game:) Buzz-word bingo

Use this bingo sheet while reading university-wide e-mails or listening to administrators discuss the university’s budget cuts. First to get five in a row wins!

layoffs	financial aid	commitments	efficiency	human capital
endowment	unions	success	financial	transition
budget	downturn	crisis	staff	economy
priority	challenges	academic culture	stimulus	employees
reorganization	long-term	services	investment	student experience

An Unanswered Petition:



We collected 541 signatures on a petition calling for health insurance for all student employees, and for an end to fees in advanced residency. We submitted this to Deputy Provost Cathy Cohen on May 2, 2008.

Given

- That the University of Chicago is part of a minority of universities that do not pay their student employees' health insurance, as 77% of all universities pay for their graduate students and 21% also pay insurance for student employees' dependents;
- That students are therefore forced to pay at a minimum \$590 each quarter out of their own pockets, substantially reducing an already small income;
- That employee health insurance is a right, not a privilege, and that the administration should act like the majority of its peer institutions in recognizing this fact;

The University of Chicago should provide full health insurance coverage for all students employed by the University.

Given

- That, at present, all graduate students need to pay \$784 in advanced residency fees each quarter, even when not taking classes;
- That the only way to have the tuition fee waived is to work for the university, which puts undue pressure on students to take teaching jobs on campus, thus slowing the time to degree, limiting students' ability to get teaching experience off campus, and creating an extremely tight labor market on campus; and
- That by waiving these fees, the administration could allow students to structure their teaching load to suit their academic and professional needs, rather than to pay the university bills;

The University of Chicago should provide fees remission for all students in advanced residency.

We the undersigned call on the University of Chicago administration to institute health insurance for all student employees at the University and to provide fees remission for all students in advanced residency.

We are still awaiting the administration's response.

A New Call to Action:

tell your experience to the provost's committee on advanced residency

Do Advanced Residency tuition and other fees help or hinder your progress toward your degree? The Provost's Committee on Advanced Residence and Time to Degree is expected to make recommendations for changing the Advanced Residency system. Write to the committee's secretary Beth Niestat (niestat@uchicago.edu) and chair Cathy Cohen (cjcohen@uchicago.edu) about the impact of Advanced Residency fees on your professional and personal lives. Cc gsu@riseup.net if you'd like us to register your response or post it anonymously on our website. Or send your response directly to GSU, and we will pass it on anonymously to the committee.

A Position Paper by GSU: on the Milton Friedman Institute

Based on the results of a GSU membership referendum, we have written a statement publicly announcing our position on the administration's proposal to create a "Milton Friedman Institute for Research in Economics." Read the statement on our website at http://uchicagogsu.org/mfi_statement.html.

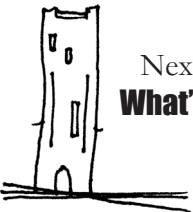
(a survey)

What is a University?

We posed the above question to our members. The answers are printed below. The best answer will win a prize, to be announced next issue. Cast your vote by writing to gsu@riseup.net, indicating your favorite.

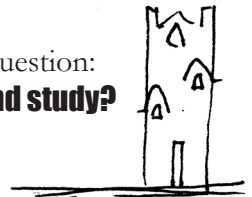
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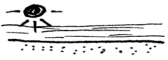
1. An arena for intellectual collaboration OR a necessary route for personal/career advancement in society today?
2. A place to interrogate ideas and learn from mentors and colleagues.
3. A community of people who share a common interest in academic and social issues.
4. Today, universities are institutions in the service of neoliberal capitalist society to maximize profit from for the school and its corporate partners.
5. While universities market themselves as educational institutions, spaces of free inquiry and a home to ideas, what this actually means (in terms of what sort of knowledge gets pursued and produced) depends on the balance of forces within the university as well as in society. As such, it is a contested terrain, one that is particularly influential because of its ability to legitimize the illegitimate.
6. A University is a business with an identity crisis. While imagining itself a multi-cultural institution teaching students socially-minded liberalism, in practice the university is a for-profit landlord, employer and political powerhouse. The university protects its reputation by sending social workers and legal students to practice their craft on poor and working people; all the while it directly affects the prices of food and rents through alliances with land developers. Its interest lays more in protecting its billion dollar endowment than in the material well-being of the adjunct professors and graduate students that teach its supposed ideals. The university hires so-called leftist faculty that chirp about injustice, while it recruits profiteering corporate executives to make its decisions. It researches cures for disease but invests in ammunitions. The University is an institution in need of serious treatment.
7. A university is an institution that invents new kinds of drugs and weapons.
8. HOW TO READ “UNIVERSITY” (in quasi-anagrams) — *While waiting at the Student Care Center:* “Sty? IV? Sit.” *At GSU Brews (pub night):* “Rye in unity.” *When looking at the sum in your bank account:* “Very tiny.” *Evidence of the need for solidarity:* One can’t spell “resist” with “university.” This requires “universities.”
9. A university is an itty-bitty thing that thinks it is a universe.
10. No such thing.



Next issue, we will be asking the following question:
What's the difference between work, play and study?

Send responses to gsu@riseup.net.





“Another University” (a fantasy)

The sands of Lake Michigan wash in and out. When the waves beat the sand up and up, there is no end to what they conceal. Coins and necklaces fall from pockets and are never found again. Clothing strays from summery bodies and, if not picked up by lakeside vagabonds, it too disappears. Giant logs and stones have been buried there, and very likely also children and automobiles.

But when the winds roar out from between the streets and sweep the beaches clean, all lost things begin to reappear. Buoys that have long since left the water; legs of docks where our parents may have sat to watch the sunrise; mountains of trash; and—maybe someday—all the years of bodies cleared out by the Mob.

And on a day like this, there was a student walking down the beach. The wind nearly knocked him over as it passed by; then it whirled and swirled around a dune and puffed above a hump of sand until the sand was carried all away. And the student saw a carved and pointed stone that he had never seen right there before. When another gust of wind blew more sand away, the student saw that the stone was stacked atop another stone. With the flying sand scratching at his eyes and ears, he dug more sand away. He found an opening in a stone tower, and when he looked inside, he saw a spiral staircase going down. He slipped in and followed it down.

At the bottom of the stairs there was a hall with open doors along its wall. Through the first door the student saw people in a circle, speaking with excitement all around. When he asked what they were doing, they said, “We are in class, learning freely what we all want to learn.” On the next door was written “bursar,” and the people inside said, “We are counting all our resources, preparing to divide them fairly among all those who work and study here.”

And at the end of the hall there was another door, with “administration” written on it. This door was also open, and when the student entered, he was surprised not to find men in suits behind enormous desks. The people sat around a table, and they said, “We run the university together, all students, teachers, workers, and all

people who live nearby. Only, there are no students and teachers and workers, because we all learn, and we all teach, and we all make the school run. When a decision must be made, our collective council makes it and chooses who will carry it all out.” The student was confused. “Where is the president?” he asked. “And the provost? And the deans?” But the people in the room could give no answer. They had never heard of such strange things.

At the end of the hall, the student went out into a courtyard, where people sat on benches speaking and singing of the world and life and love. At the far side of the courtyard, there was a library, where all the people of the city shared and borrowed books. And to the right of the library there was a laboratory where all research went to help the world, and never to destroy it. And to the left there was a hospital which treated all people freely like free people, and beside it was a daycare for all the children of the people living there. And beyond the library there was a theater and a concert hall, where all the worldly harmonies were broken and remade.

Then the student looked at his watch. It was almost time to be in class! He ran back across the courtyard and into the hall and up the spiral staircase. He pushed himself through the sand that had gathered again at the top. As he slipped and slid along the beach’s dunes, he saw the wind and waves cover the pointed stones again.

In class, he couldn’t hear a word of what his teacher said. Only at the end the teacher asked him, “What are you thinking about? You haven’t said a word all day.”

“Teacher,” he said, “you won’t believe me, but it’s true.”

“What?”

“There’s another university underneath this one!”

The teacher smiled. “I know,” she said.

“Refund my tuition!” said the student. “Sell my books and buy me a shovel!”

“Ah,” said the teacher. “But it isn’t a shovel we need to reach that other university.”

“What is it then?”

“A union.”

—*Jakob Grim*

GSU organizes graduate student workers and campaigns for better wages, healthcare, and working conditions. To join, email gsu@riseup.net or see <http://uchicagogsu.org/>