



U.E. Local 896
Campaign to Organize
Graduate Students



Open Letter Regarding COVID-19 and Graduate Workers at the University of Iowa

April 15th, 2020

To President Harreld, Provost Fuentes, the Board of Regents, and Deans of all Colleges at the University of Iowa,

Thus far during the pandemic, graduate employees have had no voice in the sweeping changes and decisions that drastically impact our livelihood. We make up a large portion of both teachers and researchers here at the University. Our contributions are vital to the continued success of the University's research and teaching missions.

We believe it is urgent that graduate workers' needs be recognized and met. The University of Iowa's Campaign to Organize Graduate Students (COGS/UE Local 896) demands that the administration take the following steps to address the health, safety, and financial security of its graduate employees:

I. Expand health insurance coverage for all graduate students and their dependents through the duration of this crisis.

The explosion of COVID-19 in the US makes clear that access to healthcare is vital for the social and economic wellbeing of all, including graduate students and their families. Thanks to years of bargaining by COGS, the majority of these costs are covered through our employment at the University. However, healthcare benefits must be expanded to cover graduate students without an appointment, those for whom insurance plans covering dependents are financially out of reach, and undergraduate students without access to affordable healthcare. The University should immediately move to guarantee 90% coverage of healthcare fees regardless of employment status for all graduate and undergraduate students at least until the end of this crisis.

II. Guaranteed stipend (2019-2020 contract) support throughout the academic year regardless of potential University closures.

Many universities across the nation are closing their doors early in order to limit the spread of COVID-19. The possibility of closures at the University of Iowa is making graduate workers uncertain about their employment status and ability to cover basic living expenses, and there has been no word yet from the University on their plan for graduate workers. The University must provide workers assurance of employment and payment including in the event of an early closure and/or changes to summer course offerings.

It is imperative that the University guarantee the continuation of the current stipend stipulated in workers' contracts for the remainder of the spring semester. It must also distribute offer letters for next fall by April 15, 2020. The University should also honor any current contracts signed for teaching and research assistant positions for the 2020 summer sessions even as summer classes are moved online and administratively rearranged. Graduate employees have already committed to teaching these courses by signing leases, planning finances, and deferring other opportunities.

III. Immediately implement a summer subsidy program for graduate workers equivalent to their current monthly salary to be paid out in July and August.

Now more than ever, it is imperative that the University guarantee all graduate employees the financial security necessary to advance in their degrees and succeed as teachers and researchers. To do so, the University must provide financial support to all graduate students throughout the summer months.

In recent years, many department's lines of summer support have diminished, leaving graduate students to look for work outside of the University to pay bills and buy groceries until school starts again. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates and accentuates this ongoing problem. With shelter in place orders likely, and many businesses around Iowa City reducing staff and shutting their doors, these extra-mural work opportunities are unlikely to be sufficient to provide for the livelihoods of hundreds of graduate students.

Record numbers of Americans are already applying for unemployment benefits. The University should do all it can to support graduate students by other means.

To this point, available local emergency funding options like micro-grants are grossly inadequate to meet current needs and are exclusionary in their requirements. It is incumbent upon the University to provide meaningful, accessible support for graduate students through the summer months in order for the vast majority of us to continue our studies, remain safe, and return to work in the fall.

IV. Commit to proactively finding solutions to ensure that, as travel restrictions change, all graduate workers, especially international students, will be able to continue their employment, research, scholarship, and teaching at the University of Iowa. Provide financial support to those graduate students whose resident status makes them ineligible for current federal aid and/or off-campus work.

Many graduate workers travel to pursue research, participate in conferences, and take advantage of professional development opportunities every year. The University must ensure that the limitations on travel in no way negatively impact graduate workers' time-to-degree or appointments. It should communicate clearly and quickly with graduate workers about how it plans to honor financial commitments it has made to graduate workers who find themselves obligated to delay or make other adjustments to their travel plans due to COVID-19.

International graduate workers, in particular, face a unique set of problems due to the current pandemic that require the University's support. They have traveled from countries across the world to study and work for the University. Many are now having to weigh possible travel home with the health and economic risks of doing so as well as uncertainties about being able to return to Iowa. The University must quickly and effectively provide international graduate workers with clear guidelines for and assistance in making decisions about travel in the coming months.

International graduate workers and students are also more financially vulnerable than many of their domestic colleagues. Those with student VISAs are restricted from seeking work outside the University. With summer appointments in flux, these students may feel the threat of economic hardship most harshly. Additionally, certain international graduate students are excluded from receiving the benefit offered through the CARES Act. Along with providing a summer subsidy to all graduate workers, COGS thus compels the University to coordinate

additional financial support for international students equal to the aid they would receive from the federal government if they were eligible.

- V. Immediately provide 100% refund of student fees, lab and other course fees, and other costs associated with physically attending the University of Iowa.**

The University has rightly decided to limit access to physical buildings on campus and to close additional campus resources until further notice. However, this means that many of the “mandatory” fees levied each semester on graduate students are no longer needed without access to many of these services. A complete refund of these fees would help ease the financial burden for many in the short term. As employees of the University of Iowa, we should not have to pay to work under any circumstances, but especially during these trying times.

- VI. Ensure adequate work accommodations for graduate workers who are tasked with additional/increased Childcare, Eldercare, or other domestic/private duties due to the Covid-19 Pandemic and the associated job losses, layoffs, school closures, etc. and thereby require more flexibility in scheduling, deadlines, etc.**
- VII. Work with programs across campus to ensure the protection of graduate workers in the long term. Most urgently, this includes guaranteeing that the total years of funding departments have promised to graduate workers is adjusted appropriately in cases in which a workers’ time-to-degree is impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.**

We are asking that graduate employees be part of the conversation moving forward, throughout the current crisis and beyond. Although we all find ourselves in unprecedented times, the concerns we outline here are long-standing problems for graduate student employees of the University of Iowa. We therefore contend that while the emergency actions listed above are necessary in the short term, they are also important steps toward providing for the basic needs of all graduate workers as well as ensuring that we may be better prepared as a community for future disasters, whatever they may be.

The Members of COGS/UE Local 896