

UI graduate students want better pay, tuition waived, fees reimbursed

COGS president: Fees are 'backdoor tuition'



The Old Capitol Building on the Pentacrest on campus of the University of Iowa in Iowa City on Wednesday, April 30, 2014. (Stephen Mally/The Gazette-KCRG TV9)

By [Vanessa Miller](#), The Gazette

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IOWA CITY — The University of Iowa graduate student union is asking for higher pay, full tuition scholarships, and fee reimbursements for its members.

Representatives with the UI's Campaign to Organize Graduate Students, or COGS, made those requests Monday while presenting their initial proposal for a 2015-2017 collective bargaining agreement to the state Board of Regents, and UI officials.

"We feel there have been underhanded attempts to roll back gains that we have made," said Jeannette Gabriel, a UI graduate student and COGS president.

Specifically, Gabriel said, the union feels a previously negotiated tuition scholarship based on resident graduate tuition rates for the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is being undermined by mounting mandatory fees.

"The imposition of fees has had a disastrous effect on gains we have made," she said.

Representing about 2,300 UI graduate teaching and research assistants, the union on Monday began bargaining its 10th two-year contract with the university and state. The next negotiations meeting is Nov. 17.

The union's proposed contract aspires to three main goals — increasing financial support, bettering degree completion rates and improving care for students with families, Gabriel said.

"We want you to consider that graduate students are not just employees," she said. "We are people with families and children of our own."

To that end, the union has proposed changes to the current contract's health insurance coverage, including increasing the employer's contribution for dependent coverage and decreasing the cost of care plans.

The new contract also proposes increasing the minimum salary for bargaining unit employees in the 2015-16 academic year from \$17,680 to \$18,894 for a 50 percent academic year appointment and from \$21,604 to \$23,084 for a 50 percent fiscal year appointment.

Union members, in the contract proposal, suggest higher salary increases for returning employees. Academic-year appointees, for example, currently see an increase of \$350, and COGS is requesting that jump to \$814.

The tuition waiver proposed in the new contract would cover all employees who are on a 25 percent or more appointment. The current waiver included in the 2013-2015 contract covers graduate employees at the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences tuition rate, even though some schools and colleges — like the College of Education — have increased the cost of tuition above that rate.

"We are asking for the tuition waiver to equally apply to all members of the bargaining unit and include the College of Education," Gabriel said.

The union is asking that a new Summer Hawk Tuition Grant program for undergraduate students, introduced earlier this year by UI President Sally Mason, be offered to graduate students as well. The

program awards Iowa residents a scholarship to cover tuition charges for up to 12 credit hours of summer courses.

“We are teaching the classes and yet we cannot take them because we don’t receive a summer tuition waiver,” Gabriel said. “Since it’s being given to undergraduates, we see no reason it can’t be given to graduate students.”

As for mandatory fees, the union wants them reimbursed to all students serving a 25 percent or more appointment. Many students pay thousands in fees, and Gabriel called that “backdoor tuition.”

“We are asking you to withdraw from this backdoor tuition and instead take responsibility for administrative fees at the university level,” she said.

During the initial collective bargaining discussion, union officials pressed the Board of Regents Office for information they’ve requested about the use of student fees. The union made the request mid-September, and members still are awaiting the information, said Jennifer Marsh, union field organizer.

Board officials said they’re gathering the data, but it was not immediately available because they don’t track it in the manner it was requested. Union representatives argued it should have been publicly available and provided to them by now.

“Bargaining begins today,” Gabriel said. “We don’t consider that an acceptable response.”

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