

Note: This document is not intended to be a word-for-word transcript of the Town Hall, but please do email gsg@princeton.edu or josesf@princeton.edu directly if you find any inaccuracies.

Context: The Unionization Town Hall was organized by the Graduate Student Government (GSG), with Daniel Vitek (GSG Academic Affairs) in the lead. In the run up to the event, the GSG made open calls to the graduate student body for panelists willing to speak for either the anti- or pro-unionization sides of the discussion. We note that although some of the panelists on both sides of the discussion are members of GSG Assembly (Robert Decker, Joshua Wallace, Sophie Moullin), the opinions of the panelists in no way represent those of the GSG, which has taken a neutral stance on the issue of unionization.

Pro-unionization panelists:

- Robert Decker (French and Italian)
- Ian Walling (Politics) later joined the panel to answer questions

Anti-unionization panelists:

- Kurt Ristroph (Chemical and Biological Engineering)
- Joshua Wallace (Astrophysical Sciences)
- Sophie Moullin (Sociology)

Moderator: Daniel Vitek

Format

- 30 minutes for panelists (10 minutes for pro- and anti-unionization, with 5-minute response periods)
- 60 minutes for open forum Q&A session

Introduction (Daniel Vitek)

In August, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that grad students at private universities could unionize. Unionization efforts have sprouted at several peer institutions. The first step in the process is for a group of students on campus to find a national union they want to work with (for Princeton, this is the American Federation of Teachers, AFT). The next step is an authorization drive, where 30% of the proposed bargaining unit must sign authorization cards (this has not yet happened at Princeton, but has happened at other peer institutions, such as Harvard, for example). After certification of the authorization drive, there has to be an election (some peer institutions have now reached this point).

Panel discussion

Robert Decker

- A union at Princeton would be a union of grad students, by graduate students, dealing with issues faced by grad students. Interested in hearing what issues and concerns you would like to see addressed.
- At present, the organizations that advocate for graduate students rely on the administration for funding and approval. The administration uses the GSG as a voice,

and there is no binding requirement for the administration to address concerns raised by the GSG. The greatest power the GSG has is as an advisory body because GSG depends on PU administration of its budget. What is exciting about the unionization process is that it would be an opportunity to have a conversation with the graduate student body to determine what the problems are that we are facing and what the means are to resolve those problems.

- Unionization will not move forward until we have a campus wide conversation on grad student needs. We want to use a bottom up approach to find solutions for common issues. Through collective bargaining, we can do more than simply advise the administration.
- Graduate students play an integral role at the University, not just in our opinion, but in the opinion of the administration [note: this is a reference to Dean Sanjeev Kulkarni's presentation at the October 2016 GSG Assembly meeting where he discussed the conclusions reached by the *Task Force on the Future of the Graduate School*].
- In the current political climate, we can all appreciate the collegiate environment we have here at Princeton. Everyone interested in unionization wants to do so in a collegiate manner, and with the other relevant parties such as the graduate school, because of the goals we share.

Sophie Moullin

- NLRB ruling applies to research and teaching assistants. The teaching duties are at most about 10 hours/week, yet Princeton graduate students make twice the poverty line amount. Princeton has some of the most generous family policies across graduate schools (including up to 6 months paid parental leave, additional leaves of absence). Princeton graduate students also receive health insurance, subsidized housing, free transportation, research and travel funding. Putting all this together, comparing Princeton graduates experience good economic security, even when compared with people training for MDs, for example.
- Believe the reason Princeton does that for its graduate students is the fact that we have an effective democratic voice through the GSG. Recently, regarding changes to family planning, the GSG raised issues and the administration has since responded. It has been done through a shared collective academic ethos and goals, and not through economic modeling.
- There are many concerns we would like to hear (housing, health, etc.) but would be better off doing that by appealing through shared values and mission rather than bargaining.
- The argument against unionization for Princeton graduate students is the opposite of the usual argument – not unionizing is protecting the right not to be a worker.

Joshua Wallace

- Princeton graduate students don't really need to unionize to address their needs. Have had a lot of experience working with administration on all sorts of issues, including

housing, family, or communication, and found them to be very responsive, very interested in what we want to say.

- The current situation is given free of charge. Everyone who'd be represented by the union would have to pay money to the union, at a cost of \$300-600/year. Some of the fees would be charged to students regardless of whether they voted for the union or not.
- Not all concerns graduate students have can be addressed by a union. Unions address employee-employer relations. They cannot address issues like housing. If we do decide to unionize, would like to make sure it's because of issues that the union can address.

[Note: the fee structure proposed by AFT was later clarified to be \$19/month for the full fee – some of the union members would pay a reduced fee.]

Robert Decker

- This would be our union, consisting of graduate students, and that all of the policies put in place would be agreed by graduate students, which include fee structures. Nothing would be imposed on the graduate students.
- All of the other specific concerns can be dealt with, with the union. Invite all to be a part of the process so that we can make sure we don't have a union which is not working with us.
- It's good to have people who are skeptical, because we need to make sure their concerns are addressed and we need dialogue with students to build a union.

Richard Anderson (History)

- Speaking to past experience as a member of a graduate student union (at the University of Massachusetts).
- In two years as a Master's student, in no way was the union an impediment to, or something that diminished the graduate students' relationship with the administration. It served as insurance. Have had friends who filed grievances and they were glad to have an independent third party working on their behalf.
- There are differences between the two universities (e.g. compensation). But union would be an additional body advocating for our needs alongside the GSG.
- Disagree with the point that the union would not be able to bargain on issues like housing and, as an example, a union could have been helpful when the Lakeside issues were at hand.

Ian Walling (Politics)

- Have been involved in unionization efforts since May. Became interested in unionizing graduate students after running across stories of students who were sexually harassed, or victims of racism, without there being a meaningful form of accountability.
- The union is a democratic organization for accountability. People pool their resources in an organization they control from the bottom up, such that they have leverage. The GSG has a voice, but don't believe it has leverage.

- Evidence shows that, with unions, attrition rates go down, and the relationship between the student body and the administration improve.
- Have met many people who were being harassed, who were leaving the university for a job market they were not prepared for, or who could not afford housing. Unions are not bulletproof, but they're a tool for accountability.

Kurt Ristroph

- Would like to stress a direct quote from the University's general legal counsel that (paraphrase): A union is a separate legal entity and the University is required by law to deal exclusively with the union. That would mean we are forbidden to negotiate with the graduate school as individuals.
- We are a diverse group of people, each with our own departments, different family situations. Painting graduate students with a broad brush, such as with a union, is not worth it.
- Existing mechanisms for dealing with issues include deans, department representatives, and anonymous reporting. With unionization, the administration's hands are tied in dealing with individual issues.
- It's up to you to decide, but believe some things should be required explicitly in writing, such as: what would the union fees be, when would they apply? Would they come from our stipend only, or would it be a percentage amount on the tuition as well?
- It would be great to have a conversation between students, but that conversation could be had with the GSG. The unionization seeks a collective solution to the problems we all face, but it might be an unfair representation since we are diverse.
- The collegiate atmosphere is a great thing, but fear bringing in a third party and require the administration to deal exclusively with that party would disrupt that atmosphere.
- Encourage all to think if unionization is worth it. Consider the costs. If the fees are in the \$300-600 dollar range, they could be balanced by a renegotiation of stipends, but those additional funds would come from services that the University provides.

Daniel Vitek

- At peer institutions, agency fees tend to be 1-2% of the student stipend.
- GSG is not free (we pay \$16/year for it)

Open Floor Q&A

Question: What is the leverage of a union?

- Sophie Moullin: With a union, the leverage would come from the financial value of the services we provide to the university, which is very tiny. If the university decided not to bargain on housing, or decided that teaching would be reduced, there would be no leverage.
- Ian Walling: Power is a really hard thing to estimate in a social system, but there is a change in behavior in schools that unionized compared to schools that don't. In no small part this is because no one wants a strike. There have been very few strikes in the history of graduate student unions. In the few cases they have happened, they involved

teaching assistants refusing to precept or grade. Change of behavior on the part of the administration in schools with unions goes against the idea that unions don't provide leverage.

Question: Haven't encountered any provisions for academic grievances in peer institution union contracts. Are there any?

- Sankar Suryanarayan (Princeton General Counsel): The question is: under what areas is there a duty to negotiate? From the Columbia decision (paraphrased): Congress has limited amending to matters of wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment. There might be some gray area under "terms and conditions of employment", but this is a new area. The university's position would say that terms and conditions of employment would refer to terms and conditions of serving as an AI or AR.

Question: What happens to students who are on fellowships? Are there precedents from peer institutions?

- Daniel Vitek: It depends on the contract. It would depend on the bargaining unit. Note that the bargaining unit can be subject to further negotiation (additional students can be added, for example).
- Robert Decker: PGSU is seeking to build a bargaining unit that is as broad as possible, and would include students who either have, will, or are currently serving as an AR or AI.

Question: What if a student is on a 3-year NSF fellowship, for example?

- Ian Walling: The Union cannot negotiate with external funding sources.
- Sankar Suryanarayan: Generally agree that a lot of the questions on specifics will have to be discussed between the graduate students and the union (on who will be included in the bargaining unit).

Question: What would be the relationship between us and the wider union? What are the specific services they would provide?

- Ian Walling: First, would like to note that \$600/year would be a spectacular fee
- Daniel Vitek: It is within the peer-institution range
- The AFT proposal is \$19/month for the full fee (many students in the bargaining unit would be paying a reduced fee)
- Daniel Vitek: For reference, fees at peer-institutions fall in the \$300-500/year range.
- Ian Walling: AFT devolves most of the power to the local chapter. It does not decide, for example, who we'd vote for, who'd lead our union, whether we're going on strike. AFT would provide access to resources, such as experience organizers and lawyers who can provide legal counsel.
- Robert Decker: To reiterate, we would have full control of the policies.

Question: Regarding the clause that says the university will only negotiate with the union. Could you say more about that?

- Sankar Suryanarayan: A union is a separate legal entity and an employer is required by law to negotiate with that labor union on hours, wages, and terms and conditions of employment. When there is a labor union, it is the exclusive legal entity for bargaining. Could a faculty member negotiate with an individual graduate student? Under labor law, no.
- Robert Decker: While the university would be negotiating with the union, we are the union. The people they'll be negotiating with are graduate students.
- Daniel Vitek: Many of the unions at peer institutions have PA positions for graduate students, whereby they are employed by the union to serve on those roles.
- Sophie Moullin: Any decision by the union will be a majority rule approach. This is concerning especially because of minorities, and unions have a very poor record regarding minority groups.

Question: I'm concerned about having to strike as an RA. As a biologist, I can't strike, otherwise the living things I work with would die.

- Ian Walling: No one can be forced to go on strike. Also can't recall a single instance of graduate student unions where live animals were abandoned.
- Daniel Vitek: One of the selling points of AFT was that union-wide strikes are not a policy.

Question: Say I have an issue with the university. What is the path I would take to get that issue resolved? At which point does an official union representative have to take over?

- Ian Walling: There is no single mechanism. Unions typically represent individuals when there are issues like having employment terminated. The union will have to negotiate for how it establishes terms and conditions of employment. One of the things unions advocate for is having union representatives in the room when individuals are being subjected to disciplinary rulings, for example. You would talk to your representative, or to paid workers at the union to go over what issues are in the contract that are being negotiated.
- Daniel Vitek: Union contracts typically have grievances administration procedures.
- Sophie Moullin: That doesn't answer the question of whether you have to go through the union.
- Ian Walling: You don't have to go through the union if you want to complain to someone. It doesn't constrain you such that you couldn't say to your advisor that you're having problems right now.
- Sankar Suryanarayan: To put it in concrete terms, imagine there is a limit on the number of hours an AR can serve in a lab. Imagine there is some project going on that requires additional time. Could the faculty member and the graduate school arrive at a conclusion? This is the challenge of the union being the exclusive representative of the bargaining unit. Labor law prohibits that individual arrangement.
- Kurt Ristroph: It is possible, if you took your issue to your union representative, that they would not take your case.

- Ian Walling: This depends on the internal organization of the union. But unions are run by sane people who would not want to impose unreasonable limits on the amount of hours you can work on your research.

Question: What would be the implications of unionization on visa or tax status?

- Sankar Suryanarayan: From the university's FAQ – (paraphrased) status as an international student would not impact inclusion in the bargaining unit.
- Sophie Moullin: For J-1 visas, there are specific restrictions, visa holders are approved to participate in both work and study-based programs. However, F-1/student visa holders cannot work. [Note: this is not true - both F-1 and J-1 visa-holders can do on-campus work.]
- Robert Decker: Whether or not we unionize has no bearing on your immigration status based on labor law. Graduate student unions at other schools have offered international students help with visas.
- Sankar Suryanarayan: Regarding tax, aside from the tax implications on the dues and fees, don't believe there is much of an implication.

Question: How do you intend to keep graduate students better informed about the unionization efforts going on?

- Hrishikesh Somayaji (Chemistry): The initial organizing group was just a bunch of people who wanted to unionize. On the run up to the affiliation vote, we realized there were people who wanted to democratize the process, which led to the flyer initiative and the absentee voting stations [note: this is a reference to voting stations set up by PGSU at various points on campus for absentee voting in the decision for PGSU to affiliate with AFT]. Now that PGSU has affiliated, there is access to resources, including personnel that will be based on campus. The outreach effort will reach everyone on campus. The next efforts will be to get at least 30% of the proposed bargaining unit to sign a union card, and the unionization vote would happen next.
- Daniel Vitek: For clarification, the binding unionization vote would be administered by the NLRB.
- Q: I wasn't worried about the vote. I was worried about being heard.
- Ian Walling: I would encourage you to come to the meetings (which are held every Tuesday) and to join the Facebook group. Would also point out that any other group of students can propose affiliation with a different union.
- Robert Decker: We are also in the process of implementing a department by department outreach. If you'd like to be a liaison for the students in the department, please contact us.
- Hrishikesh Somayaji: We also have a listserv. If you want to up-to-date on our events, you can reach out to me and we can add you to the listserv.

Question: You were saying many of the issues that concern us involve things like housing, time to completion, summer funding, and support for finding postgraduate employment. It's not clear

that those fall under terms of employment, but I know there have been provisions for those at peer institutions.

- Daniel Vitek: There are occasionally terms related to time of completion. Have not seen anything on housing or postgraduate employment support in peer institution contracts.
- Sankar Suryanarayan: The University believes that housing is not subject to collective bargaining. Our position is based on the fact that housing relates to the student status, not to AI or AR status. There was a 2010 state case involving graduate assistance, in which the Illinois board said (paraphrase): housing is not subject to terms and conditions, and housing rates are not a mandatory bargaining point.
- Ian Walling: It's not mandatory, but, historically, unions have done that. At NYU this was one of the issues that came up. Just because it's not mandatory it does not mean that it can't happen.

Question: If there is unionization, and if unions bargain for changes to stipends, where would those additional funds come from?

- Dean Sanjeev Kulkarni (Graduate School): It's really hard to say. There is a fixed budget, and there are always tradeoffs.
- Robert Decker: It's my understanding that the graduate school intends to expand.
- Sanjeev Kulkarni: In the task force report, the first recommendation is that if we grow faculty in certain areas then we would have to grow the graduate school in those areas as well.
- Robert Decker: That is important to note. I don't think we need to worry about a punitive measure in which the graduate school would axe our positions. We also can't know what Princeton's budget allocation is going to look like – it's my understanding that they don't talk about it. It's also worth noting that Princeton has a \$22.7 billion endowment, so I would be skeptical of an argument that would say Princeton cannot afford this. As an example, in Rutgers, whose endowment is 1/22th of Princeton's, they offer competitive stipends.
- Sanjeev Kulkarni: Right now, graduate students are involved in the discussion and setting of stipends. There is a committee called the Priorities Committee that helps make decisions on the budget and there are graduate students on that committee.
- Sophie Moullin: This is where the analogy of the university and a company does not hold. Why is it not sufficient to have a democratic dialogue?

[Note: the meeting proceeded for an additional 20 minutes, but I had to be present at the GSG Assembly Meeting for further note-taking. I would invite anyone who has notes on the last few minutes of the Town Hall to reach out at josesf@princeton.edu]

