

FACT-CHECKING GRADUATE STUDENT UNIONIZATION CLAIMS

The pros and cons of union membership can be confusing, particularly for those who have no prior experience with unions. Listed below are some claims that have been made by organizers seeking to unionize Princeton’s graduate students, along with straightforward facts about those claims.

This document was prepared by the Office of the Dean of the Graduate School, with input by the Office of the General Counsel and the Labor Relations team in the Office of Human Resources.

Claim	The Facts
<p><i>Unionization will not cost you a penny.</i></p>	<p>Unions cost money. They collect national, state and local dues from members and fees from non-members. Dues collection usually happens as an automatic deduction from each union member’s paycheck. Non-union members are required to pay agency fees. This money is used to compensate the union’s paid staff and pay the union’s bills and overhead. No union can guarantee that a negotiated contract will provide wage increases that exceed total dues and fees.</p> <p>According to AFT’s proposal, some Princeton graduate assistants would be required to pay \$19.03/month to AFT (national) and \$10/month to AFTNJ (state); some graduate assistants would only pay a percentage of the \$29.03/month, depending on their level of salary. This does not include local dues.</p>

Claim	The Facts
<p><i>Graduate students will have full control of the structures and bylaws of the union and will make every decision, from the most mundane to the most important.</i></p>	<p>Unions are distinct legal entities, with their own formal constitutions and bylaws. While it is true that graduate students will exercise primary control over matters affecting only their local chapter, their decisions must be consistent with the bylaws and requirements of the overarching union.</p> <p>Individual members asserting grievances may not have control over their own grievances. Typically, it is elected graduate student representatives – not individual graduate student union members – who have final authority to make decisions in individual or class grievances alleging that the contract has been violated.</p>

Claim	The Facts
<p><i>Even if you are completely content with how things are at Princeton, you should still want a union, because it will only make things better.</i></p>	<p>There is no guarantee that engaging with a union will make things better, for any individual or for any group of individuals.</p> <p>The NLRB stipulates that in a contract negotiation, the union and employer are required to bargain “in good faith.” But, they “are not compelled to reach agreement or make concessions.” See NLRB, <i>Employer/Union Rights and Obligations</i>, available here: https://www.nlr.gov/rights-we-protect/employerunion-rights-and-obligations</p> <p>The ultimate outcome on things like pay, hours, and benefits could improve, get worse, or stay the same.</p> <p>Contracts remain in force for several years, meaning that once a contract is approved, there may be limited opportunities for changes or improvements to things covered in the contract until it expires.</p>

Claim	The Facts
<p><i>Strikes won't happen, and even if they do you will not be impacted if you choose not to strike.</i></p>	<p>There have been strikes in the past by graduate students at NYU and Yale.</p> <p>No union can guarantee that its members will not be impacted if they choose not to strike. For example, a union cannot control how striking union members choose to interact with and treat non-striking members.</p> <p>Unions are permitted to impose fines on those who cross the picket line.</p> <p>The NLRB recognized in the <i>Columbia University</i> decision that “strikes pose the possibility of a disruption with significant costs, given the value and/or time-sensitivity of the goods and services involved.” P. 11, n. 89.</p>

Claim	The Facts
<p><i>The union would never bargain for things students don't want, including limits on research work for STEM students.</i></p>	<p>No union can guarantee that it will never bargain over issues that some students don't want. Different members of a bargaining unit are likely to have different priorities. Some members may want limits on hours; others may not. Once there is a contract, it applies to everyone in the bargaining unit.</p> <p>The union's focus is on the interest of the collective. Individual arrangements outside of the contract are generally not permissible. If students wish to work hours beyond limits specified in the contract, the University would not be able to permit such activity because it would violate the contract.</p>

Claim	The Facts
<p><i>The union won't press a one-size-fits-all policy across all departments. We will take into account differences across departments and even subfields within departments, and we will spell out the contract in any way we want.</i></p>	<p>The goal of collective bargaining is to reach a contract that governs the whole group. Not all members of a bargaining unit will have the same priorities, but there is a single contract for the whole bargaining unit.</p> <p>The union does not get to spell out the contract in any way it wants, and it does not get to make unilateral decisions about what is included in the contract. The term "collective bargaining" means there is "bargaining," and the outcome of bargaining can be difficult to predict.</p>

Claim	The Facts
<p><i>International students should want a union. A union offers legal protections to international students at risk of having to leave the U.S.</i></p>	<p>No union has the ability to prevent the U.S. Government from denying visas or work permits or deporting international students.</p> <p>Princeton has been outspoken on behalf of international students and is committed to offering support, including legal support, to students threatened by changes in immigration policies. You can read more about this at these links: http://www.princeton.edu/president/eisgruber/docs/Presidents-Letter-Immigration.pdf https://www.princeton.edu/main/news/archive/S49/09/76K41/index.xml?section=topstories</p>

Claim	The Facts
<p><i>No one is ever forced to join the union, so if you don't like a union just don't join it – but let those of us who want one have one.</i></p>	<p>Even if a graduate student assistant does not join the union, the student's terms of employment would still be dictated by the collective bargaining agreement that the union negotiates with the University.</p> <p>Those who do not join the union would still be charged "agency fees," which could total as much as 90% of the normal dues amount. Students who do not join the union would not be permitted to participate in union votes for things like elections of union leaders or approval of a contract.</p>

Claim	The Facts
<p><i>Princeton gives its faculty and staff better healthcare than we get. A union will provide us better healthcare.</i></p>	<p>No union can guarantee that the outcome of collective bargaining will include better health benefits.</p> <p>The current student health plan is provided at no cost to all regularly enrolled Ph.D. students and includes free access to McCosh Health Center, where students can see a variety of doctors and specialists without even a co-pay. Students with unexpected medical bills may receive grants to help them pay those bills through the dean's office.</p> <p>Princeton faculty and staff pay monthly premiums for their health care, pay co-payments for doctor visits, and do not have access to McCosh Health Center for primary care.</p> <p>You may learn more about University Health Services, the student health plan, and graduate student enrollment here: http://uhs.princeton.edu/student-health-plan</p>

Claim	The Facts
<p><i>A union would get us additional student housing.</i></p>	<p>The University does not consider housing to be subject to collective bargaining. Housing is provided to students in their roles as students, and is not tied in any way to their roles as teaching assistants (AIs) or research assistants (ARs).</p>

Claim	The Facts
<p><i>A union will give us a voice in how the university allocates resources, something we don't have now. Princeton is secretive about its budget and could easily afford to give us even higher stipends without making cuts anywhere else.</i></p>	<p>Graduate students have a voice. Each year two graduate students serve on the Priorities Committee, which has a major voice in how the University allocates resources.</p> <p>The Priorities Committee is expected to recommend a balanced budget. This means that proposals to increase spending in one area must be offset by proposals to cutback spending or forego increases in other areas. The Priorities Committee proposes annual increases in graduate stipend levels, and every year these increases have been approved by the trustees. The committee publishes its reports on budget allocation decisions; reports from the last 14 years are available here: https://www.princeton.edu/provost/priorities-committee/</p>