

**GRADUATE STUDENT EMPLOYEE COLLECTIVE
BARGAINING AND THE EDUCATIONAL
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FACULTY
AND GRADUATE STUDENTS**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the attitudes and experiences of faculty members who teach and advise graduate students who are also members of a graduate student employee union. Administrators at universities where graduate student union organizing drives are occurring state that a collective bargaining agreement for graduate student employees would inhibit the faculty's ability to instruct and advise their graduate students and that the unique educational relationship between graduate students and the faculty would be disrupted. This study examined this administrative theory by analyzing the attitudes of almost 300 faculty members at five university campuses that have had graduate student collective bargaining for at least four years. Results show that faculty do not have negative attitudes toward graduate student bargaining and believe that student bargaining does not interfere with their ability to advise, instruct, and mentor their graduate students.

Graduate assistantships play an integral role in doctoral education. They are a source of financial support for students and provide intellectual, methodological, and pedagogical training for future faculty members. They also provide institutions of higher education a valuable pool of employees to help carry out the missions of teaching, research, and service. Many critics, however, have expressed concern over the proliferation and professionalization of graduate assistants in the last twenty-five years. Students have increasingly relied on assistantships as

federal grants and scholarships have dried up, and as revenue resources have become more scarce institutions have relied on graduate students to teach undergraduate courses and to compete for research money. In its report on graduate education, the Association of American Universities expressed concern over student interests being subsumed by institutional and faculty interests and having the educational benefits of graduate assistantships undermined [1].

Coupled with a weak faculty job market that discourages students from quickly completing their degrees and looking for full-time jobs, the increased dependence on graduate assistantships has created a group of workers who demand more economic benefits and workplace rights. But as these graduate students demand greater involvement in workplace decisions, primarily through union organizing activities, tensions between educational and economic priorities have surfaced. While graduate student employee organizations claim teaching and research assistants are entitled to collective bargaining rights like other employee groups, university administrators argue that graduate assistants are primarily students, not employees, and should be governed by educational policy, not by a collective bargaining agreement.

While graduate student unions have been around since 1969, when the University of Wisconsin's Teaching Assistants Association was recognized, it has been in the 1990s that large numbers of graduate student employees have attempted to unionize at colleges and universities in the United States. In 1992 and 1998 graduate teaching and research assistants in the University of California System went on strike seeking recognition for collective bargaining and, in 1999 finally won recognition from the university administration. In the State University of New York (SUNY) system, the Graduate Student Employee Union successfully negotiated its first contract with the State of New York in 1994 after voting to unionize. This certification vote was the culmination of almost twenty years of negotiations, work stoppages, and court cases aimed at obtaining recognition as an employee union in SUNY [2]. In the latter 1990s graduate student unions have also won recognition elections at the universities of Iowa and Kansas, Wayne State University, and Oregon State University

Since the NLRB ruled against graduate student unionization in a series of cases in the 1970s, there are currently no graduate student collective bargaining units in any private universities. Intense organizational activity at Yale and New York Universities in the 1990s, however, has led to cases where the NLRB, in the near future, may reconsider past decisions on the subject.

The public debates between university administrators and graduate student unions over the merits of collective bargaining for graduate students frame the theoretical foundation of this study. Union representatives, on one hand, argue graduate assistants are employees serving an important mission of the university and deserve bargaining rights like other employee groups. Administrators, on the other hand, claim graduate assistants are primarily students, not employees, and have an educational relationship with the faculty that cannot be dictated by

a collective bargaining agreement. The purpose of this study was to test this administrative theory—that collective bargaining interferes with the faculty’s ability to instruct and advise graduate students.

RESEARCH QUESTION

In Craig’s administrative analysis of the impact of graduate student collective bargaining on graduate education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, she noted collective bargaining has been a “challenge to faculty roles” [3, p. 60]. The notion that graduate student collective bargaining would be detrimental to the faculty’s ability to instruct and advise their graduate students was succinctly stated by Yale’s president, Richard Levin, in denying GESO’s request for a representation election in 1994:

Yale has consistently and correctly viewed study, research and teaching as integral to the educational program of each graduate student. Acquiring teaching experience is, for most students, an important part of the Ph.D. program, and the faculty plays a major role in this aspect of a student’s education and training. Moreover, there is and should be a direct educational relationship between a student and faculty member who serves as his or her teacher, research advisor, or supervisor in teaching. The effect of mandating the interposition of a third party, whether GESO or any other, into such a relationship would be to chill, rigidify and diminish it [4, p. 11].

Chancellor George Young of UCLA also invoked the disrupted relationship argument in fending off an organizing drive at his campus in 1996. In a letter to faculty and administrators, Young stated: “Unionization would seriously harm the flexibility, collegiality, and harmony the university strives to foster between our students and their academic mentors” [5, p. 81]. A similar concern was articulated at the University of Florida when graduate students undertook an organizing campaign in the early 1980s. According to the dean of the graduate school at the time, faculty and administrators felt the “close family relationship between student and faculty and the independent mentoring so necessary to doctoral education would be destroyed” [6, p. 57].

It is clear that institutional leaders facing graduate student collective bargaining feel a significant drawback to collective bargaining would be the faculty’s inability to develop and maintain a close relationship with their graduate students. Since the faculty plays a central role in this debate, it is important to understand the faculty’s beliefs of, and experiences with, graduate student collective bargaining. Thus, the research question I investigated was “What are the attitudes of faculty members towards graduate student employee collective bargaining at universities with a graduate student collective bargaining agreement.”

WHY FACULTY ATTITUDES MATTER

According to Walton and McKersie, one of the fundamental attitudinal dimensions underlying a collective bargaining relationship is the acceptance by one party of the legitimacy of the other [7]. Where such acceptance is present, positive attitudes leading to support of collective bargaining are more likely to be found. In contrast, refusal to accept the legitimacy of the union is likely to result in negative attitudes and reluctance to accept collective bargaining as a mechanism for joint decision making [8].

While Walton and McKersie's theory was developed with the industrial model—or at least the traditional management-union relationship—in mind, it is applicable to the faculty-graduate student employee relationship. While faculty and graduate student employees do not have a strict, traditional bargaining relationship (contract negotiations always occur between the administration and the union), in many ways they have a *de facto* bargaining relationship. First, faculty heavily influence administrative contract negotiating teams. For example, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, one-third of the negotiating team is made up of faculty members [9], and the University of Michigan one-half of the negotiation team is made up of faculty members.

Second, traditional organizational structures of shared governance inherently involve the faculty in administrative and policy decision making in regard to the bargaining and implementation of a graduate student collective bargaining agreement. As Damrosch said, “In questions of graduate education, the tenured faculty hold almost all the real power, and they are the only interest group with a strong voice within the university on these matters” [10, p. 165]. Graduate education at research universities is traditionally decentralized, with most decisions afflicting graduate students residing at the department level [11]. The philosophy behind this is that graduate education, especially at the doctoral level, is discipline-driven, and those with the most expertise in specific disciplines are the faculty. Therefore, when it comes to addressing issues having a direct impact on graduate students and graduate education, the faculty not only play an important part in the decision-making process, but will actually be the decision makers.

Third, and most importantly, faculty are almost solely responsible for the direct supervision of all graduate student employees and individually negotiate with the graduate students on a regular basis. According to Nyquist and Wulff, faculty supervisory positions over graduate assistants require faculty members to consistently assume a multidimensional role that includes being a manager, an educational role model, and a professional mentor [12]. Since the faculty's ability to mentor graduate students is the integral factor to the success or failure of graduate student collective bargaining, it is important to understand the aspects of a collective bargaining agreement that most directly affect that relationship.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A review of the literature showed that there was no empirical research conducted on the topic of graduate student collective bargaining. The primary impetus in designing a methodology for this study was to learn what was happening on the “shop floor,” or between the workers (graduate assistants) and their first-line supervisors (faculty). This could have been done in one of three ways: survey the faculty, survey the graduate students, or a combination of both. Faculty were selected because, as stated earlier, faculty attitudes were deemed to be important—not only are they part of the relationship that is being affected by collective bargaining, they also play an important role in institutional governance and decision-making. A descriptive design was selected that utilized survey methods with an attitudinal scale and continuous categorical items that elicit beliefs based on experience.

Faculty attitudes, the first construct of this study, were measured through an attitude scale. The scale’s purpose in this study was to measure the general positive or negative feelings of faculty toward graduate student collective bargaining and broader collective bargaining issues that may predetermine an opinion on collective bargaining for graduate students.

Faculty beliefs based on experience, the second construct of the study, were measured through close-ended questions with ordered, categorical answer choices. Beliefs are differentiated from attitudes based on the fact that there is no implied goodness or badness in beliefs, but only an assessment of what one thinks exists or does not exist [13]. For this study beliefs are based on the experience of the faculty members teaching and advising within the context of collective bargaining.

The population of interest was all faculty members in the liberal arts and sciences at universities with legally recognized graduate student collective bargaining agreements. The sample frame included graduate faculty—those faculty identified by the institution’s graduate school to instruct graduate students—in the liberal arts and sciences at the following institutions: University of Massachusetts-Amherst, State University of New York at Buffalo, University of Florida, University of Michigan, and the University of Oregon. The sample frame consisted of faculty representing the classic liberal arts and sciences since these areas extensively utilize both graduate teaching and research assistants [14, 15]. Also, it is in the liberal arts and sciences where many of the current organizing campaigns are beginning and flourishing.

The five universities were selected because of the twelve institutions in the population at the time, UMass Amherst, Michigan, Florida, and Oregon were the largest and most comprehensive in regard to doctoral programs offered. SUNY-Buffalo was chosen to represent the SUNY system, which is covered under one collective bargaining agreement, because it has the largest number of doctoral programs in the SUNY System. Other institutions with graduate student collective

bargaining not chosen did not have comprehensive graduate offerings or did not have collective bargaining in place for a sufficient length of time to conduct analysis. Rutgers and the City University of New York were not chosen because the graduate assistants are part of the faculty's collective bargaining unit, creating a faculty perspective that is different from the other institutions and possible threats to validity. The University of Wisconsin-Madison was utilized for the pilot study and was not part of the final study. A stratified random sampling strategy was used for this study. Specifically, graduate faculty from the three disciplinary groups making up the liberal arts and sciences—humanities, natural sciences and social sciences—were randomly selected by institution.

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

A survey questionnaire was developed to include three sections. Section A contained a graduate student collective bargaining attitude scale, Section B contained close-ended questions with continuous-categorical answer choices to collect belief responses based on experience, and Section C contained responses to collect demographic and professional data.

To measure attitudes, in Section A, a Likert-type scale was utilized to record faculty responses to statements about collective bargaining. There were five possible responses: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, and no opinion. Each of these responses were numerically coded for analysis, as follows: strongly agree = 1, agree = 2, disagree = 3, and strongly disagree = 4. No opinion was coded as missing data. To measure beliefs in Section B, a series of questions with continuous responses, such as “all times” to “never” or “yes,” “sometimes” and “no,” were used to record faculty's beliefs of graduate student collective bargaining based on their experiences. Validity was addressed through expert review of the instrument and by pretesting it in a pilot study. An item analysis was conducted after the pilot study, but no items were eliminated.

A stratified random sample of 1,000 faculty members in the liberal arts and sciences at the five universities was selected. Two hundred sample members were randomly selected at each institution. Each faculty member received a survey by mail, with a stamped return envelope, and a follow-up postcard one week later, thanking him/her for responding or reminding him/her to do so. Two hundred and ninety-nine completed surveys were returned. After deducting sample members who had retired, were on leave, were deceased, or returned blank or late surveys, the response rate was 30.7 percent. A subsequent analysis of response bias was conducted, where fifteen nonrespondents were randomly selected and responded to the survey by phone (one in person). There were no significant differences in the responses of the nonrespondents and those who submitted a survey.

RESULTS

Section A of the survey instrument consisted of a twelve-item Likert-type attitude scale developed to measure the general positive or negative cognitive beliefs of faculty toward graduate student collective bargaining and broader collective bargaining issues that may predetermine an opinion on collective bargaining for graduate students. As shown in Table 1, the faculty as a whole responded positively to ten of the twelve items.¹ The only items to which faculty reacted negatively were the items stating that labor union organizations understand institutions of higher education ($M = 2.89$) and that the presence of graduate student bargaining helps attract better students to the university ($M = 2.79$). Items the respondents felt most strongly about were their agreement with the statement that collective bargaining is good for any industry ($M = 0.35$) and their agreement with the statement that collective bargaining is appropriate for higher education ($M = 0.70$).

Based on an analysis of the responses to the individual items of the attitude scale, it is clear that faculty do not have a negative attitude toward graduate student collective bargaining. Faculty respondents, along with the item responses mentioned above, also felt that graduate assistants should be considered employees of the university (Item 1, $M = 0.85$), graduate assistants have the right to bargain collectively (Item 2, $M = 1.79$), and graduate student bargaining protects graduate assistants from unfair treatment (Item 11, $M = 1.96$).

Section B of the survey instrument consisted of thirteen close-ended questions designed to measure faculty beliefs based on experience. Two of the questions were categorical and the remaining contained ordered, continuous-answer choices. Beliefs are differentiated from attitudes based on the fact that there is no implied goodness or badness in beliefs, but only an assessment of what one thinks exists or doesn't exist.

Table 2 shows the frequency of responses for the significant items in Section B. The entire sample of faculty provided responses that reflected positive experiences with graduate student collective bargaining on all but one of the items. Items 1, 2, and 6 are especially important to note, for they directly address the theoretical underpinning of this study, which is the disruption of the educational relationship between faculty members and their graduate students. The results from these items show that student bargaining does not inhibit the faculty's ability to advise graduate students (90.4%); does not inhibit the faculty's ability to instruct graduate students (91.5%); and does not inhibit the faculty's mentor relationship with graduate students (87.9%).

Respondents were also given the opportunity to write comments in response to the items in Section B, as well as respond to a general open-ended question. The

¹Scale items were worded positively and negatively in the survey to avoid bias. The results of some of the scale items in Table 1 have been inverted to achieve reporting uniformity.

Table 1. Faculty Attitudes Toward Collective Bargaining

Item	M	SD	n
1. Graduate assistants should be considered employees of the university.	0.85	0.96	286
2. Graduate assistants have the <i>right</i> to bargain collectively.	1.79	0.84	278
3. Collective bargaining is <i>appropriate</i> for graduate assistants.	2.01	0.97	281
4. Collective bargaining is appropriate for higher education.	0.70	0.84	281
5. Collective bargaining is appropriate for faculty.	1.82	0.92	281
6. Labor union organizations understand the workings of an institution of higher education.	2.89	0.93	223
7. Labor union organizations have the best interest of the students at heart.	1.37	0.92	194
8. Graduate student collective bargaining has not led to a new group of permanent employees in the university.	0.85	0.73	211
9. Collective bargaining is good for any industry.	0.35	0.57	286
10. The presence of graduate student collective bargaining helps attract better students to the university.	2.79	0.92	209
11. Graduate student collective bargaining protects graduate assistants from unfair treatment.	1.96	0.80	273
12. Traditional university governance mechanisms are not more appropriate for resolution of issues between graduate students and the university than collective bargaining.	1.26	0.88	249

Note: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree. No opinion was coded as missing data. Varying *n*'s (numbers) are indicative of variation in the no-opinion response and other missing data.

Table 2. Faculty Experiences with Graduate Student Collective Bargaining (in Percent)

	Yes	Sometimes	No	Don't Know
1. Does the Graduate Student Collective Bargaining Agreement inhibit your ability to advise your graduate students?*	2.1	7.4	90.4	
2. Does the Graduate Student Collective Bargaining Agreement inhibit your ability to instruct your graduate students?*	3.2	5.3	91.5	
3. Does the Graduate Student Collective Bargaining Agreement help you think carefully about your actions toward graduate students?*	18.2	25.8	56.0	
4. Does the Graduate Student Collective Bargaining Agreement cause a limitation to the number of graduate students admitted to your program?	9.3	2.8	60.3	27.6
5. Does the Graduate Student Collective Bargaining Agreement allow for the selection of the most academically qualified graduate students for assistantships?	43.1	3.1	19.1	34.6
6. Does the Graduate Student Collective Bargaining Agreement inhibit the mentor relationship between you and your graduate students?*	3.6	8.5	87.9	
7. Does the Graduate Student Collective Bargaining Agreement inhibit the free exchange of ideas between you and your graduate students?*	1.4	3.6	95.0	
8. Does the Graduate Student Collective Bargaining Agreement restrict your ability to assign your graduate students diverse work assignments?*	12.7	16.5	70.8	
9. Does the grievance mechanism in the Graduate Student Collective Bargaining Agreement provide a good way of channeling and resolving complaints?	13.3	18.0	8.6	39.9
10. Does the Graduate Student Collective Bargaining Agreement create an adversarial relationship between you and graduate students?*	2.1	24.6	73.2	

Note: (*) "Don't Know" was not a response option for these items.

prevalent themes that emerged from the written comments can be categorized into three general viewpoints: pro-union, anti-union and nonideological. Pro-union viewpoints were characterized by empathy for the plight of graduate students and the positive effect the graduate student union has had on improving the conditions for graduate students. For example, one faculty member stated:

Grad students and any other employers/workers should have an association that can represent their interests as a group to management or the university administration. Labor unions have been perceived negatively or counter-productive in the last decade or so in the general population. However, I feel that workers need a collective voice that works with the administration for the benefit of the institution.

Another faculty member addressed the effectiveness of the graduate student union:

The graduate student union at our campus has had a positive impact on the working and, in turn, studying/research lives of our grad students through the agreements they've been able to negotiate. For our department, the contracts negotiated to date have helped regularize hiring, working in disciplinary procedures in positive ways.

Anti-union voices focused on the inappropriateness of collective bargaining for graduate students. Many felt the nature of the work and the academic environment are not conducive to collective bargaining. For example, one respondent wrote:

Our student union's demand for things like drop-in-child care is at best irrelevant and at worst unrealistic, as any grad student who is not spending full-time on studies/dissertation research and teaching is not going to succeed in a reasonable period of time (5-6 years). It is not unreasonable to expect students to put up with short term hardship to attain a long term goal of the highest level of education available.

Another faculty member stated his feeling succinctly by writing, "It's bad enough some faculty get involved with unions, now grad students!?"

There was also a strong negative response in the written comments from faculty members in the natural sciences, who felt that collective bargaining is especially inappropriate for graduate students in the sciences, for the nature of their work is different from students' work in the humanities and social science and that their students have more resources and greater compensation. An example of these beliefs is reflected in the following comments:

While potentially useful in some areas of the university, the union is less useful in the sciences and other areas where competition for graduate students keeps stipends and benefits high. I do not appreciate that collective bargaining is carried out by a small clique of graduate students who do not (and perhaps cannot) represent the diverse body of graduate students.

Pay steps, etc. are not relevant to the sciences where competition demands that pay scales are much higher than in the “liberal arts.”

I don’t think it [collective bargaining] is necessary for the sciences where all of the students are supported by grants. But among the non-science majors it may play an important role.

It was interesting to discover, however, that there were prominent concerns that cut across ideological viewpoints. For example, many faculty members who did not support graduate student bargaining still believed that graduate student employees are underpaid and generally exploited. Other concerns were also discussed by both pro-union and anti-union respondents. Many faculty members felt that union activities—both general organizational activities and work actions—took too much time away from the students’ studies. For example, one respondent stated:

Graduate students are at the university to get an education and degree. While I do not condone exploitation, I do not believe that unionization, collective bargaining, strikes and walkouts should take their attention away from their primary tasks.

Another faculty member responded, in the midst of a defense of the union, that:

A union can also foster a mentality about limiting the time devoted to being a grad student. This will increase the number of years the student spends in school and decrease their [sic] productivity (research) which will make it harder to find a job.

There were also concerns over higher costs affiliated with a collective bargaining agreement. These concerns came mainly from faculty in the natural sciences, who feel they are disadvantaged when competing for grants because they have higher labor costs. One respondent stated that many faculty members on his campus have been told directly by federal funding agencies that costs are too high on that campus, so they utilize nonstudents as their research assistants. Another respondent stated that:

The problem is wage rates. The budgets of units are constantly changing. Sometimes you cannot afford to keep a student at their [sic] current rate. Because of the union you cannot rehire at a lower rate. It is easier to terminate or hire someone new.

There was also a common reaction, among both pro-union and anti-union faculty members, in response to the question that asked whether the collective bargaining agreement helped them think carefully about their actions toward graduate students. Many responded by stating that regardless of a collective bargaining agreement, they always make an attempt to treat their graduate students well.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear, through the results obtained from the attitude scale and experience section, that faculty do not have a negative attitude toward graduate student collective bargaining. It is important to reiterate that the results show faculty feel graduate assistants are employees of the university, support the right of graduate students to bargain collectively, and believe collective bargaining is appropriate for graduate students. It is even more important to restate that, based on their experiences, collective bargaining does not inhibit their ability to advise, instruct, or mentor their graduate students.

The open-ended comments, however, tempered the results of the quantitative results. While the comments, as a whole, supported graduate student bargaining, concerns over certain effects of student bargaining were evident, even among those who support bargaining. These concerns included the time students spent to advocate for the union, the increased costs related to a collective bargaining agreement, and the increased bureaucratic procedures inevitable with a centrally bargained collective bargaining agreement. One issue that did not appear in the open-ended comments, however, was the negative effect the bargaining agreement had on the personal or educational relationship between the faculty members and graduate students.

In looking at the quantitative and qualitative data together, two distinct levels of attitudes toward graduate student bargaining can be seen. On one level—a business level—faculty are concerned with procedural and financial limitations imposed on them by the agreement. But on another level—an educational level—it is clear the collective bargaining agreement does not play a role in defining faculty's educational relationships with graduate students, as theorized by university administrators.

Labor unions attempting to organize graduate assistants and graduate student organizations seeking collective bargaining rights can use the results of this study to refute claims by university administrators that collective bargaining inhibits the educational relationship between faculty and graduate students—an argument consistently put forward by the president of Yale University and other institutions facing organizing drives.

These findings can also be used by university administrators who are facing union organizing campaigns or who are already administering a graduate student collective bargaining agreement. Those administrators facing organizing drives can develop a more refined strategy to muster support from the faculty and other university stakeholders. First, educational outcomes should not be the rhetorical focus of an organizing defense. It is clear that faculty do not consider collective bargaining to be an educational hindrance. They do, however, have concerns over financial issues, and those should be communicated by administrators to both the faculty body and other stakeholders who are concerned about educational costs.

Second, in a broader context, the attitudes and beliefs of the faculty described in this study should help administrators and decision makers in the area of graduate education understand the commitment the faculty have to their graduate students. It is clear, through comments, categorical answers, and the differences uncovered between attitudes and beliefs based on experience that whether faculty members support the student union or not, the faculty consider their relationships with graduate students a sacred trust and do not allow bureaucratic or political encumbrances to interfere with that trust. Consider the results of this study a reaffirmation of the faculty's commitment to graduate education.

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