

# Ph.D. students demand wage increases amid rising cost of living



Two weeks before professors were set to administer final exams last month at the University of Illinois, Chicago (UIC), 1500 graduate teaching assistants went on strike to demand a wage increase. Union representatives had been at the bargaining table with the university for a year, since April 2021, trying to negotiate a new contract after their previous one expired. But the two sides hadn't been able to reach an agreement. "The raises that they were offering at that point were far less than inflation," says UIC mathematics Ph.D. student Matt DeVilbiss, a member of UIC's graduate workers union who helped coordinate picketing during the strike. "As inflation got worse, it became more important."

The strike lasted 6 days, finally ending just before midnight on 25 April when a tentative deal was reached. Graduate workers won a 16% raise, which will bring their annual stipend up to a guaranteed minimum of \$24,000 over the next 3 years. They also secured limits on increases to student fees, which can eat away up to \$4500 of their take-home pay. "It doesn't eliminate the problem of graduate student poverty in one swoop," DeVilbiss says, but "I think we won a really good contract, perhaps the best we could have done under the circumstances."

Ph.D. students have decried miserly wages for decades. Now, amid rising cost of living, the problem is taking on new urgency. "There's no question that students are struggling to survive," says Michelle Gaynor, a Ph.D. student studying botany at the University of Florida, Gainesville. "We're really selecting against people who are low income or from marginalized communities," she adds. "We can't talk about DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] and not talk about this."

Across the country, many graduate students strain to get by on wages that aren't sufficient to meet their basic needs. "A third of our students ... struggle to afford rent and 15% struggle to afford food," Jane Petzoldt, an entomology master's student, says of her department at North Carolina State University (NCSU) in Raleigh, where rents have risen by more than 20% in the past year. A national survey of 3000 graduate students conducted in 2020 similarly found that [more than one-quarter of respondents suffered from housing or food insecurity](#).

Some universities are attempting to proactively address the situation. At Princeton University, for instance, Ph.D. students in the natural sciences and engineering will see their largest-ever raise when the 2022–23 academic year commences: \$8280, bringing the total annual stipend up to \$40,000. And last month, Yale University announced that student parents

are now eligible for a \$7500 subsidy for the first child and \$2500 for each additional child, in addition to a \$2000 increase in their annual paychecks that all graduate students in the sciences will receive. "Raising a family while in graduate school is always challenging, and we saw an amplified need for childcare flexibility during the worst months of the pandemic and beyond," Lynn Cooley, the dean of Yale's Graduate School, wrote in a statement announcing the plan.

Still, these steps don't immediately or fully solve the problem. "I'm happy that we are getting a raise," says Arita Acharya, a 4th year Ph.D. student studying genetics at Yale. "But this is the first time we've had a raise of this magnitude in my time here at Yale. And I can tell you, at least for myself, my living expenses ... have all gone up way more than what our salaries are going up by now."

At many universities across the country, graduate students have turned to picking up protest signs for recourse. In California, where the largest protests have taken place so far this year, representatives of the University of California (UC) graduate workers unions are currently at the bargaining table, asking for pay increases that reflect the high cost of living in the state. More than 90% of UC student employees are "rent burdened," meaning they pay more than 30% of their wage on rent, says Ximena Anleu Gil, a biology Ph.D. student at UC Davis and one of the graduate students bargaining with UC representatives. It shouldn't be that "only people who come from wealthy backgrounds or who have some sort of other support" can make it in academia.

Some policies and stipend minimums are determined at the institution level, but pay also varies within universities, with some departments paying more than others. In Florida, Gaynor has tried to jump-start conversations about graduate student salaries within her department by crowdsourcing stipend

data. She put out a request on Twitter, asking biology researchers elsewhere in the country to send her information about the minimum guaranteed stipend for graduate students in their department. She went on to meet with her department chair and send data to the rest of her department showing that their minimum stipend (\$18,650) is lower than many other programs—the national average in her current data set is roughly \$27,000, based on data from 150 universities—and also lower than the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Living Wage](#) for a single person household in Gainesville.

Although comparisons of student wages across departments and universities aren't always apples-to-apples—in addition to differences in local costs of living, programs handle student tuition, fees, and health insurance premiums differently—those data can be helpful in negotiations, according to NCSU student Petzoldt. “Sometimes competition with peer institutions can ... be a motivator.” Last year she and NCSU Ph.D. student Michelle Kirchner [collected stipend data from other universities](#) to advocate for a raise within their department. Presenting these data led to a raise \$1000 higher than what the department had originally offered, she says. “It doesn't offset inflation since 2019, but it's at least something.”

Gaynor didn't have that success story: So far, her department hasn't budged on stipend levels. “Many faculty here are very supportive,” she says. “It's just hard internally to find the money within just our department.” Still, Gaynor hopes the data, [which are available online](#), will help others advocate for their own raises. “It almost feels like a consolation prize: Even if it can't invoke change here right now, it can invoke change elsewhere.”

Calls for raises in Canada are also growing. On 12 May, hundreds of researchers and scientific societies [sent a letter](#) to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, asking for funding to increase the award amounts for graduate

scholarships offered by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada. "They have not had a raise in nearly 20 years," says Marc Johnson, a biology professor at the University of Toronto, Mississauga, who organized the campaign to send the letter. "We have the best and brightest minds in science and engineering that are living below the poverty line."

The salary associated with those awards is important because they're considered the "cream of the crop" and they tend to set the standard for graduate stipends across the country, says Andrea Wishart, a Ph.D. student at the University of Saskatchewan who testified about low graduate student wages at a hearing this month in Ottawa held by the House of Commons Standing Committee on Science and Research. "They hold everything else down as well."

In addition to national discussions, Johnson says faculty members in his department are discussing raising graduate student stipends because of rising cost of living in Toronto, one of the most expensive cities in Canada. "Everyone agrees that it has to happen. We don't have a great solution on *how* it will happen" though, he adds, "because at the same time, our grants are not tracking inflation."

Some U.S. graduate students note that a handful of faculty members in their departments have found a way to use grant money to raise trainees' stipends. But other faculty members, they say, have questioned the need to give students a sizable raise—saying that, factoring in tuition and health insurance costs, graduate students are already expensive, and that they, too, lived on low wages when they were completing their Ph.D.s. "It's kind of this mentality of, 'Well, I suffered in graduate school—therefore, you should also suffer,'" NCSU student Kirchner says. She rejects that argument: "If you look at historical inflation ... what's happening to grad

students right now, we're worse off."

Beyond that, she adds, "We don't think that's a healthy mindset, because why are we not working towards a better future for grad students?"