



UNM WORKS BECAUSE WE DO

GRADUATE EMPLOYEE LABOR AND
WORKING CONDITIONS AT UNM

Findings from the 2021 Bargaining
Survey collected by the United
Graduate Workers of UNM
Research Committee

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Since last fall, over one thousand graduate employees at the University of New Mexico have joined United Graduate Workers of UNM to come together and improve teaching and research conditions at New Mexico’s flagship university. This spring we surveyed hundreds of graduate workers in every job classification and department about their working conditions. This report details some of our findings.

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GRADUATE WORKERS PROVIDE VALUABLE LABOR TO THE UNIVERSITY

UNM WORKS BECAUSE WE DO

“Almost all of my 100/200 level courses at UNM were instructed by graduate workers who gave 100% despite being overworked and trying to complete their studies. In my 300/400 level courses, more often than not it was the graduate assistant responsible for helping students outside of class or for grading assignments. Reflecting on my UNM experience, almost all my classes were instructed by GA's or relied heavily on GA's to provide academic support to students.

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Gabriela Estala-Lopez, UNM Alum
International Business/Anderson School
of Management

In recent decades, universities have increasingly shifted teaching duties away from traditional tenure-track faculty onto graduate employees, adjunct professors, and other non-tenure-track instructors. At UNM graduate workers do all of the same types of work as faculty, such as creating course materials, grading papers, and exams, holding office hours, answering student calls and emails, holding lectures, running labs, editing scholarly journals, and performing research. In addition, graduate workers perform tasks often required of other staff at the University. They help to run institutes and University museums. They coordinate conferences, they run departmental websites and social media pages. They answer correspondence on behalf of faculty and staff.

This semester at UNM, only 26.8% of courses were taught by full-time tenured faculty. The rest were taught by a combination of adjunct, part-time, and other non-tenure-track professors. Graduate teaching assistants serve as the instructors of record for **19.2%** of undergraduate courses taught this semester, accounting for over **28,000** credit hours and bringing in an estimated **\$12 million** in undergraduate tuition. In compensation and benefits, UNM is paying these graduate employees an estimated total of just **\$2.6 million** in compensation and benefits.

WAGES

GRADUATE WORKER WAGES HAVE NOT KEPT PACE WITH THE COST OF LIVING

The MIT Living Wage Project calculates the annual cost of 'bare necessities' in Albuquerque New Mexico at \$23,213 for a single adult with no dependents.¹ However the minimum stipend for graduate workers is just \$14,225 per year.² That is \$8,988 less than the cost of bare necessities for a single adult, not to mention graduate employees with families.

ONLY 0.5% OF GRADUATE WORKERS RATED THEIR FINANCIAL SECURITY AS "VERY SECURE."

60% OF GRADUATE WORKERS REPORTED THAT THEY HAVE RELIED ON PERSONAL SAVINGS WHILE EMPLOYED BY UNM.

47% OF GRADUATE WORKERS REPORTED THAT THEY HAVE RELIED ON FAMILY SUPPORT WHILE EMPLOYED BY UNM.

35% OF GRADUATE WORKERS REPORTED THAT THEY HAVE HAD TO GET A SECOND OR THIRD JOB WHILE EMPLOYED BY UNM.

Without disability, food stamps, and Medicaid I would not be able to afford the costs of attending UNM. The stipend does not cover basic living costs, especially for a single dad with three kids who are attending school online because of a global pandemic.

*Scott Albright, Graduate Assistant,
Department of Political Science*

I had to use food banks and borrow money from my family the first two years of my program in addition to working as a private tutor, dog walker, and babysitter to try to pay my rent and bills.

*Emma Mincks, Teaching Assistant,
Department of English.*

HEALTHCARE

EXISTING HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE IS DANGEROUSLY INSUFFICIENT

UNM's employer insurance plan for graduate employees fails to provide adequate coverage while burdening graduate workers with costly copays and high out-of-pocket maximums. The plan does not include dental coverage (graduate employees can opt to purchase dental insurance for an additional \$182/semester) and does not even include the option to purchase vision coverage. The cost of adding a child or spouse to the insurance plan is \$3,232.68 per year. On a base salary of just over \$14,000 annually these costs can create insurmountable barriers to accessing healthcare and health issues from delaying care.

**65% OF GRADUATE WORKERS
REPORTED THAT THEY HAVE IGNORED
MEDICAL ISSUES OR DELAYED
TREATMENT DUE TO THE COST OF
CARE.**

**15% OF GRADUATE WORKERS
REPORTED THAT THEY HAVE HAD
TO USE STUDENT LOANS TO
COVER HEALTHCARE EXPENSES.**

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I have had several dental emergencies in my time as a grad worker at UNM, only a couple of which I've actually been seen for, out of pocket. I had to go somewhere other than the UNM dentistry school because it was going to cost me almost \$300 just for the new patient evaluation. I would love to get contacts or at least replace my outdated scratched-up glasses but I can't afford any of the out-of-pocket costs let alone an exam for a new prescription.

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Joe Ukockis, History Department

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Due to two unavoidable ER visits in the past few years, my wife and I owe over \$15,000 in out of pocket medical expenses. As an international graduate employee, I cannot take out student loans to cover these expenses, so I've gone into debt.

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Marley Russell, Teaching Assistant, Department of Psychology.

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WORKING CONDITIONS

GRADUATE WORKERS SUFFER FROM OVERWORK AND LACK OF EFFECTIVE PROCESSES FOR ADDRESSING WORKPLACE CONCERNS

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Graduate instructors are “unofficially” expected to do much more for their undergraduate students than just teaching classes and grading.

Advisement is often confusing or difficult to access for undergraduate students, so graduate instructors help undergrads learn to navigate the university. We suggest classes for them to take, we introduce them to University Libraries and CAPS, campus resource centers, etc...we are a huge retention factor in keeping undergraduate students at the university, and it's time this labor was recognized.

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Sarah Worland, Teaching Assistant, Department of English
School of Management*

61% of graduate workers either wanted teaching training and did not receive it, or were not satisfied with the teaching training provided by their department. **19%** of graduate workers reported that they have either received their appointment letter or payment late.

65% of graduate workers reported that they have worked more hours than what is stipulated in their contract in a week and **34%** of graduate workers reported that they almost always work more hours than what is stipulated in their contract in a week. **34%** of graduate workers reported that they have to perform job duties not stipulated in their contract.

When I first started a research assistantship over the summer, my professor insisted that I begin work before my contract was finalized, then blamed the university for the loss of \$3500+ I was owed for work during that period. The only solution I was offered by the university during that period was a short term loan with 7% interest which I had to pay back the following month with a reduced stipend. Eventually a settlement was reached between the department chair and my professor in which I would be paid an additional \$2000 (\$1,500 less than I was owed) over the course of a year, but said professor made comments after the fact that I was wrong for asking for compensation for the work I had done.

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Duncan McGraw, Research Assistant, Optical Science and Engineering*

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WORKING CONDITIONS

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I filed a complaint with OEO and was VERY DISSATISFIED. They called me and pressured me into sharing my experiences. When I was hesitant, they lied to me and told me that they were very interested in improving my conditions and that they would be able to protect me from retaliation. After the interview, they told me they were providing the transcripts of the interview to the chair of my department and they informed me that they are rarely able to identify whether retaliation is deliberate. Then they told me my interview was now in the public record and would be made available to any department or individual at the University who requested it. They are very clearly concerned with avoiding legal issues for UNM, but do not care whether we are harmed in the process.

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Anonymous, Research Assistant, Department of Anthropology*

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Only **32%** of graduate workers (less than 1/3) who reported experiencing harassment or discrimination have elected to file a complaint with the Office of Equal Opportunity.

Of those who did not file a complaint and provided a reason as to why, **90%** cited either a fear of retaliation and/or a belief that the OEO process would not result in any meaningful action or change. In many cases, these fears and beliefs were based on the respondent's past experiences with OEO, or knowledge about others who had filed OEO complaints in the past.

Of those who did file a complaint with OEO, **79%** reported that they were not satisfied with the process. The **#1** reason cited was that **“nothing happened”** as a result of reporting or participating in the OEO process.

COVID-19

UNM HAS SHIFTED COSTS TO GRADUATE EMPLOYEES WHILE DENYING THEM A VOICE IN DECISIONS THAT IMPACT THEIR LIVES

“The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the immense structural problems and lack of resources available for graduate workers. Throughout the pandemic, I have witnessed and experienced the fragile position UNM has forced graduate workers into. At the beginning of the pandemic, I witnessed professors send my colleagues into classrooms they had deemed too hazardous for their own health. I witnessed graduate workers take on many more hours of work to switch not only their own classes online but the classes they TA for and attend as well--all while being paid thousands of dollars less than the cost of living. I witnessed graduate workers drop out of school because UNM failed to provide them with the resources they needed.

Samantha Cooney, Graduate Assistant and Teaching Assistant, Department of Political Science

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- Only **15%** of graduate workers were offered funds to facilitate the transition to online and remote work at the start of the pandemic.
- The average graduate worker has spent **\$595** of their own money during the last year to facilitate online/remotework. This includes: internet (adding service for those who didn't have wifi at home but relied on campus wifi for work, upgrading to a higher speed internet to facilitate remote work, having to get a separate internet connection for those who were previously sharing with neighbors), webcams, newer/faster computer, microphone, headset, office furniture (chair, desk, etc.), second monitor, increased electric bill, specialized software (that was previously available on campus computers)
- **53%** of graduate workers either wanted training and did not receive it or were not satisfied with the training that they received to transition to online/remotework.
- For those graduate workers who did receive funds from their department, the average amount received was **\$81**. That's just **13%** of the average amount spent (\$595) by graduate workers.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOLUTIONS

ALLOWING GRADUATE ASSISTANTS TO UNIONIZE AND COLLECTIVELY BARGAIN WOULD IMPROVE COMPENSATION AND WORKING CONDITIONS.

Collective bargaining through a union provides graduate students a degree of power over their employment. Workers in unions are paid more than their non-unionized peers on average, and the wage boost from being covered by collective bargaining agreement is even greater for workers of color.³



Graduate workers at unionized peer institutions in cities with similar costs of living have higher minimum stipends and better benefits than graduate workers at UNM.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOLUTIONS

GRADUATE WORKERS' LEGAL RIGHT TO UNIONIZE HAS BEEN AFFIRMED AT THE STATE AND FEDERAL LEVEL.

At the federal level, the National Labor Relations Board took an important step on March 12, 2021 when it rescinded a proposed Trump-era rule that would have repealed bargaining rights for student employees, including graduate assistants.

At the state level, regulators have typically adopted the same approach. Of the 27 states that allow for collective bargaining for public workers, state labor boards and state courts in 19 states have permitted collective bargaining on behalf of graduate employees. In eight other states (including New Mexico), the issue has not yet been litigated.



NEW MEXICO SHOULD FOLLOW THIS NATIONAL TREND AND RECOGNIZE GRADUATE ASSISTANTS' RIGHT TO FORM A UNION AND COLLECTIVELY BARGAIN TO IMPROVE WAGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS.

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