



Graduate Employee Experience Survey

Summary of Findings

Survey Background

The Graduate Employee Experience Survey was conducted with the intent of providing information about the employment, working conditions, and attitudes of graduate student employees. Graduate student employees comprise a constituency of approximately 2,600 graduate students who are also employed by the University of Missouri in roles such as graduate research assistants, graduate instructors, and graduate teaching assistants.

Specific data regarding job satisfaction and confidence in the University climate has historically been lacking. Surveys commissioned by the University have not collected information on the employment concerns of graduate employees, and as last year's reporting revealed, data on graduate student satisfaction was ignored over the span of a decade. In our role as a representative of graduate student employees, the Coalition of Graduate Workers - a local of the National Education Association - wrote a survey to gather information with the aim of better serving its bargaining unit.

The survey was distributed via social media, union e-mail lists, and through University of Missouri Directors of Graduate Studies, with the intent of reaching as many members of the bargaining unit as possible. Responses were collected between the morning of Monday, September 26th, and the evening of Tuesday, October 4th. Survey data indicates that respondents were demographically representative of the broader graduate student population, as well as representative of relative percentages of job categories and academic fields. As such, the survey is a meaningful glimpse into the attitudes and opinions of graduate employees.

This report serves as a summary of findings, reporting general response trends and areas of concern.

Wages & Compensation

One of the key areas of concern for graduate employees is a stagnant minimum stipend that has historically fallen below the poverty line. In response to graduate employee advocacy, the University implemented a minimum 0.5 PhD yearly stipend of 15,000, with the promise of an 18,000 minimum stipend in AY 17-18. The 15,000 increase has been implemented as promised. A changed political environment and looming budget withholdings in the state budget with the potential for across-the-board appropriations decreases calls into question the likelihood of the 18,000 increase.

Key findings in this area include:

- A majority of respondents indicated that their wages were inadequate to meet household budgets, and that outside work or loans were required to meet household budgets.
- A plurality of respondents indicated that they did not feel adequately compensated for their work.
- One third of graduate employees reported that their pay schedule did not fit household needs. This is likely due in part to the practice of disbursing graduate fellowship pay through the Financial Aid office, rather than through payroll.
- One tenth of graduate employees reported wage theft (defined as receiving less than their promised wages).
- Less than a fifth of graduate employees are confident that the AY 17-18 pay raise will be implemented.

These findings indicate widespread dissatisfaction with wages and compensation at the University of Missouri, and lack of confidence that the University will address wage problems.

Beyond the question of minimum compensation, the frequency of wage theft unaddressed by the University is extremely disturbing, and deserves further investigation.

Finally, lack of confidence in the implementation of the AY 17-18 raise indicates the need for a legal mechanism – such as collective bargaining – through which such increases can be negotiated in good faith, with the buy-in of both parties.

Healthcare

Health insurance is, for clear reasons, a key topic of concern and distrust for graduates. The current subsidized plan was secured as a concession from the University of Missouri administration due to a union drive in the early 2000s, with graduate employees briefly working with the American Federation of Teachers to form a local on campus.

The disastrously handled unilateral revocation of subsidized health insurance coverage for AY 15-16 triggered large protest and union organization, successfully securing the temporary restoration of health insurance. A recent decision from federal agencies indicated that enforcement of the original IRS guidance would be indefinitely delayed; however, the recent election results throw the longevity of that decision into question.

Key findings in this area include:

- A strong majority of respondents utilize the subsidized Aetna health insurance.
- Of those who had health care expenses in the past year, a majority indicated the Aetna plan was inadequate to cover them.
- Feelings toward the Aetna health insurance are highly mixed, with largely equal proportions reporting satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and neutrality.
- An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that employer-provided health insurance is “important” or “very important” to them.
- A majority of respondents do not believe that they will have comparable or better health insurance in AY 17-18.

These findings indicate that health insurance continues to be a major fault line for graduate employees, and one which the administration has failed to adequately address. A majority of graduate employees do not believe that they will have comparable health insurance next academic year, and an overwhelming majority of graduate employees rate this form of compensation as important to them.

Student health insurance packages negotiated by the University in a process which includes some input from undergraduate and graduate student governments is not the most sustainable or most desirable mechanism to ensure *employee* healthcare for the future. Given the importance of this area of compensation to graduate employees, and given the inability of current governance mechanisms to adequately address health insurance problems, other arrangements should be found such as collective bargaining.

Mental Health

The area of mental health is of particular concern for graduate employees, as they are often burdened with both the distinct responsibilities of a student, and the distinct responsibilities of an employee of the University. Low wages, long hours, conflicting duties, and social isolation can prove emotionally and psychologically taxing on graduate employees, and support mechanisms on a department or campus-wide level are not always adequate.

Key findings in this area include:

- An overwhelming majority of graduate employees report that they are stressed by the combination of their job duties and their academic studies.
- A majority of respondents indicated “no” or “unsure” when asked if they were provided with adequate mental health support.
- Awareness of mental health resources was high, with a strong majority indicating that they felt well informed about mental health services.
- Of those that were referred to off-campus mental health providers, a majority indicated their health insurance was inadequate to cover costs.

Survey results indicate that mental health concerns and stress are high, and services are not always adequate. High levels of awareness indicate that the relevant University offices are performing strongly in outreach and education; however, these offices are undoubtedly understaffed and underfunded due to the overall budget climate. Prioritizing mental health resources for all University populations should be a key concern moving forward, with an aim toward addressing the particular concerns of graduate student employees.

Campus Leadership and Direction

After a historic academic year and unprecedented administrative turnover, campus constituencies are understandably concerned about the University of Missouri's leadership, direction, and future. With interim administrators populating a majority of upper administrative positions, the University faces a unique level of uncertainty, with some direction provided by the recent hiring of Dr. Mun Y. Choi to serve as President of the University of Missouri System.

Key findings in this area include:

- Graduate employees are strongly positive about the University of Missouri as an institution.
- However, confidence in the Columbia campus leadership is extremely low, with few graduates expressing trust in administrative leadership.
- A strong majority of graduate employees do not believe the University administration will prioritize their well-being, indicating that graduate employees do not trust the administration to comprehensively address graduate employee concerns.
- Respondents were uncertain about the state of academic freedom at the University, with one quarter indicating that they were "confident" or "strongly confident" in academic freedom protections at University of Missouri.
- Respondents were dubious about the direction of the University under its current leadership, with only one quarter expressing belief that the University is headed in the right direction.

These results indicate that the campus-level administrative leadership following the departure of Chancellor Loftin has not successfully restored trust among graduate employees, and that few believe their leadership has put the University back on track.

The lack of faith in University of Missouri-Columbia's leadership and direction should be of concern to the incoming University of Missouri System President and to the Board of Curators. Although only graduate employees were surveyed, less quantitative metrics indicate high levels of dissatisfaction from other constituencies.

Conclusion

Many of the issues facing graduate employees in AY 15-16 have yet to be resolved, and few express confidence in the current mechanisms and actors to achieve a desirable resolution.

Graduate employees are an essential part of the University's public, land grant mission, performing invaluable research and teaching functions, among other duties. They make up a substantial portion of the University's employee population, with approximately 2,600 graduates employed in any given academic year. However, the University has declined to recognize graduate employees as possessing the rights of employees – such as the right to collectively bargain, which is guaranteed by the Missouri Constitution.

Addressing our population's concerns requires a collegial approach to a legally protected collective bargaining process, the restoration of trust broken by the University's administration, and strong advocacy by all campus constituents on behalf of the University's vital role as one of the state of Missouri's most valuable institutions.

The Coalition of Graduate Workers is committed to pursuing these goals as we move forward, and we hope to do so in partnership with the University of Missouri's campus and system leadership.