

Associated Students of Western Washington University
Board of Directors

**A Resolution Regarding TA Compensation and Fee Schedule at WWU
Academic Year 2018-2019**

WHEREAS Teaching Assistants, TAs, stipends have been stagnant since the 2014-2015 academic year. Since 2014-2015, WWU-wide imposed fees have increased ~28%, excluding the S&A Fee which is included with a TA tuition waiver, while cost of living (COL) has increased ~21% to date, using the average rent for a Whatcom County 1-BD apartment as a benchmark (2018 Board of Trustees Report) (UW Runstad Department of Real Estate). This does not include additional departmentally imposed fees, which for some graduate programs are thousands of additional dollars per year (2018-19 WWU Budget Office); and

WHEREAS there is a tremendous financial burden for TAs that is positively correlated with reduced quality of work, poor mental health, delayed or failure to graduate, etc. (2016-17 WWU Graduate Survey). TAs play a vital role in the University's ecosystem, providing research, mentorship, instruction, leadership, WWU graduate program advocacy for prospective students, value, reputation, and most importantly undergraduate support and inspiration. It is estimated over 9,155 undergraduate enrollments received TA support Winter Quarter 2018 (2019 Departmental Survey); and

WHEREAS without compensation commensurate with the value TAs present to the university, and appropriate measures in place to ensure stipends match the COL and increase in enrollment and registration fees as described above, TAs cannot perform their duties to their full potential; this is hurtful to stakeholders across the University; and

WHEREAS the ASWWU Board of Directors is a recognized voice for all students of the university; and

WHEREAS on January 28, 2019 over 50 respondents commented on Sabah's *Moving Forward in 2019* with anecdotal but detailed arguments explaining specific ways in which WWU is not fulfilling their obligations to adhere to the goals outlined in the 2018-2025 Strategic Plan and how this impacts graduate student education, contribution on campus, and wellbeing; and

WHEREAS The President's Office replied on Thursday, February 7, 2019 in a public statement "While this issue has been raised in the past, and various funding proposals put forth, Western is committed to start addressing it in the next fiscal year..." and committed to "make sure that there are opportunities for graduate student representatives to be involved in the planning process during spring 2019."; and

WHEREAS the 2018-2025 WWU Strategic Plan stipulates in Goal #1 that “Western will provide a transformational education grounded in the liberal arts and sciences and based on innovative scholarship, research, and creative activity”, and in subsection C, WWU commits to: “Increase support and infrastructure for all types of scholarship, research, and creative activity”; and

WHEREAS the 2018-2025 WWU Strategic Plan stipulates in Goal #3 that “Western will foster a caring and supportive environment where all members are respected and treated fairly” and in subsection A, B, D, and E WWU commits to: “Strengthen shared governance to ensure that students, staff, and faculty are meaningfully empowered in the university’s policies, decisions, and direction”, “Support student, staff, and faculty wellbeing, including physical health and wellness, mental health, and disability resources based on universal design”, “Improve climate and working conditions for student employees, staff, and faculty at all locations”, and “Provide competitive compensation and professional development for student employees, staff, and faculty”; and

WHEREAS the 2018-2025 WWU Strategic Plan stipulates in Goal #4 that “Western will pursue justice and equity in its policies, practices, and impacts” and in subsection B and E WWU commits to: “Establish, fund and sustain practices of self-examination and continuous improvement to identify, understand, and remediate structural injustices and inequities at Western” ,and “Increase affordability of and access to high quality undergraduate and graduate education at all Western’s locations”; and

WHEREAS the 2018-2025 WWU Strategic Plan stipulates in their *Benchmarks of Success* a goal of 19%-28% in increased degrees awarded to graduate students by the 2024-2025 academic year; and

WHEREAS Western’s priorities during the 2019 Legislative Session has three key priorities the upcoming 2019-2021 biennial budget; one, being “Competitive compensation for faculty and staff: In order to retain and attract high quality faculty and staff Western has requested \$15.3 million to fully fund negotiated contracts with classified staff and to provide a 4% per year compensation increase for all faculty and professional staff” but this goal/request leaves out TAs who have not seen a compensation increase for over five years; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED, the 2018-2019 ASWWU Board of Directors formally endorses the Graduate Student Advisory Council (GSAC) Stipend & Fee Subcommittee’s recommendation to increase stipends for TAs to reflect fee and COL increases over the last five years, the last time stipends were increased (2014).

BE IT RESOLVED, the 2018-2019 ASWWU Board of Directors commits to collaborating alongside Western administration to begin the process of creating a mechanism to review and increase stipends instep with graduate student enrollment and registration fees (WWU) and

COL expenses for Bellingham. Such as, a committee that annually reviews TA stipends and provides a recommendation to the University’s Budget Committee(s) and Board of Trustees.

BE IT RESOLVED, the 2018-2019 ASWWU Board of Directors commits to collaborating alongside Western administration to begin the process of discussing a way to relieve TA fee burden at the beginning of the quarter. Such as, allowing TAs to pay their fees over the quarter with monthly payments or deferral until the end of the quarter, and/or have scholarships and emergency funding reserved for TAs who are struggling to pay their way.

BE IT RESOLVED, the 2018-2019 ASWWU Board of Directors commits to doing everything in their power to ensure that graduate students have a voice on all WWU student matters, including assisting in reserving a graduate student representative seat on student committees and advisory boards when applicable.

BE IT RESOLVED, the 2018-2019 ASWWU Board of Directors commits to doing everything in their power to ensure that TAs are fairly compensated for the work and vital contribution they provide to Western Washington University.

BE IT RESOLVED, the 2018-2019 ASWWU Board of Directors commits to doing everything in their power to ensure that graduate students are recognized and appreciated for the work they do at Western Washington University and the tremendous value they add.

BE IT RESOLVED, that copies of this resolution be distributed via email to President Sabah Randhawa, Vice President for Enrollment and Student Services Melynda Huskey, Dean of Graduate School and Vice Provost of Research Gautam Pillay, Associate Dean of the Graduate School Michael Barr, Board of Trustees, and the graduate WWU student body.

President
Millka Solomon

Vice President for Business & Ops
Nate Jo

Vice President for Academic Affairs
Levi Eckman

Vice President for Activities
Ama Monkah

Vice President for Diversity
Camilla Mejia

Vice President for Governmental Affairs
Natasha Hessami

Vice President for Student Life
Anne Lee

1reply

Cory Hughes replied on Fri, 01/18/2019 - 15:01 PERMALINK

COMPLETE AGREEMENT

I am in complete agreement with all points laid out by Patrick.

-Cory Hughes

Geology Graduate TA

2reply

Christina Turner replied on Wed, 01/23/2019 - 11:05 PERMALINK

I'M A THIRD YEAR GRADUATE

I'm a third year graduate student in the Biology department that has been TAing every quarter. I would have finished my master's degree on time at the end of my second year if I didn't have to take a second job. I agree with Patrick and would like to see changes made.

3reply

Rachael Mallon replied on Thu, 01/24/2019 - 10:00 PERMALINK

NEEDS OF GRAD STUDENTS AND TAS CONTINUE TO BE IGNORED

I agree. Thank you to Patrick for raising this issue. As a 'teaching school' Western should support ALL of its instructors. Teaching Assistants live at the poverty line and qualify for SNAP benefits from the state. Does this show that Western values its educators?

Thank you for your consideration on this issue.

Rachael Mallon

4reply

Monica Villegas replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 13:26 PERMALINK

ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

I agree that the financial issues graduate students are currently facing are not being addressed by the university. I believe the financial burden of living expenses and tuition costs has interfered with the process of learning and completing graduate course work. If some of these expenses/issues can be relieved, then I would be able to devote more time to my thesis and studies.

5reply

Octavio Cruz replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 13:29 PERMALINK

ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES - GRADUATE TA

I agree. A very large amount of TAs need to use food stamps.

6reply

Allison Frodsham replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 13:32 PERMALINK

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

I agree. I'm a TA and work over 20 hours per week between lesson planning, teaching, and grading. In order to make ends meet, I have to work part-time at a store in downtown Bellingham called

Greenhouse. That means I don't have a single day off per week during the school year. Being forced to work an additional job to pay my rent (I live in a house with FIVE other people), means I'm forced to lose tremendous amounts of sleep in order to keep up with my studies. We can do better. There's something wrong with the system where I'm making more money working retail over the summer than teaching and being in charge of a classroom of 24 students per quarter. Please consider a bump in out salaries.

7reply

Kate Welch replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 13:38 PERMALINK

PATRICK IS RIGHT

Dear Sabah,

I agree with Patrick. Graduate students are a core part of the inner workings of this university in many of its departments. We teach labs, aid students, and spend countless painstaking hours grading exams and assignments, freeing up professors and NTT to teach and do research. It is becoming increasingly common for universities to provide living, inflation-adjusted wages for their graduate student researchers and teaching assistants, something that Western continues to neglect. Many departments lack the funding to provide support for the entirety of their small cohorts, so many students work additional jobs or incur heavy debt loads trying to further their educations. Graduate students do vital work at this university, and providing more funding to students for teaching and research will only increase these gains and attract competitive candidates that further Western's reputation and contributions to our society and the scientific community. Pay us living wages, and pay more of us for the work that we do. We're college educated and eager to go excellent work.

Kate Welch

TA Environmental Studies Dept.

8reply

Erika Whitney replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 13:54 PERMALINK

IN SUPPORT OF THIS POST

There are few in the city of Bellingham who can afford to rent and buy groceries on a graduate student's stipend. I would be in support of either increasing our stipends, or ceasing to charge graduate students expensive additional fees, or both.

While the cost of housing in this city has been increasing steadily, it appears that the graduate stipends have not changed to match those increases in the cost of living. Beyond cutting out discretionary spending (which is rather easy when you work 80 hours a week), most of us have to go on food stamps. Affordable housing can be difficult to secure, especially within commuting distance from campus, and often the only affordable rooms involve renting rooms in houses with many other people - leading to further difficulties just trying to get enough sleep when your day starts early and ends late, yet your housemates are up and active during the night.

9reply

Sarah Kellogg replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 13:59 PERMALINK

ENVIRONMENTAL ED., CAMPUS

One of the things that has been endlessly frustrating as a campus-based Environmental Education graduate student has been the complete lack of opportunities I've had to even obtain a TA position, let alone one that pays a fair wage. My program only offers one 1/2 time position per cohort, and I was not

the one to be given that position. I've applied to campus-wide positions, as well as asked within the Environmental Studies department, but as that is rather competitive, I have yet to be successful.

Additionally, I spent several hours over the course of MONTHS trying to receive work study (which I am eligible for) to work for my adviser, and despite going so far as giving up part of my financial aid award AND my adviser writing a letter to the student employment office outlining the position I have wanting, I have not been awarded any. This means that as someone who is in what is ostensibly an education program, I have no research assistant experience and literally no teaching experience in my field unless I a) PAY the university for teaching credits or b) work for free. I find this absolutely ludicrous.

I have many frustrations with my education here at Western, and some of them are program specific, but one that has been looming over my head as I prepare to finish this spring is the financial burden. Presumably I would make the same decision again for a number of reasons, but I am not looking forward to completing my education with tens of thousands of dollars in loans to pay back while also not feeling confident that I have gained the skills necessary to either find a job in my chosen field or continue on academically.

I know that Western and the Graduate school can do better to support it's graduate students. What I don't understand is why they don't already.

10reply

Rebecca Williams replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 14:13 PERMALINK

ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

I agree. The cost of living in Bellingham has increased quite a bit, rent & utilities are barely (if at all) covered by the TA stipend. Covering the extra cost of living takes away from focusing on education. Graduate study and Teaching Assistanships are such an amazing opportunity to grow academically and professionally: it seems important to protect it with a modest but livable stipend.

11reply

Jeremy Nolan, M... replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 14:26 PERMALINK

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION SCIENCES AND DISORDERS

I agree

12reply

Anonymous replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 14:28 PERMALINK

I AGREE WITH ALL OF THE

I agree with all of the statements up above, and want to further point out the steep increase in the cost of living that Bellingham has experienced in the last five years, let alone the last ten when our stipend was last increased. Nobody is suggesting a cushy lifestyle for graduate students but the level of poverty that the current stipend inflicts upon them is pretty shameful. Financial anxiety causes additional undue mental burden upon a group of people who are already mentally struggling and perpetuates extended timelines to graduation. Furthermore, this system enforces postponed graduation but only supports graduate students with TAships for the two years that they're "supposed" to be there before removing priority in lieu of newer students (which also loses them healthcare). Trying to complete a graduate degree when the two options are a.) live out of your car, or b.) work retail and postpone graduation

even longer, should not be the reflection of a university that aims to "foster a caring and supportive environment where all members are respected".

13reply

Megan Jendro replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 14:31 PERMALINK

MBA

I agree with the overall compensation layout that Patrick has described. I work 20 hours a week as a graduate assistant, and am required an internship upon graduation. MBA students take three classes a quarter, making it almost impossible to take on another job. I had to take out additional loans to help pay for my rent and living expenses. Even if the stipend is not increased, I think at minimum the fees associated with tuition should be waved.

14reply

Alex H. replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 14:32 PERMALINK

GEOLOGY DEPT.

An understanding was present upon receiving my acceptance letter to the university that tuition would be covered and "school fees" would be the only remaining cost on my end. What was not written alongside these statements was the harsh burden of expenses reflecting a small town experiencing an influx of population and rising prices that would ultimately place me on government assistance.

Dissecting how much TA's receive in monetary stipends per year/month/day/hour is stunning. Not only are we paid less than the state minimum wage, we are also experiencing a rise in costs associated with living in Bellingham, not to mention the continual increase of university fee amounts, departmental fee amounts, the initiation of the "family leave" deduction program, and the faculty salary increase that seems to always be waived in front of us. It is appalling to receive all this information after enrolling into the program and moving 1,500 miles across the country.

The fact that graduate students need to fight for even the smallest of grievances is a plain reflection of where the heart of this university is. Graduate TA's work their tails off for this university. Administrators are blind to see how late we stay on campus grading papers, prepping for classes we teach, and trying to complete our own work and thesis writing all at the salary of below a living wage and government assistance. Universities that care about their community take care of their community. TA's have more interaction with students than faculty members yet aren't even worth a breath to compare returns granted. I've learned running around like a headless chicken is not worth it here at WWU. At the end of the day I'm still a number that can easily be replaced by someone who is ignorant and financially rigid and can contribute to the conglomerate they call WWU. Nonetheless, nothing in life that is worth comes easy. So we are here as a community of graduate TA's to fight for what is not only right, but due to those who are overlooked.

Department fees are now encroaching into figures that shun many of us in taking a course based on the fee associated with the class. How are you going to charge a student X amount of money for registering in a course for sitting in a chair the entire quarter? External activities are understandable, but not all is justified. Seattle is a city experiencing mass population growth but refuses to provide infrastructure that is needed. WWU is a university experiencing the same transition where graduate students across the nation apply to come here, yet the infrastructure refuses to provide accommodating infrastructure.

We're not here to sob over anything; we are here to do something. Change is apparently rooted in this university, tokens are placed in high places as the face of the school, yet the pivotal, financially important graduate students who provide the funding for faculty, are valueless in the eyes of all who operate the Graduate School.

We all know a union will solve the problems.

15reply

Robert Beck replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 14:50 PERMALINK

SOUNDS ABOUT RIGHT

I agree with Patrick completely, While I am grateful for my TAship, it is rather insufficient to make ends meet especially when I have family that depend on me.

16reply

Warren Tomlinson replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 14:51 PERMALINK

GA/TA

As a graduate assistant with a strict 20 hr week GA-ship, I am struggling to make ends meet and have taken on debt to cover my expenses. Even though we didn't see a pay increase this year like the rest of the faculty, other methods of revenue could come our way that would help resolve this disparity. Despite a full tuition waiver, I still pay over \$1000 each quarter in fees. Removing or cutting fees for full and part-time TAs/GAs would be a good start. I was also awarded a scholarship through the school for outstanding academic performance, however, that scholarship was taken away because I was already a full-time GA, which seems unfair considering how hard it is to maintain good grades and work as much as I do for the school. This could be another area to allow for more revenue for high-performing graduate students.

17reply

Andrew Crook replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 14:56 PERMALINK

IN SUPPORT OF PATRICK BARNES

My name is Andrew Crook and I am writing in support of the comments made by Patrick Barnes regarding the compensation of Graduate TA's at WWU.

I am a graduate TA in the English department. I teach a class of 24 students three days a week. My job title is teacher's assistant, but I teach my own class by myself with support from my supervisors and administrators.

I am grateful and humbled by the support my department has given me, but I am disheartened to learn of the University's inability to value their graduate TA's as the essential resource that they are.

I teach my class, I take my graduate classes, I write my thesis, and I barely have money for rent. This isn't how it needs to be.

Please consider us, see us, and allow us the financial security we deserve.

18reply

Jo Hurt replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 15:29 PERMALINK

NEEDS OF GRAD STUDENTS AND TAS CONTINUE TO BE IGNORED

My name is Jo Hurt and I am writing in support of the comments made by Patrick Barnes regarding the compensation of Graduate TA's at WWU.

I am a graduate TA in the English department, a 15-credit/quarter graduate student, and an officer in WWU's English Graduate Association. I teach a class of 24 students three days a week. My job title is teacher's assistant, but I teach my own class by myself with support from my supervisors and administrators. English TAs fall into the lowest TA pay grade, but we are--as far as I know--the only TAs who completely teach our own classes.

I am grateful and humbled by the support and opportunities my department has given me, but I am disheartened to learn of the University's inability to value their graduate TA's as the essential resource that they are.

I teach my class, I take my graduate classes, and I barely have money for rent. This isn't how it needs to be.

Please consider us, see us, and allow us the financial security we deserve.

19reply

Hana Shishkarev replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 15:41 PERMALINK

TA COMPENSATION NEEDS

Hello my name is Hana Shishkarev and I am a second year MA grad student and TA in the English department. It is my understanding that TAs in the humanities are the lowest paid on campus and I feel this is a real injustice considering the work we do at this university.

While my official title is Teacher's Assistant I am actually the sole instructor listed for the 5 credit GUR composition course I teach (ENG 101). There are 24 students in my class and I correspond with, and evaluate each of them without the help or mediation of any other university faculty. In addition to teaching my class for 4.5 hours every week, I also spend a few hours a week grading my students' work, and another 3 hours a week meeting with them in my office hours, and building our class canvas site to make it a resource for my student's. It is beyond ridiculous that for all this work I make roughly \$12,000 a year AND am expected to pay quarterly fees of \$370/quarter on top of paying for my course textbooks. I can barely afford to pay rent in Bellingham on this "salary".

When I am not teaching I have 10 credits of my own graduate level classes to do reading and homework for so unfortunately I have no time to get a second job to better support myself.

I implore you, please give the future TAs of Western Washington University a livable wage that is commiserate with the current housing market and the cost of living.

Sincerely,

Hana Shishkarev

20reply

Hannah Newman replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 15:42 PERMALINK

TA COMPENSATION

Hello,

My name is Hannah Newman and I'm currently a Teaching Assistant in the Education department. As part of that position, I teach a full class of students as the primary (and in terms of workload, sole) instructor. Additionally, I facilitate independent studies for multiple students, grade assignments/exams for multiple faculty, and serve as a researcher for the chair of the Special Education department. This is, of course, in addition to my own 10 credit graduate student workload and professional development.

I realize that the science-based graduate students frequently make it known that they have large workloads, but as an MFA student my thesis demands occupy the same time commitment. I genuinely believe that we are navigating the same intensive workload.

While this experience is wonderful in the learning opportunities it presents, it does not come without stress and anxiety, which is only exacerbated by the difficulties created when trying to live on too little money. The sky rocketing housing costs, general utilities/cost of living, and ineffectiveness of our health insurance (its lacks dental/vision coverage, and covers very little in terms of actual services) create massive roadblocks to our ability to a) learn at our fullest potential and b) successfully educate Western's undergraduate students. We can only be stretched so thin.

As such, I implore you to consider raising the stipend rates to a level at which we can live without fear of no food or insufficient funds for educational materials. In fact, I encourage you to try to both raise our rates and improve our insurance. We value education deeply, as graduate students. But at what cost are we supposed to learn?

Thank you for your time and consideration. Best,
Hannah Newman

21reply

Allison Spikes replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 15:53 PERMALINK

ENGLISH 101

Hi, I am writing in support of the comments made by Patrick Barnes regarding the compensation of Graduate TA's at WWU.

I am a graduate TA in the English department. I teach a class of 24 students three days a week. My job title is teacher's assistant, but I teach my own class by myself with support from my supervisors and administrators.

I am grateful and humbled by the support my department has given me, but I am disheartened to learn of the University's inability to value their graduate TA's as the essential resource that they are.

I teach my class, I take my graduate classes, I write my thesis, and I barely have money for rent. This isn't right. I'm a mother of three young children, and I commute five days a week from Everett to Bellingham to teach and attend classes. I have to take out a loan each quarter of over \$2100 to pay for my daughter

to attend pre-school in addition to money for gas, groceries, and rent so that I can teach in this innovative program in the English Department. Everyone has to take English 101—our compensation needs to reflect that level of value.

Please consider us, see us, and allow us the financial security we deserve.

22reply

Hannah LaGassey replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 16:04 PERMALINK

RE: NEEDS OF GRAD STUDENTS AND TAS

I agree with Patrick on all accounts. I fortunately am able to keep my TA work just under 20 hrs per week, as do most Huxley TAs. However, the stipend I receive for my work is not sufficient to cover the cost of living in Bellingham. My housing prices have increased 55% in the past three years I have lived here, and not because I have chosen a more glamorous place of residence. My living expenses per month total ~\$1150. After student fees, taxes, and health insurance I make ~\$950 per month. I pay the remainder of my expenses with life insurance money I received after the death of a close family member. Furthermore, we must continue to pay living expenses over the summer when we do not receive paychecks. Summer jobs are difficult to find in Bellingham, with few skilled jobs seasonally available and competition for unskilled labor high with undergraduates and other residents of Bellingham. Working during the summer is also not possible for many of us, as this is the time to collect field data and attend training programs outside the university. For instance, I will be attending a training program for two weeks in July (for which I received the RSP grant that I am so thankful for) and collecting my field data throughout August--no employer will hire me with such a schedule. I can work some odd jobs throughout summer but my earnings will barely dent my living expenses. Graduate TAs are absolutely essential to most programs here at Western, saving instructors countless hours of work and the University a load of money since we are not paid like instructors. We simply ask that we be given living wages so that we can devote our full effort to our TA assignments, our coursework, and our research.

23reply

Ben Hagedorn replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 17:27 PERMALINK

TA STIPENDS

I chose to live alone because it is critical to my ability to focus on my work. I have one of the lowest rents of anyone I've talked to in the Bellingham area for a single occupancy living situation, and my rent still cost more than I get paid with my TA stipend.

ENVS

24reply

Jamie McMullen replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 17:54 PERMALINK

RE: NEEDS OF GRAD STUDENTS AND TAS CONTINUE TO BE IGNORED

I agree with the comment Patrick Barnes made above concerning graduate teaching assistant funding. In the Math and English departments, graduate teaching assistants are COURSE INSTRUCTORS that lecture 5-credit courses solo. Not only do these impressive positions demand sharpness at all times, finesse, and ingenuity, and are performed by graduate teaching assistants remarkably well, but the Math and English

teaching assistants serve the entire university by instructing these courses that are required by virtually every major.

Why is it, then, that we are given stipends that put us at a net loss after our bills are paid?

Graduate students are adults who customarily do not rely on their families to support their educations and living expenses. We also already hold college diplomas. We could very well find skilled jobs in the community and in industry that pay fair, comfortable wages, but instead we choose to be here at Western. We could very well find teaching assistantships at different universities around the globe that will pay us a fair wage for our services in our departments. Instead, we choose to continue our educations at Western and we choose to contribute to the education of undergraduate students at Western through teaching assistantships and supervising undergraduates in their research.

Other universities are keeping up with current livable salaries for their graduate teaching assistants. If this monetary insult to graduate students at Western is not remedied in the very near future, you can expect application rates for graduate programs, and especially teaching assistantships, to quickly decline.

Please give us the same respect and decency that you have decided to give all undergraduate employees and faculty at Western.

Sincerely,
Jamie McMullen
Mathematics Graduate TA

25reply

Cassidy Crickmore replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 17:59 [PERMALINK](#)

CHEMISTRY GRADUATE TA STIPEND

I agree. The stipend we currently receive does not cover my basic cost of living including rent, food, internet and energy bills, etc.

26reply

Justin Doyle replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 18:14 [PERMALINK](#)

CHEMISTRY

I agree with Patrick Barnes and hope that strides are immediately taken to offset the financial burden we as graduate students are currently facing.

27reply

Eve Lalor replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 18:43 [PERMALINK](#)

YES, AND...

I am in full agreement with Patrick's extremely well-put comment. My friends and family are shocked when I describe the financial reality of being a graduate student at Western. I'm currently on food stamps, which involved jumping through several hoops to get, not least of all because HR incorrectly filed my paperwork to DSHS the first time. They made some sort of discrepancy between my "hourly

rate" and "projected monthly income" such that DSHS calculated that I didn't work enough hours to be eligible for assistance, which is rather ironic and hilarious if you appreciate that kind of dark humor.

As is clearly demonstrated by all the above comments, Graduate TAs across the board are overworked and underpaid. We prep, teach, and grade three labs per week, while taking classes ourselves and also trying to do our own research. Financial struggles and picking up extra work (when it can even be found) take away from the time spent on our TA, academic, and research duties. The result is diminished quality of our teaching and performance in our classes, and delayed completion of our theses. Then third-year students are punished by losing TA eligibility, health insurance, and office space on campus.

I came to Western because of my academic and research interests. The fact that I'm really, really interested in my research project is what keeps me here despite the fees and other nonsense. None of us realized until we got here that grad students are at the very bottom of the university's priorities. The most recent insult was getting left out of the wage increase for the rest of the faculty and staff. Despite the excellent academics and research opportunities, I honestly cannot recommend Western's graduate program to anyone else, unless the financial situation really changes.

-Eve Lalor, Geology Dept.

28reply

Alberto Melchor replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 18:50 PERMALINK

CHEMISTRY

I agree, this also affects our work and the potential as to how we can teach our students. Having this burden can easily be removed by increase the financial compensation of graduate students. We are prevented from taking up side jobs and the rent has constantly been rising as well.

29reply

Noah replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 19:28 PERMALINK

I AGREE

I completely agree with the points put forward in this letter and would like to add my own experiences and perspectives. Personally, I'm very fortunate to be able to attend this graduate program, but I know that under any different circumstances it'd be much more difficult or infeasible for me to do so. Just as this letter says, I see myself and so many of my colleagues working extremely hard to balance all the many responsibilities of our studies while also working off-campus jobs in order to be able to afford food, rent, and so on, not to mention tuition and fees.

One of the major challenges I see for my department is that there are many students and comparatively few TA positions for them to work, so these slots are very competitive not a reliable source of financial relief. (Some students are lucky enough to have RA positions, but not all research projects are funded so these, too, are not easy to come by, especially depending on what kind of work a student chooses to specialize in.) Like many of my peers, I work two part-time jobs because I do not have a TAsip this quarter. I'm fortunate in that they're decently well-paying positions, but even so I still rely heavily on loans and family contributions to be able to attend school, pay rent, and so on. Personally, I know that without the continued financial backing of my family, there's no way I'd be able to attend this program, despite the amount of additional work I cram into summers, breaks, and so on.

Another corollary of the strict "20 hours per week" contract that we're supposed to follow as TAs is that this prevents us from holding other on-campus positions to supplement our income. So not only do we spend more than the 20 hours of allotted time grading and interacting with students, but we're actively forbidden from continuing employment at the University. This often means additional commuting to off-campus jobs.

Once again, I think the concerns raised above are extremely valid and clearly stated. I know that budgeting and planning are by no means a simple procedure, and that there are many, many constraints and factors to consider, so I don't expect a magic cure and for all these problems to go away overnight. That said, socioeconomic background is a huge factor in determining who does and does not attend higher education programs, and graduate programs should be every much a part of this discussion as undergraduate programs. As this letter points out, Western is striving to improve in many worthwhile and admirable ways, but it seems to have forgotten a portion of the student body in these ambitions.

Thank you for your time and consideration with this issue. I hope that for all the future talented and hard-working graduate students here at Western there is some resolution to these concerns.

Sincerely,

-Noah S
Graduate Student, Computer Science Department

30reply

Samantha Bibeau replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 20:27 PERMALINK

WWU ENGLISH TA'S DO THE MOST BUT ARE PAID THE LEAST

My name is Samantha Bibeau and I am a first-year MA student at Western Washington University.

While I've only been a Viking for a few memorable months, I must say that the most difficult hardship that comes with attending this wonderful university is the financial stress that comes with a considerable low salary for a 20+ hour a week position. As an English 101 TA, I spend the quarter teaching a class of 24 students on my own, I learn all they're names and get to know their personalities, I grade each and every homework assignment and project, and my weekends are filled with lesson planning. I devote my time, energy, and passion into teaching English 101 because I simply love this job, but the pay is less lovable.

It's incredibly disheartening to hear that the English 101 instructors are the lowest paid TA's at Western; and as far as I know we are also the only TA's at Western to completely teach our own classes without another professor in the classroom. By paying the English 101 instructors less than the TA's who don't carry the responsibility of an entire class, you are prioritizing other subjects over English, and this is a shame for the institution and our students. While Patrick Barnes and so many other intelligent and hardworking TA's ask for a pay increase, I merely ask that the English TA's are paid equal to that of the school's other TA's.

Thank you for your time and consideration!
Samantha Bibeau

31reply

Destiny Brugman replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 22:50 PERMALINK

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT TAS

Sabah,

My name is Destiny Brugman, and I am a first year MA graduate student and TA in the English department. I agree with Patrick.

When applying to come to graduate school, the first thing I became aware of (as I needed to seek funding to further my education) was that our of all of the TAs at Western, TAs in the humanities are the lowest paid on campus. This, along with the staggering funds all TAs receive does not serve the work we do on this campus or how we act as professionals representing Western Washington University in our own research and publication efforts during our time here.

As a Teacher's Assistant in the English department, I find it important to know that I run my own class of 24 students three times a week for 80 minutes— this class (ENG 101) is a 5 credit GUR composition course I teach which is required for almost all students to take. Outside of typical class hours, I am communicating with students who student within various disciplines to assist them in understanding how they can use the skills we work on in my class in their future classes at WWU. In ENG 101, we cultivate a community based around communication and writing in a way that better prepares students for their time at WWU. When we aren't in the classroom, I'm corresponding with students via email or office hours to help them better understand what we are doing in this class and how we can better cater their experience in my class to the experiences they will have in future classes here at WWU.

I am so grateful to the support and experience I am receiving from my department, and humbled by my luck to study at this wonderful institution, but it is often hard to make ends meet. I take out loans to cover the \$370 worth of fees, food throughout the quarter, and other school related expenses such as textbooks. Rent in Bellingham is hefty with limited options that I can afford on the budget, so I use this loan money to help me get by month-to-month and still focus on my studies and career goals. As many (if not most) graduate students, I am completely separated from my family's money and have never had their financial support in my education. I am a first generation graduate student, and as neither of my parents have a college degree and I've spent my time growing up in a financially tight space, my family has never been able to offer me any financial help. In addition to this, I do not have a spouse or partner to supplement my income in any way, so I am left to budget everything for myself and hope that no unexpected medical expenses pop up. Then, over the summers, many of us are forced to take on multiple jobs to continue to live in Bellingham in preparation for the following year(s) of graduate school.

In addition to being an instructor of ENG 101, I take 10 credits of intensive graduate level classes. For me, this means that in order to prioritize my studies, I cannot hold a second job on the side and must sacrifice my well-being (nutrient and health related typically) to maintain the work I do at and for this university.

I hope that you consider our concerns and look forward to hearing more from you at my time at Western. I appreciate you taking the time to listen to our concerns and hope to continue to create and participate in the wonderful communities (and particularly the wonderful English TA community) we have here at Western in my time here. I can't wait to see the way you work with us to move Western forward into a more sustainable and welcoming place that we can afford to be apart of.

Sincerely,

Destiny Brugman
English Department
Western Washington University

Grant Cooper replied on Tue, 01/29/2019 - 07:32 PERMALINK

TA STIPENDS

It sounds like these TA's are being paid 1 quarters tuition to teach for a whole year? This does not seem to reflect a reasonable amount to survive on. According to HUD, extremely low income is \$16,000 annually for a single person in comparison to the area median income in Whatcom County. This is an extremely difficult amount for a single student to survive currently without hardship and It would only be logical that this stipend amount would be devastating for a single parent.

32reply

Haley Doran replied on Tue, 01/29/2019 - 12:17 PERMALINK

FINANCIAL COVERAGE OF GRAD TAS

I agree, I am a chemistry grad student TA and the stipend is not enough to live comfortably, especially given the time we put into being a TA and conducting research.

33reply

Jake Lawlor replied on Tue, 01/29/2019 - 12:49 PERMALINK

RE INSUFFICIENT GRADUATE STIPENDS

I am in complete agreement with all that has been said in this thread. Though I am grateful for the supervision and research opportunities I've had in the Biology Program, had I more fully understood the magnitude of the financial burden and lack of support from the University on this issue before enrolling at Western, I likely would have explored other options in pursuit of a Master's degree. Low stipends ultimately affect both quality of research and quality of life of WWU graduate students and make it near impossible to live autonomously off the grad stipends alone. This financial burden also perpetuates a pattern of exclusivity in Western grad programs, inconsistent with Western's claimed devotion to fostering opportunity for students of all backgrounds.

34reply

Jasmine Balasa replied on Tue, 01/29/2019 - 12:50 PERMALINK

BOLG POST REPOSE

I agree

Jasmine Balasa, Adult and Higher Education

35reply

Heather Loepp replied on Tue, 01/29/2019 - 20:29 PERMALINK

BETTER PAY FOR TAS

I teach English 101 in tandem with earning my MFA in creative writing. In our department, the title "TA" simply doesn't fit; we craft our class from the ground up and carry all of the weight of teaching like any other teacher or professor on campus, spending 12 hours a week on grading ALONE. At no point do we act as "assistant", yet we are paid the lowest TA stipend on campus. I am 35 years old, working around the clock to earn my MFA while pulling off the magic trick of teaching ENG 101 and haven't been paid a stipend/salary this low since I was a teenager working at Subway. I love my job---I just wish we were paid a respectable living wage that reflects the vital role we play on campus; teaching a creative, dynamic, rigorous curriculum that is REQUIRED for all Western students to graduate. Many of us can't even make our rent. Come on, Western, seriously? Please consider our humble request and give us the respectful response we deserve.

36reply

Kamryn Masters replied on Tue, 01/29/2019 - 22:50 PERMALINK

ENG 101

While I appreciate the tuition waiver and \$500ish stipend I receive for being a graduate TA I found it difficult to stomach the news that the stipend amounts haven't been raised in close to two decades... wages for ALL employees need to rise with cost of living and graduate TAs are no exception... some of my fellow TAs are forced to work jobs on weekends/evenings to make ends meet as the stipend we receive twice a month barely covers the cost of rent, let alone bills, food and other miscellaneous expenses... those of us who wish to put a priority on teaching and being a student are forced to take out large loans in place of an additional job burying us further in student debt... needless to say this is not the way things should be but it is how they are and I implore WWU to make the necessary changes to where graduate TAs are not forced to choose between their studies, students and surviving...
-Kamryn Masters M.A. Candidate

37reply

Molly Johnson replied on Wed, 01/30/2019 - 08:44 PERMALINK

I AGREE!

I agree!

Molly Johnson
Geology graduate TA

38reply

Anonymous replied on Wed, 01/30/2019 - 09:10 PERMALINK

I AGREE WITH YOU PATRICK.

I agree with you Patrick. Despite holding a full-time GA position at Wooding, I am currently working outside of WWU and taking out loans to help pay for my time here as a graduate student. Livable stipends are necessary.

Zachary Lundgren
Education and Social Justice Graduate Assistant

39reply

Paige Morkner replied on Wed, 01/30/2019 - 13:25 PERMALINK

GEOLOGY DEPARTMENT TA

I agree with Patrick 100%, we deserve a living wage which provides the ability to complete research and teach without financial burden of taking out loans or finding other means to support ourselves in the process. The actions of the university sends a message that the university doesn't recognize the burden they continue to place on graduate students by requiring a huge amount of school fees at the beginning of each quarter (\$350+ per quarter) and refusing to increase stipend amounts to meet the cost of living in Bellingham.

40reply

Rebecca Smith replied on Wed, 01/30/2019 - 15:46 PERMALINK

I AGREE MY NEEDS AS A GRADUATE STUDENT AND GA ARE NOT BEING MET

I fully support and agree with what Patrick Barnes is saying in this letter. I feel that this college is not addressing concerns financial and otherwise for graduate students. My main problem is that my salary is too low to cover my expenses. My net income is \$654 per month. That is barely enough to pay rent let alone anything else. While I am thankful to have my GA position, I think it is a terrible practice to pay students \$16.35/hour and expect them to be able to pay their living expenses while also going to school. This leads to students such as myself having to take out student loans to pay my current living expenses such as food, gas, and utilities. This makes no sense from a business perspective I would never advise someone to take out loans to cover their non-discretionary expenses. This is one reason the cost of debt and the burden of debt for student loan debt continues to climb for students.

Moreover, we are forced to pay many fees every quarter. If I did not have a GA position, I would pay \$821 per quarter in fees or \$2,463 per school year (in fees alone). With my GA position, I pay \$604.30/quarter or \$1,812.90 per school year in fees. Although, lower, it still takes a significant portion of money away from my expenses. These are excessive to what most colleges do (I have been to several). The one that I find to not make any sense to me is why I am forced to pay a student health fee that will not take my insurance? For those students who live on campus, it makes sense to have and offer this service. However, for those who are unable to use it, they should get a waiver for that. It costs me \$678 over the two years that I am here and I am not gaining any benefit from it (I am not the only person in this category either). Instead, the students who live in student housing should be paying these fees. They are the people who use this service most often. Also, With the Affordable Care Act (more commonly known as "Obama Care") most students are required to have and carry commercial insurance. Thus, this does not need to be a "free clinic" that is funded through tuition. Instead, it should be supported by those in student housing, and insurance billed for all services rendered.

In summary, increasing our wages (given that others are already receiving the increase) and decreasing many of the unnecessary fees will help graduate students who are choosing to participate in a GA position. This is something that provides much value to Western as well as the local community. By doing this, we can also increase the pool of applicants and thus the quality of the education of students at the graduate and undergraduate level receive. This, in turn, will spiral and impact other areas such as university research both by students and professors (which what I help with). I appreciate you taking the time to address the concerns of Graduate Students overall as well as those with a TA position.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Smith

College of Business and Economics

41reply

Jai Dulani replied on Wed, 01/30/2019 - 20:14 PERMALINK

ENGLISH TA

Dear Sabah,

My name is Jai Dulani and I am writing in support of the comments made by Patrick Barnes regarding the compensation of Graduate TA's at WWU. I am a first-year graduate student in the English department. While my title is Teaching Assistant, I am the sole instructor for an English 101 class, which means I teach a class of 24 students three days a week.

Our compensation is less than \$12,000 a year and we are still required to pay over \$350 in fees/quarter. The cost of living in Bellingham is above the national average and this stipend is not sufficient to live on. The workload of taking 10 graduate credits a quarter, teaching a class on our own every quarter, and ultimately writing a book-length thesis is very demanding and puts us in the position of either taking on more employment or taking out loans - neither of which are sustainable options as we work towards our degree.

The fact is we are not fairly compensated for the time and labor we put in and we deserve to be.

Please raise our stipends - it is an investment in our well-being, our work as graduate scholars, and our futures. Please take action that would truly reflect the values of Western.

Best,

Jai Dulani

Please consider us, see us, and allow us the financial security we deserve."

42reply

Amanda Stromecki replied on Thu, 01/31/2019 - 14:27 PERMALINK

I AGREE

I agree

Amanda Stromecki, Biology

43reply

Kristiana Lapo replied on Fri, 02/01/2019 - 16:30 PERMALINK

GRAD STUDENT NEEDS NOT BEING MET

I strongly and wholeheartedly agree with Patrick on these issues.

Kristiana Lapo

M.S. Candidate, Department of Geology

44reply

David Beaumier replied on Fri, 02/01/2019 - 17:44 PERMALINK

ENGLISH

Dear Sabah,

Please do consider making TAships a viable job for someone to live in Bellingham and give the best they can to their classes and to their students to help raise the bar at Western.

David

45reply

Lilja Strang replied on Sat, 02/02/2019 - 15:29 [PERMALINK](#)

I AGREE

I am from the Biology department and share a cohort with Patrick. I agree wholeheartedly with the concerns he outlines here. I am one of the few graduate students fortunate enough to have secured outside grant funding. I also receive financial support from my parents, and took out a small federal loan. Based on my experience TA-ing here my first year, I can honestly say that without these outside resources I would be unable to continue pursuing my M.S. here at WWU.

46reply

President's Office replied on Thu, 02/07/2019 - 14:07 [PERMALINK](#)

ADDRESSING GRADUATE STUDENT NEEDS

Patrick, the comments and concerns that you and so many other graduate assistants in this thread have expressed are greatly appreciated. While this issue has been raised in the past, and various funding proposals put forth, Western is committed to start addressing it in the next fiscal year. We will make sure that there are opportunities for graduate student representatives to be involved in the planning process during spring 2019.

47reply

Lillian Kuehl replied on Sun, 02/10/2019 - 13:45 [PERMALINK](#)

GRADUATE STUDENTS NEED AND DESERVE INCREASED STIPENDS

My name is Lillian Kuehl and I'm a 4th-year graduate student in the Biology Department. My first year I was a TA, but I found the lack of supervision (once per quarter for about 20 minutes or less) and iffy communication of expectations so stressful that it wasn't worth the pay. Simply put, I found myself sobbing at least once a week and having a hard time focusing on my thesis work--that's not worth \$1200 per month. My second year I lived on \$1500 per month loans from my parents, since federal student loan interest for graduate students was/is about 6% and accrues continuously while you're still in school. Last year I started working full time and now I work on my thesis here and there when I can, and have adjusted my expectations of quality accordingly lower. I can't represent my best while a graduate student at WWU, and this does harm to the university and its undergraduates, not just me. Stipends for graduate students haven't increased in well over 15 years, and had I known this in advance I would never have enrolled at WWU--it's not just about money, it's about respect for the people who are teaching your students and giving your university a reputation for quality research.

48reply

Carson Yach replied on Thu, 02/14/2019 - 15:41 [PERMALINK](#)

MASTERS IN EDUCATION. RESIDENCY WITH NCI

I agree. Raise the wages!!

49reply

Megan Jendro replied on Mon, 01/28/2019 - 14:34 PERMALINK

IN ADDITION TO MY LAST

In addition to my last comment, students who work over 19 hours a week are not allowed to receive scholarships or grants. 20 hour a week TAs and GAs have to balance a much higher demanding hour quota in addition to classes and should be able to be rewarded for taking on such demanding positions.

50reply

Lacey Kelley replied on Fri, 02/01/2019 - 14:08 PERMALINK

GRADUATE STUDENTS

- 1) Graduate students lack support from the university.
- 2) Lacey Kelley
- 3) Psychology