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GRADUATE STUDENTS HOLD GRADE-IN AT UT TOWER

Austin, TX, May 13th – At 10:30 AM, a large group of University of Texas Austin graduate student workers began a grade-in at the office of Provost McInnis located on the second floor in the UT Tower. The grade-in is being held to demonstrate the importance of graduate student workers to the UT Austin community and demand that the university fully cover the cost of tuition for graduate student workers.

At the nation’s top universities, graduate student workers receive full tuition waivers and stipends in exchange for working as Teaching Assistants, Research Assistants, and Assistant Instructors. At UT Austin, tuition benefits for graduate student workers do not cover the full cost of tuition. Many graduate students are forced to pay more than $1000 per semester in tuition fees, even though they were awarded tuition waivers with their letters of admission. The average UT-Austin graduate student worker is paid about $15,000 per year. That $2,000 is a significant amount of overall pay. Further, these tuition costs are billed at the start of the Fall semester, before graduate student workers receive benefits. Students are forced to make these payments over other financial obligations at risk of losing their continuing registration.

“Now during final seasons, we are responsible for reviewing, proctoring, evaluating and inputting the final grades of tens of thousands of undergraduate students. It is time that the university recognize this work.”, said Erika Slaymaker, a graduate student in the Department of Sociology, and member of the group Underpaid at UT.

This protest follows a rally held on May 1st, where close to 500 University of Texas at Austin graduate students, faculty, staff, undergraduate students, and members of the greater Austin community rallied on the UT campus to protest low graduate student worker wages. One of the immediate focuses of the event was a petition demanding that UT Austin’s budget council find a way to cover the Tuition Reimbursement Benefit (TRB) gap by the fall 2019 semester.

The University of Texas at Austin has appointed a task force to address the low graduate student stipends. However, recommendations from previous task forces have been ignored. In 2004, the Commision of 125 recommended that graduate student stipends be “as high as those at the nation’s other premier graduate schools.” Since then, graduate student wages have remained stagnant while the cost of living has sky-rocketed.

The University of Texas at Austin Provost has $50 million of soft money—funds that are not allocated to specific activities or conditions. It would cost the university just over $2.5 million to cover the TRB gap for all graduate student workers in Fall 2019. There is no reason that the University should be unable to cover this gap while working towards a more long-term and sustainable solution to waiving graduate student workers’ full tuition and paying them living wages.

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