

Questions below in blue are questions submitted by Vanderbilt Graduate Students to the Graduate Student Council (GSC). If you would also like to submit a questions please fill out this [this short and anonymous survey](#). After you submit your question please check our website for updates. The Graduate Student Council is comprised of graduate student volunteers. We will work diligently to address your questions in a timely manner.

Questions below in purple are questions that GSC has come up with to promote additional conversation about this topic. Transparency is important to our organization's culture which is why we have decided to color code the questions this way.

Speaking of transparency... Where does our information come from? We get information from research publications, news articles, and SEIU's constitution. We also get information from conversations with the Union Organizing Committee, graduate students, and faculty. As necessary, we have reached out to both Vanderbilt's legal counsel and SEIU's legal counsel to make sure our facts are legally accurate. GSC is maintaining a positive relationship with both the Union Organizing Committee and the VU administration. It should be noted that we are independent from both groups.

This information has been compiled by fellow graduate students. We are human and also working on PhDs. If you find an error please kindly report it to us at [gsc@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:gsc@vanderbilt.edu) so we can fix it.

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# Graduate Student Council and Opportunity for Discussion

## Why is the Graduate Student Council (GSC) remaining neutral?

The Graduate Student Council will remain neutral regarding graduate student unions at Vanderbilt. We are an inclusive organization which aims to foster a cohesive, collegiate community. Graduate students on campus have many strong views on unionization. Some students support unionization and others do not. We recognize and respect these differences of opinion. By remaining neutral, GSC remains inclusive to all students regardless of their unionization stance.

## What is GSC's goal? What else is the Graduate Student Council doing to facilitate conversations?

We wish to support students during this time by providing unbiased, factual information to graduate students. Our goal is to promote healthy discussion and critical thinking about the pros and cons of unionization. To do this, GSC is distributing unbiased information about union topics that students find confusing and answers to unionization questions. We understand that students on campus need a platform to hold conversations and discussions with individuals outside of their normal peer group. To provide this platform, we hope to host open forums where both pro- and anti-union views can be discussed.

### Who are the different groups involved in this conversation?

We, as the Graduate Student Council, are supporting students by providing unbiased information about the pros and cons of unionization. This conversation needs to occur between all graduate students at Vanderbilt. Students who support unionization have developed a Union Organizing Committee and are advocating for unionization. As of right now, students have not organized a formal committee advocating against unionization.

While the administration has made a few announcements about unionization, GSC feels this is a conversation that needs to occur between students, and not between the students and the administration.

### Will the GSC oppose administration interference in unionization?

Yes. GSC has already spoken with VU administrators to share our stance on this subject. We will denounce any interference if it occurs.

### How can students organize to voice their opinions about unions?

Students can join the Union Organizing Committee by going to [this](#) website.

Alternatively, if students want to voice anti-union opinions, they can form their own Registered Student Organization (RSO). As an RSO students can build their own website, form their own listserv, post on campus, reserve rooms for meetings and discussions, and request funds from AcFee. Interested students should contact Clayton Arrington for information about how to register as a new organization. See also: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/studentorgs/registering-your-org/new-organizations>. **Applications are due April 15<sup>th</sup>!!**

### I know I do not want to be involved in this conversation. How can I receive fewer emails?

GSC respects your inbox and will only send out relevant information. To this end, we will no longer send out union specific emails unless we are announcing an open forum or informing you a vote has been called. We will continue to post new information here on our website and in our monthly newsletters.

If you would like to be removed from the Union Organizing Committee's listserv, please politely request removal by emailing [vandygraduateworkers@gmail.com](mailto:vandygraduateworkers@gmail.com).

## Background Information

### What is the NLRB and why is this relevant now?

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) is an independent federal agency that is charged with administering the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). The NLRB issues rules and provides guidance under the NLRA, conducts union elections, prosecutes violations of the NLRA (unfair labor practices), and issues case decisions interpreting the NLRA.

Previously graduate students at private institutions were not eligible to determine whether to form and join a union. These FAQ questions are relevant now, because of the recent NLRB ruling involving *Columbia University and Graduate Workers of Columbia, United Auto Workers*, which states that graduate students at private institutions are employees for purposes of the NLRA when performing services as teaching assistants and research assistants and, as employees, they may now decide whether they want to form and join a union.

## Helpful definitions:

Bargaining unit - The collective group of individuals that is represented by a union

Bargaining contract - The terms, conditions, and benefits negotiated by the union and employer

Bargaining committee - Members of the bargaining unit who have been elected to represent the bargaining unit's interests during negotiations

Union Steward - Member of an organization who is also a labor union official who represents and defends the interests of fellow employees

Union Organizing Committee - A committee of graduate students currently advocating for graduate student unionization

## What is a microunion?

A microunion is a subset of a larger group. For example, there are approximately 2,200 graduate students under the Graduate School umbrella at Vanderbilt. A union might decide that it wants to organize and represent all 2,200 graduate students or it might decide it only wants to organize and represent a subset of all graduate students, for example, the graduate students in a single department. That subset would be considered a "microunion."

## Tennessee is a right to work state - what does that mean?

As a right-to-work state, employees in a bargaining unit represented by a union do not have to join the union or pay any union dues to retain their status at the University. In other words, if a union forms you do not have to join the union. Employees within a bargaining unit that do not join the union are still covered by the terms and conditions of the union contract. However, *only students who are dues-paying members of a union are allowed to vote on union matters.*

## How can I get more information to make this decision on my own?

We recommend this website: <http://www.justfacts.com/unions.asp#strikes-private>

We recommend reading **SEIU's constitution** to understand what it means to be in a union:

<http://www.seiu205.org/files/2014/07/Constitution-and-ByLaws-Adopted-110610-Final-Document-0505111.pdf>

Here are some articles:

- Gordon J. Hewitt, "Graduate Student Employee Collective Bargaining and the Educational Relationship Between Faculty and Graduate Students" *J. Collective Negotiations* 29(2) (2000). Available at: [https://triggered.clockss.org/ServeContent?url=http://baywood.stanford.clockss.org%2FBWCN%2FBAWOOD\\_BWCN\\_29\\_2%2FP07GC8RF5GG04VH8.pdf](https://triggered.clockss.org/ServeContent?url=http://baywood.stanford.clockss.org%2FBWCN%2FBAWOOD_BWCN_29_2%2FP07GC8RF5GG04VH8.pdf)
- Sean E. Rogers, Adrienne E. Eaton and Paula B. Voos, "Effects of Unionization on Graduate Student Employees: Faculty Student Relations, Academic Freedom, and Pay" *ILR Review* 66:2 (2013). Available at: <http://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1731&context=articles>
- Schenk, Tom L., The Effects of Graduate-Student Unionization on Stipends (January 17, 2010). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1831975> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1831975>
- Beyond Bargaining: Consequences Of NLRB's Graduate Students Decision [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-p-mastrosimone/nlr-graduate-students\\_b\\_11759160.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-p-mastrosimone/nlr-graduate-students_b_11759160.html)
- Ehrenberg, R. G., D. B. Klaff, A. T. Kezsbom, and M. P. Nagowski: 2004, 'Collective Bargaining in American Higher Education'. In: R. G. Ehrenberg (ed.): *Governing Academia*. Cornell University Press,

# Unionization Process

## What is the process to form a union?

The process is dictated by NLRB rules. The process begins when a union solicits students to sign “union authorization cards” stating their desire for the University to recognize the union. Once at least 30% of the proposed “bargaining unit” have signed union authorization cards, the union files a petition for representative election with the Regional NLRB Office.

The petition is sent to the University along with a notice of a hearing to be held by the Regional Director of the NLRB. The University is given the opportunity to provide its position on whether the proposed bargaining unit is appropriate (for example, the University might not find it appropriate to include a post-doc in a graduate student union). If the Regional Director determines that the proposed unit is appropriate, an election will be ordered and a date/time set for the election. The election is a secret ballot election, which means everyone’s vote is anonymous.

During this process, both the union and the University are free to campaign for or against unionization. To ensure that the union has an equal opportunity to campaign to students, NLRB rules require the University to provide the union with the home addresses, home email addresses, and home telephone/cellphone numbers of all eligible voters in the proposed unit. The election is held on the date and at a location determined by the Regional Office with the election being by secret ballot. We have also heard that election ballots might be sent to students by mail.

## Why have student chosen Service Employees International Union (SEIU) over other unions?

After the NLRB ruling, a few Vanderbilt students reached out to SEIU Local 205 to begin advocating for unionization at Vanderbilt. SEIU Local 205 has worked with other workers in Nashville so the proposed union would be part of a larger community of workers. GSC is not currently equipped to address the merits of one union over another. However, if you are interested in this question, we would like to encourage you to discuss this among your peers.

## What is a union authorization card?

A union authorization card is a card that individuals sign in order to show support for the union. Essentially, by signing these cards you are indicating that you would vote yes if an election were held.

## If I sign a union authorization card am I committed to voting “yes” if an election is held?

If you sign a union authorization card you are not committed to voting “yes” in an election. However, since the union authorization cards are used to assess student interest in unionization by the union and the NLRB office, you should not misrepresent your interest in a union on these cards.

## I want to sign a union authorization card. How do I do this?

If you want to unionize and sign a union authorization card, email [vandygraduateworkers@gmail.com](mailto:vandygraduateworkers@gmail.com) for more information.

## What is the voting process like for forming a union? Does the vote require a majority of TOTAL students to vote "yes" or does it require a majority of students who vote to vote "yes"?

Elections to certify a union are decided by the *majority of the votes cast*. For example, we have approximately 2,200 graduate students at Vandy. If 500 students actually vote, and 256 of those students vote to unionize, then a union would be certified. A tie results in no union certification.

## Is my union vote anonymous?

Yes. Voting is by secret ballot and the election is conducted by employees of the NLRB. Union representatives and University officials are not permitted to be present at the voting locations.

## Would there be consequences if I voice my opinions on unionization?

No. It is a violation of the NLRA and University policy to retaliate against a person because of their union views, whether in favor of or against unionization. If you feel that you have experienced negative consequences for voicing your opinion please contact the Graduate Student Council.

## If there is an election and graduate students vote not to unionize, can there be another election?

Yes, but only after one year has elapsed.

## If an election results in representation by a union, could there be another election to remove the union?

Yes, however, the NLRB will not process a union decertification petition for at least one year after the vote to unionize. If the union and University agree on a union contract, the NLRB will not process a union decertification petition for a full three years from the date of the contract.

## Who will represent graduate student interests should unionization occur?

If a union forms, the bargaining unit consisting of graduate students will form a "Chapter" within the SEIU Local 205 organization.

The bargaining unit will also elect graduate student representatives to form a bargaining committee (the number of representatives is unknown to us at this point). The bargaining committee will create a contract proposal based on information solicited from students (through votes and surveys). The bargaining committee, with support from union staff (presumably a legal team) and the union Chief Negotiator (likely SEIU Local 205's President or other appointed designee), will negotiate the contract with VU administration (probably also accompanied by professional negotiators/a legal team). *Note: SEIU's constitution (Article 4, Section 4) says that by unionizing, we give SEIU authority to 1) act as the exclusive bargaining representative with full exclusive power to execute agreements and 2) present, process, and adjust grievances and disputes. So we do not know what the extent of the bargaining committees role in this process will be.* Once a tentative agreement is reached, all members of the union will vote to ratify the contract. If the proposed contract is voted down, negotiations will continue. *Note: SEIU's constitution says that only members can vote. See Article 5, Section 1A.*

Union members also elect members to be Stewards, who address day-to-day grievances and complaints.

## If a union is formed, how long does it take before we get our first union contract?

After a union forms, students first must take time to choose the bargaining committee and establish their bargaining priorities. Then the union facilitates conversations with Vanderbilt to negotiate this contract. GSC has looked into this matter and found that the time it takes to ratify a contract is unpredictable. This process might take months or years.

## What happens in the meantime, after a union is formed and before a union contract is agreed upon?

SEIU would not charge union dues until a union contract is agreed upon.

Before a contract is agreed upon, the University legally cannot make any changes to our working conditions or provide us with new benefits. Any changes to our working conditions, good or bad, must be approved by the union. The advantage to this is that there will not be any surprises if we have a union, the downside is that all advocacy efforts will stall until a contract is agreed upon.

## What does it mean to be a member of the union?

According to SEIU's constitution, all members must:

- Act in solidarity
- Comply with decisions made by the union
- Abide by and carry out all terms of the bargaining agreement
- Shall "assist in organizing the unorganized" and participate in such activities as called on by the union
- Refrain from any activity to disestablish the union
- Notify SEIU of their address
- Be respectful and orderly

# Pros and Cons of Unionization

## What would be the purpose of unionization? What are the benefits?

- We would have legal recourse if the admin refuses to negotiate changes to working conditions, wages, and benefits.
- The union can provide legal aid to students during negotiations.
- The administration will not be able to make policy changes that affect graduate students without consulting the union first (eg. parking prices cannot change without union approval).
- We negotiate for increased benefits.
- We negotiate for even better working conditions.

## What are the consequences of unionization?

- We give SEIU authority to act as the exclusive bargaining representative with full exclusive power to execute agreements. We give SEIU authority to present, process, and adjust grievances and disputes. Students guide this process, but according to SEIU's constitution they have exclusive power (See Article 4, Section 4).
- If your individual needs do not align with the collective needs you may lose benefits.
- You have to commit to unionization before you know the details of the union contract.
- You might have to strike.
- If you decide you no longer want a union they can be difficult to decertify. According to SEIU's constitution members are not allowed to participate in any activities that could harm the union.

## What are the consequences of NOT joining the union if a union forms?

According to SEIU's constitution, here are some of the consequences of not joining the union:

- If you do not join the union, you may lose your voice.  
"A worker who is not a member of the union will not be represented regarding day-to-day problems, including grievances and disciplinary actions, except where required by law" (Article 4, Section 7A.).  
According to NLRB rules, the administration will not be able to advocate for you because they cannot change anything without union approval.
- You might have to pay fees to voice your opinions. "Where the union is required to provide representation to non-members by law, the Executive Board shall adopt a fee schedule for the provision of such services where allowed by law." (Article 4, Section 7B.)
- You cannot join the union after something bad happens so that you can get representation, unless you have unique circumstances. (Article 4, Section 7C.)
- You cannot vote on union matters including contracts, elections, and strikes.
- You cannot participate in union functions.

## What specific immediate and long-term goals do the students who support unionization want to achieve through collective bargaining?

The Union Organizing Committee is in the process of creating a platform where students can begin to identify and refine these goals. **GSC cannot provide specific goals at this point in time.** However, to provide some examples, here are some general goals that students may choose to advocate for:

- Contractually guaranteed annual cost of living stipend increases and timely payments
- Enhanced dental, vision, and mental health insurance (and lower copays)
- Improved access to insurance coverage for partners and dependents, subsidized child care and parental leave (including retaining student status while on leave, which can mean retaining visa status, health insurance, and access to University facilities)

We encourage all students to discuss the specific goals that they would like to advocate for with their friends and departments. If you would like to become involved in the Union Organizing Committee's efforts to create this platform, please contact [vandygraduateworkers@gmail.com](mailto:vandygraduateworkers@gmail.com).

## If a union forms, will new benefits simply be added to the ones we currently have?

Every single benefit and working condition is up for negotiation so new benefits will not be added to the ones we have now. Sometimes unions try to negotiate a "past practices" clause that stipulates that previous benefits will not be reduced. If the University does not agree to such a clause, union negotiations will probably be a process of compromising and what is given for one benefit might be taken from another to balance costs.

## How will unionizing change (either improve or worsen) our lives as graduate students?

The answer to this question depends on your personal situation at Vanderbilt. Some students are in a difficult position and would greatly benefit from unionization. Other students might be in a great position and experiences negative consequences from changes made to current policy. Please reflect on your personal situation and use the information provided throughout this webpage to consider your response to this question.

## Could unionization formalize a path towards clear and open due process regarding dismissal from academic programs and/or involuntary loss of

funding? Some graduate students find out suddenly that their labs have no funding and lose their pay without warning. A clear statement from the University about these cases would substantially remove graduate student stress.

Yes, a union might be able to negotiate due process regarding dismissal. The union might also be able to negotiate the creation of bridge funds to support graduate students during abrupt funding interruptions.

### How will a union impact my stipend?

Studies do not fully agree on this.

A study from 2004 concludes that unionized schools were ineffective at increasing stipends, but better able to reduce require fees.

Citation:

Ehrenberg, R. G., D. B. Klaff, A. T. Kezsbom, and M. P. Nagowski: 2004, 'Collective Bargaining in American Higher Education'. In: R. G. Ehrenberg (ed.): *Governing Academia*. Cornell University Press, pp. 153–173. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1881&context=articles>

A 2010 study reports that graduate unions are effective at raising stipends, but ineffective at lowering fees, providing health-care coverage, and lowering intra-university wage variance. This study also found that returns for unionization are higher for teaching assistants when only teaching assistants are included in the union. Contrary to the findings for teaching assistants, the study found that contract unions do not help research assistants.

Citation:

This paper used data from surveys conducted by the US Department of Education, the National Research Council, and the National Science foundation. It used a multilevel model to control for intra-university correlation of wages. Schenk, Tom L., *The Effects of Graduate-Student Unionization on Stipends* (January 17, 2010). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1831975> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1831975>

*It should be noted that these studies have very small sample sizes for graduate schools with unions.*

The Union Organizing Committee has stated one of their priorities will be to negotiate for higher stipends to offset the cost of union dues.

### Would the union's role be strictly limited to stipends and salaries?

No. All working conditions, wages, and benefits will be re-negotiated if a union is formed.

### Would unionization help improve our health insurance options (or get us access to staff health insurance)?

A union might bargain for improved health insurance options.

However, GSC would like to note that **we already receive better health insurance options than staff**. We, graduate students, get Platinum level coverage (as defined by the United Health) and the insurance company does not make any money off of our premiums. If you would like to learn more about how GSC is advocating for improved health insurance outside of unionization please see <https://studentorg.vanderbilt.edu/gsc/current-advocacy-efforts/>.

That being said, we recognize and respect the fact that our current healthcare plan is not suitable for some students. It is difficult to create a health insurance plan that all 2,200 students will find perfectly suitable.



## How will this affect the mentor-mentee relationship?

We have not found strong evidence for how this will impact the mentor-mentee relationship.

### **This means that you might enjoy the same great relationship you already have.**

The Union Organizing Committee has assembled data from two reports that suggest faculty do not have a negative attitude towards unionized students and graduate student unions do not inhibit their ability to mentor graduate students.

Citations:

Gordon J. Hewitt, "Graduate Student Employee Collective Bargaining and the Educational Relationship Between Faculty and Graduate Students" *J. Collective Negotiations* 29(2) (2000).

Sean E. Rogers, Adrienne E. Eaton and Paula B. Voos, "Effects of Unionization on Graduate Student Employees: Faculty Student Relations, Academic Freedom, and Pay" *ILR Review* 66:2 (2013).

### **This also means that you might suffer through the terrible relationship you already have too.**

Unless your mentor is breaking the law (discrimination, harassment, RCR issues) it is unclear what a union can do. Could a union hold your mentors accountable for being "nice", changing their mind about the direction of your project, or getting revisions/feedback to you quickly?

## Is there weight to the University's claim that unionizing may obstruct learning?

As far as GSC is aware, the University has said that unionization may "alter our current students' academic experience," which does not necessarily mean unionizing may obstruct learning. The only way we can think that unionization will obstruct learning is if a strike occurs and students cannot attend class or perform research.

## How would unionizing affect me as an individual on a routine basis?

- Your student organization, which can be considered a labor organization, might lose funding from the University. According to section 8(a)(2) of the National Labor Relations Act, employers cannot dominate labor organizations. The University could get in serious trouble by providing funds to student organizations as it might be construed as dominating a labor organization.
- The process for reporting grievances would change. If you are a union member you would report concerns to the Union Steward - a graduate student representative. It is not clear if you can report concerns to your DGS, Department Chair, GSC, or the Graduate School in the same way as you do now.
- You will probably observe no change with your mentor, for better or worse. See [How will this affect the mentor-mentee relationship?](#)
- It might make some policies more clear, and therefore improve your day-to-day life in that regard.

## How would unionization change the already good relationship graduate students have with the University?

It is hard to know how this will change, here are some thoughts:

- Right now, students undergo **integrative negotiation** with the University (GSC observes this on a daily basis). Integrative negotiation has a strong focus on the relationship between both parties and mutual benefits and gain. Unions often utilize **distributive negotiation**, which focuses on distributing finite resources and does not typically consider the relationship between the parties. Here is a link from Oregon State that compares these two strategies: <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/comm440-540/distinteq.htm>.

Of course, even if a union damages our relationship with the administration, legally, the administration cannot do anything about it.

- Students may not be able to sit on campus planning committees.

### How will this affect graduate student instructor of record positions?

We do not know how this will affect instructor of record positions. We will not know until after negotiations and a contract is ratified.

### As it currently stands, we do not turn in timesheets or have defined paid time off. Will unionization change that? And will that reduce flexibility in our work hours/vacation time?

We do not know how this will affect our work schedule. We will not know until after negotiations and a contract is ratified.

### Is it in our best interest to support a union even if our pay and advisor relationships are solid? What will a union do for graduate students who are currently happy?

Students must answer this question for themselves. Here are some questions to inform your thinking:

- Do you believe that a union will get you even more benefits than you currently have? See relevant question: [If a union forms, will new benefits simply be added to the ones we currently have?](#)
- Do you believe that you can improve your situation without a union? See [Union Alternatives](#) section for relevant information.
- Are you concerned that VU will take away your benefits unexpectedly? See [What would be the purpose of unionization? What are the benefits?](#)

### Has unionizing graduate students worked well at other universities?

**We are unable to fairly represent the benefits and consequences of unionization in our answer to this question. Unions don't report failures, therefore we can only present successful outcomes of unionization.** Also, private universities have just recently been allowed to unionize so there is little data on how successful these unions are so far. Public universities have previously been allowed graduate student unions so we may be able to look at these unions to get some data.

#### How unions have worked well:

The Union Organizing Committee has compiled a list of successful advocacy efforts from public university unions. ***This list only focuses on the benefits*** students have seen from unionization. To make sure we are not presenting misleading information, we are only reporting data from their list that indicates the specific changes the union has created. (For example, we are not posting information that says "Students now get paid \$30,000" because we don't know how this differs from what they had before. But we will report "Students negotiated 4% pay increase".)

- After an eight day strike in 2014, the University of Oregon Graduate Teaching Fellows won a 10% wage increase.
- In 2001, GSOCUAW at NYU negotiated improvements in stipends and free health care (2002) with expanded coverage (2003).
- In March 2015, NYU grads renegotiated their contract for a 4% raise.
- Between 1991 and present, graduates at UMass Amherst have won free health insurance, subsidized child care, a dental plan, tuition and fee waivers, a reasonable workload, more than doubled the minimum stipend, and a grievance procedure.

- In their recently ratified 2015 contract UMass Amherst's grads won access to gender neutral bathrooms near grads' places of work and an affirmative action hiring committee to advocate for more people of color and other underrepresented categories.
- Between 2002 and present, University of Washington union has obtained benefits such as the right to a neutral arbitrator for workplace disputes, additional compensation for or relief from overtime as a graduate assistant, and an average increase in graduate assistant wages of 34%.
- Between 2007 and present, Graduate Students United at the University of Chicago won a doubling of teaching assistant salaries, better standards of care at the Student Care Center, and the right for students on parental leave to retain their student status.

#### Where unions have failed:

- Unionization at private schools has failed at Brown University and Duke University. We've also heard that union efforts are losing traction at Harvard. We do not have details regarding why unionization has failed at these schools.
- Overall, unions are not successful at lowering fees, providing health-care coverage, and lowering intra-university wage variance. (According to the articles by Tom Schenk: "The Effects of Graduate-Student Unionization of Stipends" and "The Effects of graduate-student unionization".)

#### How is this effort affected by failure to unionize at Duke?

Recently, SEIU recalled its petition to form a union at Duke because the majority of Duke graduate students voted against unionization. We do not see that this will have an effect on the unionization efforts at Vanderbilt.

#### What will the union do that the GSC is not already doing?

GSC advocates for students by collecting data on student concerns, forming proposals suggesting solutions for these concerns, and bringing all of this information to the appropriate administrators. We also ensure a graduate student voice is present by placing students on planning committees around campus. Our efforts have been effective and have served to build a productive relationship between the administration and students. Here is what a union could do that we could not:

- A union could force the University to come to the table to consider certain requests. For example, the dental and vision plans provided by our student insurance are separate from our Student Health Insurance Plan. Some students have advocated for combined plans so they do not have to buy separate ones. However, the University will not consider these requests because VU's goal is to keep the overall cost of our health insurance premiums low. If the bargaining committee for a union wanted combined plans, they would have the power to make the University negotiate.
- If a union were in place, the administration would not be able to make changes to working conditions without prior union approval. For example, in 2015 the administration announced that they would be reconfiguring the graduate student workspace in Buttrick Hall. GSC stepped in and created an opportunity for students to have some input, but some students are still displeased with the overall results. If a union were in place a formal negotiation would have likely occurred before any changes were made.

#### The administration FAQs say that we will not know what a union will provide until after we vote to unionize. How do we avoid that risk?

Because we must negotiate the final contract with the University, nothing is guaranteed. So yes, it is true that we will not know the terms and details of the bargaining contract until after negotiations. However, students can work to have a clear idea of what the union will advocate for, thereby reducing some of the unknown variables. This can be done by participating in

campus conversations and discussions about unionization. By sharing advocacy goals with each other, students can begin to identify common needs and build a campaign platform. Building a platform does not guarantee that it will be ratified during negotiations though. Each student will be responsible for voicing their opinion and ensuring that their needs are represented in this platform and on the bargaining committee if a union is formed.

## What are current complaints that the administration has ruled unfavorably towards graduate students?

We are listing the complaints that students have specifically brought to the administration, that have not been resolved, and that GSC is aware of:

- The new graduate student workspaces in Buttrick Hall are smaller than students were led to believe by the administration.
- The Graduate School reduced the number of travel grants that students were eligible to apply for from 1 / year / graduate student to 3 total / graduate student.
- In order to keep our insurance premiums low, the administration does not combine dental and vision plans with our Student Health Insurance package (you have to purchase them on the side). However, some students would like the plans to be combined, so they feel this is an unfavorable ruling.
- VU did not appropriately handle complaints against a professor in A&S who was accused of sexual harassment and discrimination. VU was not transparent about the investigation process and students do not feel that the professor in question was held accountable for his actions.
- A few departments on campus do not yet have a consistent, back-up funding mechanism to support students whose mentors suddenly lose grants.

## Would I have to go through the union if I had an issue with something at Vanderbilt?

Yes. Typically concerns would be reported to the Union Steward.

If a union forms you will still be able to approach the administration with your concerns but, according to the NLRB, the employer must respect the role of the union as the sole and exclusive agent of the employees.

## Since the administration seems opposed to graduate students unionizing, is it possible that we would actually lose some opportunities/ facilities as a punitive measure on their part once we get on the bargaining table? Is there any historical data that shows that this does not happen (or at least this is not something the admin can pull off successfully in the long term)?

NLRB law states that employers cannot punish employees in this way. It is hard to find historical data on this because either employers get caught and held accountable or they do not get caught and it is not reported anywhere.

If students were to lose opportunities, GSC thinks it will not be a punishment, but due to the fact that every single item is up for negotiation and some things are bound to change. See question [\*If a union forms, will new benefits simply be added to the ones we currently have?\*](#)

## Would the Union organize strikes?

Yes, the union would organize strikes if the students felt it was necessary. Typically, union members would vote whether or not to strike. According to SEIU's constitution, a majority vote would determine whether or not a strike occurs. A bargaining unit that forms a "Chapter" in SEIU will have the opportunity to democratically refine the process to strike. If a strike is called, all members must participate.

## Could I be "fired" from Vanderbilt if the union goes on strike? What are the other consequences of a strike?

VU can "permanently replace" us during a strike (we are not saying it will happen, just that it could happen). Furthermore, during a strike we would not be paid, receive benefits (like health insurance), or be eligible for unemployment benefits. All members must participate in the strike and those who cross the picket-line can be fined. GSC is not sure how much these fines are.

## My friend has \$1000 mice that need constant attention. Will he be able to tend his mice if he is on strike?

If a union forms, union members will not be able to cross picket lines to care for their mice or other experiments. GSC imagines that students will still be able to read from home as long as they are not reported to the union. Students can drop out of the union and then freely cross the picket line. For more information about dropping out of the union, see [What are the consequences of NOT joining the union if a union forms?](#)

## What happens when all of the students who work in labs decide not to strike? Does a union actually give us any bargaining power?

GSC cannot predict how likely this is to occur. If all the students who work in labs drop out of the union to avoid a strike then that whole body of students will lose their voice at the negotiating table. While strikes might be effective, they are only one tool of collective bargaining. Even without strikes, Vanderbilt would still be required to attempt negotiations in good faith.

## When can the administration walk away from the negotiation?

GSC recently learned this and felt it was important for everyone to know. If VU and the union reach an "impasse" at the negotiating table then VU would make its "last, best, and final offer". If this agreement is still rejected then VU has the legal right to implement its last, best, and final offer even though an agreement was not reached.

## How will our employment change with the new designation in a state that considers workers "at-will" employees?

We are still looking into this question...

However, this is what we have found on Wikipedia so far... "At-will" means that an employee can be fired from the organization for any reason at any time (because the employee can leave for any reason at any time too). TN is an at-will state. According to Wikipedia, the standard for organizations with a trade union is that employers must have "just-cause" for firing employees. It is not clear if this needs to be negotiated in the contract, but we will keep looking into this.

# The Bargaining Unit and Differences between Disciplines

## Would the union only include graduate students, or would other campus workers be included?

Based on information gathered at union informational meetings, it is our understanding that the bargaining unit for the graduate student union would encompass all graduate students under the

Graduate School umbrella (~2,200 graduate students). We will not know the size of the bargaining unit until the Union Organizing Committee and SEIU file for a vote.

### Does a union only apply to students who TA?

No, under the NLRB's decision in *Columbia University and Graduate Workers of Columbia, United Auto Workers*, the NLRB determined that all students who are Teaching Assistants (Teaching Assistants, Teaching Fellows, Preceptors, Course Assistants, Readers and Graders), Graduate Research Assistants (including those compensated through Training Grants) and Departmental Research Assistants are "employees" entitled to the protections of the NLRA. Students fitting those descriptions are free to organize collectively or choose not to do so.

### Would the international status of students affect union eligibility?

International students are eligible to vote and be a member of the union.

### Will all graduate students be required to join a union if the majority vote to unionize? If a union forms, is joining mandatory?

Tennessee is a right-to-work state, which means that you do not have to join the union. If you do not join the union you will not have to pay dues, BUT you will also be unable to vote on advocacy priorities or contract ratifications.

If you are in the bargaining unit but do not join the union, all conditions agreed upon in the contract *will still be applied to you*. There is no exception to this.

For example, let's say a bargaining unit is one department. Two students in that department had decided not to join the union. Down the road that student union successfully negotiates a change in the health insurance plan. The two non-members don't get to vote to accept the negotiated change. Those non-members will get that changed health insurance plan too.

### How would the union ensure all graduate student voices are heard if not all graduate students are required to be in the union?

**Please read closely because we have found a few contradictions here.**

If you do *not* join the union, you will *not* be able to vote on contracts, elect a bargaining committee, vote on strikes, and so on. In this way, a non-member's specific voice will not be heard.

According to SEIU's constitution (Article 4, Section 7A) "A worker who is not a member of the union will not be represented regarding day-to-day problems, including grievances and disciplinary actions, except where required by law". We do not know what "except where required by law" means. This makes it sound like *non-members cannot report grievances*, so again a non-member's specific voice may not be heard.

However, SEIU has told us, "It is required by law that the union represent everyone in the bargaining unit regardless of membership." We are not sure what this looks like.

### How will unionization impact the individual needs of PhD candidates while still keeping the interests of most in mind?

This is a very difficult question to answer for two reasons. First, every student is in a different situation and we cannot predict how each individual will be affected. Second, we will not know how our students are affected by unionization until after a union contract is agreed upon.

Generally, GSC foresees three possible scenarios regarding this question.

1. An individual's needs will align with the bargaining contract and the formation of a union will have a positive impact on that individual.

2. An individual's needs will mostly align with the bargaining contract and the formation of the union will have a small or unnoticeable impact on that individual.
3. An individual's needs will not align with the bargaining contract and the formation of the union will have a negative impact on that individual.

A union is built on the premise of collective bargaining and not on individual needs. If a union forms, it would be your responsibility join the union so you can voice your individual needs during union votes.

To help identify your personal response to this question ask yourself and your peers:

- What is my personal situation on campus and how is my situation different from the collective?
- How do my needs align with the collective goals that the Union Organizing Committee is advocating for?
- Do our collective goals have more value than my individual needs?

### Will all graduate students be in the same union regardless of discipline?

If SEIU and the Union Organizing Committee apply for a bargaining unit that encompasses all graduate students, then all graduate students will be in the same union (based on our conversations with the Union Organizing Committee, this is their goal). If SEIU and the Union Organizing Committee apply for multiple micro-unions then all students might not be in the same union.

### How will the union address all of the very specific needs and concerns of the very different graduate programs? Will there be a distinction between natural science and arts & sciences students?

This is a very common question because students perceive the needs of these two groups to be fundamentally different. For example, students in the School of Medicine are not required to TA while students in the College of Arts and Sciences (A&S) must TA. Moreover, there are even significant differences from department to department - being an instructor of record (being fully responsible for teaching a class) is important aspect of career development for some departments, but not others.

To our knowledge, there will only be one contract. According to the recent ruling, unionization applies to all graduate students regardless of RA (research assistant) or TA status. The Union Organizing Committee has stated that we can try to negotiate for different benefits for different departments. For example, Humanities students and Sciences students do not necessarily have to end up with the same pay.

We do share many common needs and University policies (eg. health care and travel funding) apply to all of us. To help facilitate healthy discussion, consider the following questions:

- What needs do all graduate students share? What do we have in common?
- What needs are unique to students in my field?

### Is there a way for my program/position to avoid being combined into the unionization efforts of other programs?

The only way to avoid being combined into the bargaining contract is to vote against unionization. If a union forms the conditions of the bargaining contract will be applied to you and your department, even if you chose not to be a part of the union.

# Union Dues

## What would the union fees be?

SEIU union dues would be 1.35% of our paychecks.

## Will these dues replace the students' activities fee?

No. Union dues are in addition to any fees charged by the University. As a note of clarification, the student's activities fees are not just a gym membership; they go towards things like building maintenance and academic programs too.

## If unionized, would all graduate students be required to pay dues, regardless of their interest in the union?

See answer for: [Will all graduate students be required to join a union if the majority vote to unionize? Is joining mandatory?](#)

## Will union dues be just another financial burden for students who already are financially strapped, and end up actually discouraging new students to pursue higher education at Vanderbilt?

If a union forms, union members could vote to prioritize higher stipends in negotiations to offset the cost of union dues. If negotiations are successful, dues would not add to the financial burden. If negotiations are not successful, they will add to the financial burden.

## What gains would the SEIU provide that would be worth 1.35% of our pay?

This is a question every student has to answer for themselves because every person will put a different value on different benefits. Please see the [Pros and Cons of Unionization](#) section above.

## What are the potential tax consequences for graduate students? If we are considered employees of the University, will any tuition benefits be considered taxable?

We need more information to answer this well. To answer this question we will have to consult a tax professional. We have been told that unionization will not affect your tax status, but we have not yet consulted a tax professional to verify this! Please do not construe this answer as tax advice.

# Administration and Unions

## What is VU's view of unionization?

Please see the following resources for VU's view of unionization. [https://gradschool.vanderbilt.edu/current\\_students/unionization/faq.php](https://gradschool.vanderbilt.edu/current_students/unionization/faq.php)  
We have verified that the information they present is legally accurate. However, because we are striving to present neutral and unbiased information in response to your questions, we feel obligated to comment that the linked resource contains heavy cautionary tones and is slightly biased against unionization.



## What is VUMC's view of unionization (for those students at the intersection of VU and VUMC)?

All graduate students under the Graduate School umbrella are also under the VU umbrella, even if your mentor is a part of VUMC. As far as we know, VUMC has not taken a stance on unionization since graduate students no longer fall under their purview.

## Can faculty and students speak to one another about unionization?

Yes. Faculty and students may speak freely to each other about the issues surrounding unionization. Members of University administration may not interrogate or question students about their union views. However, students may initiate conversations about unionization with University administrators.

## Are the faculty and graduate student unions separate?

Yes. Some Non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty are also advocating for unionization with SEIU. This union is separate from the union activities relevant to graduate students. Announcements have been made regarding both unionization efforts. The Union Organizing Committee has sent out announcements regarding these efforts to show solidarity and support for the NTT union.

## Is the administration blocking the Non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty vote?

The administration is not blocking the NTT vote. In accordance with NLRB rules, VU was given the opportunity to determine if the proposed NTT bargaining unit was appropriate. VU felt that the bargaining unit was not appropriate. Since SEIU and VU could not agree on a bargaining unit, both parties agreed to seek a court hearing.

## When and where are these legal actions taking place or have taken place?

### Are there any public records about these filings/actions?

The hearing to determine if the proposed NTT bargaining unit was appropriate is complete. Information about the hearing can be found at the NLRB website.

<https://www.nlr.gov/case/10-RC-193205>

## Will the administration block a graduate student vote?

GSC believes that students have the right to vote on unionization and determine if this is the path for them. We have shared this stance with the administration and the administration has told us that they will not block a graduate student vote.

## Why has the University hired an outside law firm?

The NLRB has very strict rules and policies that apply to employers once employees begin soliciting unions. Essentially, employers have to walk a very fine line. If their actions are perceived to violate these rules (asking students what they think about unions, trying to provide incentives for students to not unionize), serious penalties ensue. Law resources are necessary to navigate these new waters. An outside law team may also be necessary to balance the opposing force of the union legal team.

The union organizing committee feels that the University will use this legal team to block the union vote. GSC is keeping a close eye on this and, as of yet, has not found any evidence that the VU is trying to break up the union.

## How much does the administration pay their law firm?

We do not know. GSC has been told that this money is not coming from funds that would otherwise be used for graduate students.

# Unionization Alternatives

## How does GSC advocate for graduate students outside of unionization?

GSC advocates for students by hearing student concerns, investigating the situation, creating proposals that provide solutions, and facilitating discussions with the administration to effect change. Students can email their concerns to GSC or discuss them with us at our monthly meetings.

**GSC is effective because we can connect students directly to the administration.** We work with various Deans that advocate on behalf of graduate students to create change. For example, the GSC president and Student Life Liaison have regular meetings with Dean Wallace to discuss our goals for graduate education and concerns that students have. If necessary, Dean Wallace advocates on our behalf (like with the parking policy and AirBnB policy) to make changes that benefit graduate students.

### The graduate student advocates that we have worked with include:

- Mark Wallace - **Dean of the Graduate School**, Louise B. McGavock Endowed Chair, Professor of Hearing & Speech Sciences, Professor of Psychology, Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences
- E. Duco Jansen - Professor of Biomedical Engineering, **Associate Dean for Graduate Education**, Professor of Neurological Surgery
- Kathy Gould - **Associate Dean for Biomedical Sciences**, Louise B. McGavock Professor, Department of Cell and Developmental Biology, **Director of Graduate Student Support**
- Mark Bandas - **Associate Provost and Dean of Students**
- Cynthia Cyrus - **Vice Provost for Learning and Residential Affairs**; Professor of Musicology; Affiliated Faculty in Women's and Gender Studies
- Keivan Stassun - Senior Associate Dean for Graduate Education and Research, College of Arts and Science, Professor, Department of Physics and Astronomy
- Don Brunson - **Assistant Dean of the Graduate School**, Office of Diversity; Underrepresented Student Outreach, Admission, and Retention Officer
- Ruth Schemmer - **Assistant Dean of the Graduate School**, Career Development, liaison to the Graduate Student Council and the Graduate Development Network
- Patricia Helland - Associate Dean, Residential Affairs, Communication & Assessment
- Craig Smith - Associate Professor of Psychology and Human Development, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies, Peabody College, **Acting Associate Dean for Graduate Education**, Investigator, Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Research on Human Development
- Jimmy Byrd - Associate Professor of American Religious History, **Associate Dean for Graduate Education and Research**, Chair, Graduate Department of Religion

## What goals can we achieve without unionizing?

Please see our website for a specific list of goals we have achieved without unionization. See our past advocacy accomplishments <https://studentorg.vanderbilt.edu/gsc/past-advocacy-accomplishments/> and our current advocacy efforts <https://studentorg.vanderbilt.edu/gsc/current-advocacy-efforts/> .

## The needs and wants vary greatly across the various schools and departments. Is there a way to gain representation (with a few graduate students, perhaps?) at the administrative level without unionizing?

Yes. GSC has already started this process by placing students on the following committees:

- Student Health Insurance Focus Group
- Graduate Education Working Group (in progress)

- PCC outside review group
- Graduate Student Housing
- Traffic and Parking Committee
- Sexual Assault Task Force
- Student Wellness Committee
- International Student Focus Group
- Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Committee

In the future, we hope to increase the communication and transparency between these committees and the student body, perhaps through the Graduate Education Working Group.

## How has the administration advocated for graduate students prior to all this union talk?

**The administration has shown significant top-down buy in for graduate student education.**

- The Strategic Plan developed by the Graduate Education Study Group <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2015/05/04/graduate-education-study-group-report/>
- The \$300,000,000 endowment Chancellor Zeppos recently set aside for Graduate Research and Education <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2016/08/26/zeppos-shares-vision-for-inclusive-excellence-at-vanderbilt-during-fall-faculty-assembly/> ,
- Plans for graduate housing
- Board of Trust meeting dedicated to graduate education
- Also see our webpage for more contributions: <https://studentorg.vanderbilt.edu/gsc/past-advocacy-accomplishments/>