

Lawrence Mullen (they/them/theirs)  
University at Buffalo, GSEU President

Good morning and thank you for holding this public hearing, to give SUNY students and employees, much like myself, an opportunity to address you all directly.

My name is Lawrence Mullen, and I am the president of the Graduate Student Employees Union (GSEU) chapter at the University at Buffalo—or in other words, I am the legal representative of approximately 1,200 state-funded Teaching and Graduate Assistants who work across UB's three campuses. And I am speaking today to address the issue of a \$15,000 gap between Buffalo's Teaching and Graduate Assistant's stipends and the cost of living in Erie County.

To understand this massive gap in pay inequity, I encourage us to look briefly to the past. In 1975, University at Buffalo graduate workers were making approximately \$3,000 per academic year, and were advocating for a wage increase to \$4,000. To put that into perspective and to adjust for inflation, Buffalo graduate workers were making just under \$15,000 and were advocating for a wage increase to \$20,000. **It only took the University at Buffalo 45 years, but finally *most* graduate workers at Buffalo are making \$20,000;** however there are two primary issues here that remain unresolved.

The first issue being that you'll note that I said *most* graduate workers at Buffalo are making \$20,000. Based on a recent survey that GSEU conducted throughout September and October, 33% of graduate workers make less than \$20,000, and 20% make less than \$15,000. The federal poverty level is \$12,880 for a one-person household. Many of the graduate workers who make less than \$15,000 are also required to pay broad-based fees, as they were excluded from the Graduate School's decision to cover fees for doctoral students, meaning that for example, students who are pursuing MFAs, are being paid less than \$15,000 per year and then pay approximately \$2,800 *back* to the university in fees, meaning their net pay is less than \$12,200.

The second issue being that the cost of living in Erie County is not \$20,000; the cost of living in Erie County isn't even \$30,000. According to the Economic Policy Institute, the cost of living for Erie County is \$35,000 per year, for a one-person household. If you have a partner, or have children, the cost of living only balloons closer to \$40 - \$45,000 per year. The solution to this gap is often to "work a second job." Between working a fulltime Teaching or Graduate Assistantship and conducting instrumental, essential, and oftentimes groundbreaking and cutting-edge research, graduate workers simply don't have the time;

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and international students can't seek employment outside of the university without violating the terms of their visas.

Fundamentally, the work that we do, the courses we teach, the counseling services we facilitate, and any of the other types of multifaceted labor we provide, keep the University at Buffalo moving forward. **In September, the University at Buffalo was deemed the top public university in New York, and yet the university values its graduate workers so highly that they pay us poverty wages, watch us get groceries from their food bank, and go deep into debt to simply afford standard living expenses.**

I will conclude by stating that within the GSEU contract with New York, the contractual floor for the stipend of a full Teaching or Graduate Assistantship is \$10,568. Again, I will remind you that the federal poverty level is \$12,880 for a one-person household. The reason why the University at Buffalo can continue to pay its graduate workers poverty wages is because SUNY permits sub-poverty contractual floors—because SUNY does not value its graduate workers.

My aim in speaking today was to provide you with insight on the issue of graduate worker stipends, and the roles that both SUNY and individual university centers play in maintaining a level of poverty among the very same workers who teach core-curriculum humanities, natural and social sciences courses. SUNY works because graduate workers do. Thank you.