

Teaching Assistants Union AFT 1729

ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2013/2014

Officers & Staff:

Robin Blanchard (President)
James Schwass (Vice President)
Ashish Gupta (Treasurer)
Eric Denby (Communications Officer)
Kevin Wordelman (Lead Organizer)
David Paul (Organizer)

Executive Summary by Robin Blanchard, President (2013-2014)

This year, the TAU faced many issues in the graduate student community. Two of the most prevalent were the prohibitive cost of graduate student healthcare, especially for international students, and the university's budgeting practices regarding tuition and compensation packages for all teaching assistants.

Healthcare was the first big fight we took on this year. In light of the Affordable Care Act, many graduate students are able to stay on their parents' insurance or purchase much cheaper insurance through the ACA marketplace. Part of our struggle was understanding exactly what options graduate students have through the ACA. Unfortunately, although we exhausted all known avenues of information, none was forthcoming. The Executive Board intends to stay on top of this situation and release information to our members as it arrives in coming years.

The other part of our healthcare struggle relates to international students. Due to many requirements for international student health insurance, most international students are unable to find cheaper health insurance, and are forced to spend a large amount of their stipend on this expense. While our efforts to negotiate this issue with WMU's administration were ultimately sidelined (see the Grievance Report for more information), this is still an important issue for our members, and the Executive Board intends to bring it to the bargaining table next year.

Our second big fight this year was about WMU's budgeting practices regarding tuition and compensation packages for all teaching assistants. Our membership passed the FAIR Tuition Resolution, which President Robin Blanchard, Communication Officer Eric Denby, and Treasurer-Elect Brianna Forbis presented to the Board of Trustees, officially asking them to eradicate out-of-state tuition rates for all teaching assistants. The Executive Board is still seeking pertinent information, and intends to carry this issue into bargaining next year.

Another concern as we head into the last year of our current contract is the impending arrival of Right-To-Work legislation, which will give teaching assistants who are receiving all the benefits of our negotiated contract the option to not pay any dues. We are currently working with the AFT to receive support from them during this upcoming difficult time, and we will be pushing for a more comprehensive membership than ever to make up for the lost dues.

Overall, I would call this year a triumph for the TAU. Although we have encountered obstacles, we have persevered in spite of them, and I know that next year we will be stronger than ever. I hope our membership will continue to join us on our journey to be a better union.

Campaigns/Actions by Executive Board (2013-2014)

One of the cornerstones of a strong teaching assistant union is to coordinate campaigns that both educate its members and raise awareness for issues facing teaching assistants. Consequently, the following campaigns were created and executed this year.

- **Orientation:** Each year, TAU attends new GA training and individual department orientations. The goal is to educate and sign up new members. Overall, this was a success. Every known department event was covered by either staff or officers.
- **Affordable Health Care:** The union explored various ways in which the Affordable Health Care Act would affect our membership. In addition to various email communications, we also held an information session with a healthcare navigator. Finally, we continued to push for health care reforms on campus, asking the university to refine their requirements for international students, which we feel are outrageous and financially prohibitive.
- **FAIR Tuition Resolution:** One of our largest actions is the FAIR Tuition Resolution, which calls for all graduate assistants to be assessed tuition at in-state rates. Various actions included a rally for equality, a tuition forum with Dean Stapleton, and a presentation to the Board of Trustees. Although a remedy has not been reached between the union and the administration, we were successful in raising awareness on campus. This campaign is ongoing.
- **Community Outreach Grant:** In association with our partner unions in the West Michigan Federation of College Educators, we created the Community Outreach Grant. The grant is annually presented to a local community organization. This year we presented the grant to the Kalamazoo Literacy Council. Each year, members of our union are allowed to nominate an organization of their choice. The Outreach Committee then presents three nominees, of which one is chosen during the WMFCE holiday party.
- **Professional Development Grant:** This grant was created and approved this past year. Its purpose is to provide members with a \$200 grant designed to offset costs associated with any professional development activity. This year we were able to present six members with this grant. Additionally, as per the new bylaw, grants were made available to officers. For this inaugural year, only two officers took advantage of this opportunity.

Grievance Report by James Schwass:

The grievance process is in place to help us enforce our contract with WMU - if a teaching assistant feels as though they are negatively affected by a misinterpretation of the contract, or as though their contractual protections are not being upheld, they can notify the union leadership that they would like TAU to file a grievance on their behalf, thus initiating the grievance process.

The first step in the process is a formal meeting between TAU representatives and the director of the academic unit with which a grievance has been filed. At this meeting we try to understand how the contract is being interpreted or applied, and discuss solutions to the problem that both parties find agreeable. If no such solution can be found, the grievance process proceeds to its second step, wherein TAU representatives meet with the Director of Academic Collective Bargaining in much the same fashion as the step one meeting. If an agreement cannot be made at

this meeting, the grievance process proceeds to its terminal phase: arbitration. In arbitration, a third party professional arbitrator is asked to hear arguments from TAU and from WMU and then render a decision as to how the situation should be resolved.

This year we have entered the grievance process on two occasions, and considered filing grievances on two occasions.

Late last summer we resolved a grievance with the Medieval Institute. A teaching assistant had been offered a fractional TA appointment to teach a particular class along with a contingent faculty appointment to teach the exact same class. As a result of this creative classification, this TA was only offered 4 credit hours of tuition remission instead of the 7 credit hours to which she was entitled. This matter was disputed through the second step of the grievance process, before finally being settled days before entering arbitration, as the university agreed to compensate the TA in question for the tuition credits in question.

Our second foray into the grievance process began when members of the Computer Science department brought it to TAU's attention that their department had adopted a practice wherein teaching assistants' appointment workloads were reduced, but then their overall hours working for the department were supplemented with additional "side-work" consisting largely of grading assignments. Teaching assistants were paid less than half of the contractually mandated rate for the time they spent on their "side-work", even though this work was protected under the TAU contract. This dispute was resolved after the step two meeting, when the effected teaching assistants were compensated a total of \$12,075 and the Computer Science department agreed to terminate this practice. It is certainly worth noting that Drs. Lloyd Carr and Edmund Tsang communicated clearly that this practice was not adopted out of malice, but was instead put in place to offer extra work to underfunded TAs before TAU came into existence. All parties were eager to collaborate and find a way to ensure the affected TAs were compensated fairly and quickly.

Rising healthcare costs to TAs have been referenced above, and some of our actions to seek solutions to the problem have already been detailed. Our contract contains a clause stipulating that if the cost of healthcare is projected to rise more than 12.5% in either year two or three of the contract, we have the right to reopen the article in the contract governing the university's contribution to TA healthcare. We calculated the average increase in healthcare premiums to TAs over the first two years of the contract, and using this information projected that premiums should rise over 12.5% in the coming year. The university disputed our calculation, and revealed a weak point in the language of our contract; nowhere have we spelled out a mechanism for projecting the increase in premiums, nor who decides what projection is valid. In conjunction with confusion regarding the ACA, this led us to not pursue a grievance on the healthcare issue. Instead we hope to address the issue in bargaining next fall.

The second grievance we considered filing this year was in response to a proposed policy change in the Mathematics Department. Nonresident TAs in this department were informed that they must either obtain residency status at WMU or the department will compensate them for tuition only up to the in-state rate for credit hours. The in-state tuition rate is about half the rate assessed to out-of-state students. Of course this is an egregious breach of our contract with the university. TAU was made aware of this issue at orientation last fall, and has been in informal contact with the Mathematics Department to assess the situation. However, due to a recent change in the way

TA tuition will be accounted for by the university, it seems as though the Mathematics Department will have absolutely no control over how nonresident TAs will be compensated for their tuition. Tuition bills for TAs will be paid in full by the Graduate College. As such, we have not filed a grievance on this matter, but will be verifying in the fall that all TAs are appropriately compensated.

Communications Report by Eric Denby:

My main goal when taking over communications for the union was to make sure information was readily available to all members and to make sure members were aware of any and all actions, thoughts, campaigns, accomplishments, and obstacles facing teaching assistants at Western Michigan University. To this end, I think tremendous strides were made. Below is a list of communication actions:

- **Redesigned Website:** A new website was created in an effort to provide a clearinghouse for information as well as a platform to offer updates to interested parties. After researching other union websites, TAU created various FAQ sheets that addressed common member questions. Additionally, the website features all official union correspondence, including easy access to our employment contract, constitution, bylaws, resolutions, member minutes, etc.
- **Facebook:** In tandem with e-mails and website updates, Facebook was updated with interesting stories, shared campaigns and information from other sources, and event invites. On occasion, the “boost” function for events was used.
- **E-mail Newsletter:** MailChimp was secured as a new e-mail platform. E-mails went out both weekly and as needed, based on action or information alerts. Although the program itself is useful for subscription management and appealing design, it has been discussed that MailChimp may be too “commercial,” causing issues with delivery. Currently, we are considering switching to either a listserv through Western or simply batch emailing from officer emails.
- **Printed Newsletter:** Instead of using the printed newsletter as our main communication with members, we switched to monthly email newsletters. Printed items were used once in the fall, for a newsletter, and in the spring, for action updates and election information.

Treasurer’s Report by Ashish Gupta (2013-2014)

As of May 1, 2014, the TAU has received \$68,535 and expended \$48,812. The account balance is \$57,055.

Organizer’s Report by David Paul (Staff)

As of May 1, 2014, the TAU represents 535 teaching assistants, with 329 as members and 206 as agency fee payers. Over 77% of our bargaining unit has a full appointment, 9% at a three-quarters appointment, 1% at a two-thirds appointment, and 13% at a half appointment. The membership is close to evenly split between PhDs, 47.29%, and MAs, 52.71%.

Resolutions & Bylaws by Executive Board (2013-2014)

The following bylaws were adopted by TAU in the 2013/2014 school year. Per our constitution, these bylaws were adopted during a regularly scheduled membership meeting. Complete language of each bylaw is available online at www.TauAFT.org.

- Revocation of Membership or Dues Deduction Authorization (9/20/2013)
- Dispute Resolution Policy (9/20/2013)
- Agency Fee Objection (9/20/2013)
- Fund Balance (3/26/2014)
- Officer Scholarship (3/26/2014)
- Bargaining Team (3/26/2014)
- Executive Reporting (3/26/2014)

Submitted by Robin Blanchard, James Schwass, and Eric Denby on May 1, 2014 to the general membership of the Teaching Assistants Union.