

Annual Report

Teaching Assistants Union AFT 1729

For the 2014/2015 Academic Year

Officers:

Eric Denby, M.A., History (President)
Codie Stone, Ph.D., Sociology (Vice President/Grievance Officer)
Brianna Forbis, Ph.D., Clinical Psychology (Treasurer)
Brandon Soderman, M.A., Anthropology (Communications Officer)

Staff:

Kevin Wordelman (Lead Organizer)
David Paul (Organizer)
Lindy Demarest (Organizer)

Bargaining Team Members:

Yngvi Einarsson, Ph.D., Psychology (I/O)
Jaafar Hachem, Ph.D., Chemistry
Laars Helenius, Ph.D., Mathematics
Stephanie Sicard, M.A., Anthropology

Executive Summary by Eric Denby, President

This year has been an exciting one for the Teaching Assistants Union. In addition to it being a bargaining year, we have also made large strides in changing the overall direction and organization of the union. In the past, the TAU has been extremely successful at offering services to its members. We provided information, negotiated the terms of our employment, and enforced our contract through a grievance process. Unfortunately, this model of being a “service” organization no longer works. With anti-labor legislation in Michigan and an inherent gender and economic inequality on a campus, we can no longer simply stand idly by. We need to become an organization that concerns itself with both traditional labor issues (pay, health care, benefits, safety) AND social justice issues that affect our friends, neighbors, and colleagues.

Of course, this is a large undertaking, one that will take many years and many people to accomplish. It is also a task that cannot be decided by a few of our members. In year’s past, the officers determined the direction of the organization. We decided that needed to change. To do this, we created the Organizing Committee of the Teaching Assistants Union. This larger governing body consists of any member who wants to help shape the future of the union. Currently, we have over thirty dedicated members on this committee and we have created a new bylaw vesting this committee with the majority of decision making for the union. We have already begun to get commitments from members to be a part of this committee for next school year and we are all confident in the future of the union.

We have also made a concerted and dedicated effort to attend both the Graduate Student Association and Board of Trustees meetings. The GSA is the board approved representative of graduate

students on campus. They have access to an extremely large budget and it is necessary to stay abreast of their activities, plans, and direction. It is also important that the Board of Trustees are informed of the union's struggles, accomplishments, and objectives. During the past year and half, I have had the honor of representing teaching assistants and addressing the board during their public comment period. I believe this is an important task that the executive officers should continue fulfilling.

As part of our commitment to a more democratic union, we held a successful Contract Convention in the fall. Over 50 members attended a day-long event that focused on what issues and ideas we wanted to address during bargaining. We also approved our bargaining team. To follow up the success of our fall event, we sponsored Action 101: Creating Equitable Learning and Working Environments during the spring semester. Over 25 members attended four different workshops - Strike 101, Bargaining, the Organizing Conversation, and Direct Action. All who participated found it to be a worthwhile event and plans are in the works to offer this type of program on an annual basis.

At the start of the new academic year, we were able to participate in a cost-sharing program with AFT-Michigan. As many of the state's higher ed unions were preparing to enter a "right to work" contract, AFT-Michigan offered to pay half the cost of hiring part-time member organizers. Basically, we were able to hire one of our members to assist Kevin Wordelman with signing up new members and recruiting organizing committee members. After an interview process in October 2014, the executive board hired Lindy Demarest (M.A., Comparative Religion) to fill this position. We are currently working with AFT-Michigan to determine what funds, if any, will be available for next year. We are also exploring new and innovative ways to structure this work.

I am also proud to report TAU's dedication to gender and economic equality, publicly expressed by our support of former College of Arts and Sciences Dean Alex Enyedi and the controversy surrounding his removal. Many of our members joined with other faculty, staff, and students, to protest Enyedi's firing during the January meeting of the Board of Trustees. As the situation became more pronounced, the Organizing Committee of the TAU unanimously voted on a Resolution in Support of Dr. Alex Enyedi. The resolution indicated the Organizing Committee believed in the transparent manner of Enyedi's leadership and that the committee "will continue fighting for fairness and transparency" on campus. In a year filled with traditional employment concerns because of bargaining, I was especially proud of the support many TAs voiced for Enyedi and his attempt to solve the gender and economic inequality within the College of Arts and Sciences. You can read that resolution on www.tauaft.org.

We were also able to continue our commitment to the community. In partnership with the Professional Instructors Organization, we presented this year's Community Development Grant to the Kalamazoo Gay and Lesbian Resource Center. Each year, members of both TAU, PIO, and KVCC FT nominate worthy organizations, and the recipient is chosen during our joint-holiday party. The KGLRC received a \$1000 grant.

We also continued the highly popular Professional Development Grant: This grant was created and approved last year in an effort to provide members with additional resources for professional development. This year, the TAU distributed four grants.

Grievance Report by Codie Stone, Vice President

The 2014-2015 school year has been a busy year as vice president of the TAU. Before the school year started, during the summer of 2014, the TAU executive board meet regularly to prepare for the challenges we knew we would face this year. That preparation proved to be extremely helpful for multiple reasons, particularly for me because we received word of our first grievance of the year in early August 2014. Students in the Human Performance and Health Education (HPHE) were required to take an online course for their degrees, but the Graduate College initially refused to pay the entire cost of the online tuition. Kevin Wordelman and I met with Dr. Nancy Mansberger (Director of Academic Collective Bargaining) and Dr. Sue Stapleton (Dean of the Graduate College) to discuss how to address the matter on several occasions. We argued that the TAU contract grants each full-time TA 9 credit hours and that the language used in the TA contract letters restricting the use of those credit hours violated our contract. The administration originally argued that historically there had been restrictions on the credit hours and no one had complained before, so they should still be able to restrict how TAs used their credit hours based on historical precedent. However, the 2012-2015 TAU contract did not contain language restricting how TAs use their 9 credit hours and the University has to abide by the contract language, rendering any historical precedent moot.

After a meeting with Dr. Jim Gilchrist (Vice Provost and CIO) we received a document denying our grievance, at which point the Organizing Committee and the Executive Board started to organize members to put pressure on the University while we began proceedings to arbitrate our grievance (in the hope that the University would change their decision and we would not have to arbitrate). You all may remember, and perhaps signed posters for, the “9 Means 9” campaign we ran in the fall semester, which culminated in a group of 35 or so graduate students delivering the stack of signed posters to the Provost's office. Ultimately the University decided to avoid arbitration and paid the extra tuition for the required online courses taken by all TAs in the 2014-2015 school year. Now TAs required to take courses online or off campus will have their full tuition covered.

Another issue that was brought up during the fall grievance process was that an international student in the Chemistry department, who was admitted to the program and hired as a TA with a lower TOFEL score than usually allowed, was unable to use his tuition remission credits to pay for the CELCIS courses he had to take to achieve the required score. The Chemistry Department did pay for a portion of the CELCIS courses the TA was required to take with a partial scholarship. We argued that since he was required to take the classes as part of his program (acceptance to the program was based on him taking those classes), his tuition remission credits should pay for those courses as well. The University argued that the Graduate College did not have to pay for those courses, because the courses were not officially part of the student's graduate program. Originally the University offered a resolution to our grievance that did not include any provisions for this student, and so the Organizing Committee decided to continue with arbitration on behalf of the international student. Ultimately, the University offered to pay for the remaining portion of the CELCIS credits after sustained pressure from the TAU membership.

The grievance process put us in a good position for bargaining, as we showed the University administration the power of dedicated teaching assistants standing together for our rights.

Communications Report by Brandon Soderman, Communications

When this year started TAU had a respectable membership rate, but TAU was not directed by these members. To a large extent, TAU was directed by the four elected officers and the two hired staffers. This deeply concerned the four elected officers. We knew that if wanted to bargain with leverage and enact an university that we desired that we would need to change the dynamics of TAU. Not only did we want to continue increasing membership, but more importantly we wanted to transform the quality of membership engagement.

We decided that to engender these goals that we needed to transform the structure of TAU. In particular, we identified the need to democratize TAU by extending decision-making beyond the four officers to all members who desire to be included in the process. We felt that this was an important change toward creating a culture of engagement. This structural change breaks down the dichotomy between the union and members by making TAU directed by its members. These changes engender the possibility of members taking ownership of TAU and the form it takes.

Through the year we have made strides toward this goal. Decision making has been extended to any member willing to attend an organizing committee. This committee has grown to about thirty consistent people. In practice, TAU is clearly transcending the top-down structure into a more horizontal structure. This is all very much a work in progress, but strides have been made. If TAU is to survive the onslaught of contemporary policies and discourses detrimental to the labor movement it will need to continue this process.

Treasurer's Report by Brianna Forbis, Treasurer

This year has brought on a new set of financial challenges for the Teaching Assistants Union as we began to prepare for the upcoming changes in our contract. Specifically, as we prepare for the Right to Work law, which is a direct attack on unions and will disallow the union to collect fees from non-members who benefit from our contract. This act will have many negative effects on the union, including a substantial decrease in our total annual revenue. With this in mind, we have worked tirelessly to increase our membership in preparation for the hit we will take upon the ratification of the new contract.

One piece of this effort that has affected the finances of TAU was the hire of two part-time organizers whose pay was partially funded by the AFT. Another pro-active step we took in preparation for this act was to make cuts across the board on operational expenses and the employee payroll. Details of these expenses, and cuts are available upon request by emailing treasurertauft@gmail.com.

As of April 1, 2015 TAU has received \$51,930.34 and expended \$49,377.78. The account balance is \$43,307.54. The member approved budget for the 2015-2016 fiscal year is available at www.tauaft.org

Organizers Report by Kevin Wordelman and David Paul

This has been a very productive organizing year for TAU. Our leadership decided to grow the union's governance structure to include a large Organizing Committee that would convene every two weeks (typically) to decide on policy and financial matters and to emphasize the importance of interdepartmental organizing to sustain our growth as a labor union.

With assistance from the American Federation of Teachers, we hired two part-time member-organizers this year to assist in growing our Organizing Committee. We hired TAU members Lindy Demarest and Eric Denby to work 20 and 10 hours per week respectively, recruiting new members and new Organizing Committee members from across campus. We began the year with 8 committed members on the OC, but we ended the year with 33 members, doing some organizing in their departments and committed to attending OC meetings on a regular basis. Of those 33, twenty will be returning next year and will hopefully all attend a planning retreat on May 7, 2015.

This spring (as of April 1, 2015) we have 317 members teaching, out of 488 total TAs for a membership rate of 64.9%. Last spring we had 329 members teaching, out of 535 total TAs, for a membership rate of 61%. The number of TAs on campus is down about 15% since 2009, although graduate enrollment and tuition are both increasing.

Bargaining Report by Stephanie Sicard

We chose our positions arbitrarily, with each person getting their first choice. Laars Helenius as the Chair, Jaafar Hachem as Research, Yngvi Einarsson as Organizer and Stephanie Sicard as Minutes/Note-Taker.

We continued tradition by beginning with non-economic matters first. It is often faster to reach agreement on negotiations that are not entrenched in budgetary limits. We decided to save the focus on economic issues until the end, when both parties would not only be comfortable at the table but also well versed in financial obligations and parameters.

Our overall goal was to negotiate a contract that was beneficial for our members, as well as the university. A key priority throughout bargaining has been to discuss options amongst ourselves first before bringing them to the table, and to use caution and research when examining proposals from the university. Through open discussion and negotiating, we have built a trustworthy relationship with the administrations team, which will benefit the TAU in future conversations. As of May 1, the teams are still negotiating next year's contract.