

Petition to Unionize Duke Ph.D. Students

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To: Julian Liber <julian.liber@duke.edu>



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Duke Ph.D. Students and Faculty,

Graduate education is an essential part of Duke's identity as one of the world's leading research universities, and our success relies on the collective engagement of students, faculty, staff, and administrators. The university has received notice that the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has filed a petition to form a labor union of Ph.D. students who are teaching and research assistants at Duke. There is much at stake, and I encourage the entire Duke community to become well-informed on the issue, and I hope that all eligible Ph.D. students will vote.

This is not the first time the Duke graduate student community has explored unionization. In 2017, following extensive consideration and debate, Duke's graduate students voted to reject SEIU unionization by an almost two-to-one margin. I believe they were correct in doing so.

Labor unions have contributed significantly to giving employees voice and agency in our nation and around the world, and Duke has strong working relationships with several unions representing our employees. However, the educational context matters greatly. The university's institutional position remains that Duke's relationship with our students is centered on education, training, and mentorship, fundamentally different from that of employer to employee.

Ph.D. students are not admitted to do a job; they are selected because of their potential to be exceptional scholars. The experience of teaching and conducting research is designed to prepare them for a multitude of careers in classrooms,

laboratories, industry, and non-profits—a model that has served generations of graduate students well.

Duke Ph.D. students have their own voice and agency and multiple avenues for advocacy. They work directly with their faculty advisors to adjust schedules and expectations and advocate for policy changes by reaching out directly to deans and school leadership. Faculty and administrators have worked directly and collaboratively with our graduate students to learn of and address concerns. These efforts have resulted in [significantly expanded support](#) over the past decade, including the substantial stipend and benefit changes announced last September. These productive channels for shared governance would change for our graduate students if a non-academic third party were to serve as their representative. 

While the university has a clear and consistent institutional position on this matter, we will steadfastly support the right of all in our community to debate this important topic openly and fairly. We will support the right of all eligible voters to freely consider and register their views. Although this petition has been coordinated and submitted by an outside organization, the decision about unionization is up to Duke students. In an election, the outcome will be decided by a simple majority of those who vote, despite the fact that a union would become the sole representative of all current and future Ph.D. students. For this reason, every eligible Ph.D. student should educate themselves on the issues and should vote. I encourage all to become more familiar by [visiting this website](#).

As interim provost and a member of the faculty, I take great pride in our Ph.D. students and am deeply grateful for their many profound contributions to the life of our university. Duke supports our Ph.D. students' development as professionals, scholars, and citizens of our scholarly community, and we hope they will—each and all—make an informed choice in this consequential matter.

Jennifer Francis

Interim Provost

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