Panel: Graduate Assistants, Unionization, and Negotiations - The UConn Perspective

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Graduate Assistant Unionization and Negotiations

The UConn Perspective

- Overview
  - History of Labor Organizing at UConn
  - Factors that Contributed to GA Unionization
    - The UAW Organizing Drive
    - UConn’s Decision to Remain Neutral
  - Outcome
- The Negotiations & Ultimate Agreement
History of Labor Organizing at UConn

- 1975 State Employees Relations Act (SERA) enables faculty and professional staff at State Colleges & Universities to organize and collectively bargain directly with their Boards of Trustees.
- In 1977 faculty and professional staff at UConn negotiate first contracts with the Board of Trustees.
- 91% of full-time workforce at UConn is currently unionized.
Factors Contributing to GA Unionization

- **Health Insurance Changes** - GAs moved from self-insured employee health insurance plan to fully-insured student health plan with higher out-of-pocket costs
- **Spousal and Dependent Benefits** - Proposed elimination/reduction of subsidies for spousal and dependent health insurance
- **Fee Increases** - Increases in student fees not covered by the GA tuition waiver
- **Teaching Loads** - Increased teaching loads in few University departments
- **Lack of Appeal Process** - Inadequate grievance procedures for GAs to appeal decisions about workloads, time off requests, and allegations of discrimination and discriminatory harassment
The UAW Organizing Drive

- **Fall 2013** Graduate Student Senate responds to adverse changes by passing a resolution that:

  "The right of a graduate assistants to collectively bargain over terms and conditions of employment is the only viable recourse for ensuring the well-being of graduate assistants, the graduate school, and the University of Connecticut."

- UAW begins card collection drive seeking to unionize UConn’s 2200 Graduate Research and Teaching Assistants

- GAs gain support from other campus unions including AAUP and UConn professionals as well as a number of elected officials

- **Spring 2014** - UAW requests that UConn Administration enter into a neutrality agreement
University’s Decision to Remain Neutral

- Connecticut’s congressional delegation and all state constitutional officers signed letters endorsing the right of UConn GA’s to unionize and urging the University to remain neutral

- Majority support for unionization was clear

- GA’s status as “employees” for collective bargaining was unsettled

- Favorable labor board ruling or enabling legislation was likely

- NYU had recently entered a similar agreement with UAW

- UConn has a long history of strong and constructive relationships with labor unions that represent 91% of UConn’s workforce
The Neutrality Agreement

- UConn agrees that GA’s are “employees” only for the purpose of collective bargaining under the state labor relations laws.

- Academic matters are not subject to collective bargaining including:
  - Selection of who becomes a GA
  - Decisions regarding who is taught, what is taught, how it’s taught and who does the teaching
  - Decisions around academic progress
  - Decisions regarding the establishment of tuition, fees, and charges of general application
The Neutrality Agreement

- The parties agree that GA’s are not covered by the state employee pension or healthcare.

- Arbitration will not reach academic policy matters.

- Majority status will be determined by “card check” and not a secret ballot election.

- UConn’s senior administration would not engage in efforts to influence a GA’s choice as to unionization.
April 17, 2014 - Connecticut State Board of Labor Relations certifies the GEU-UAW as the exclusive representative of UConn’s teaching and research assistants after verifying signatures on authorization cards from over 70% of eligible GAs

June 2014 - GEU-UAW and UConn begin the process for negotiating a first contract

May 2015 - GEU-UAW and UConn reach a comprehensive collective bargaining agreement covering July 1, 2015 - June 30, 2018
The Negotiations

- Critical Issues in Bargaining
  - Health Insurance
  - Fee Waivers
  - Workload
  - Leaves of Absence
  - Compensation for Summer Work
  - University Prerogatives and Academic Rights