

Graduate Student Organization

STATEMENT ON FEE INCREASES FOR STONY BROOK GRADUATE STUDENTS

Given the great financial pressure that the state budget cuts have imposed on the university and the impossibility of increasing tuition revenue, SUNY-Stony Brook has suggested raising fees for graduate students. These fees are already a great burden for students: presently, fees cost a full-time graduate student Teaching Assistant the equivalent of one month of his or her salary. Furthermore, there is no plan to make the process of raising fees more transparent at Stony Brook even though such transparency exists at other SUNY campuses such as Buffalo. Graduate students see fee increases as unexpected, unexplained, and overall unfair. Whereas the Stony Brook administration has argued that the State of New York has established an exploitative system of extracting tuition from Stony Brook with the aim of using it to cover governmental costs and costs at other SUNY campuses, graduate students see the Stony Brook administration as reproducing the same system of extraction of revenue over graduate students that the State wrongly imposes over it. Thus, given what we know thus far, it is our position that fee raises are unjust and that these fees should not be raised. It is also our position that the system of raising fees should become wholly transparent.

In practical terms, we need to understand the criteria the university administration uses when deciding whether or not to implement fee hikes and how fee monies are used by the university. For instance, the administration implemented a 60% hike in the Technology Fee in the period 2004-2005, but why did it implement it? How did technology improve? Similarly, the International Students Service Fee increased from \$35 to \$100 in the critical period 2009-2010 without notice or any visible sign of improvement in the quality of service. Why did this increase occur and how are graduate student dollars being used? We also need to fully grasp why a Stony Brook graduate student who started her Ph.D. in 2004 paying \$559.25 in fees is now paying from \$1063.3 to \$1325.8 (in the case of international graduate students), while writing the last chapter of her dissertation on campus. Though fees and the cost of living on Long Island continue to increase, our salaries do not. Graduate students appear to be bearing the burden of the present financial crisis, and wrongly so because we make so little.

Taking into account a) the lack of transparency regarding the way in which our fees are increased, managed, and expended; b) the lack of information with respect to how these decisions to raise are made; and c) the imminence of a fee increase that will definitively mean a *coup de grâce* to the students' budget, we seek to begin an era of increased transparency by urging the university to create a research committee devoted to collecting, processing, and systematizing information regarding fee raises at Stony Brook. This committee would be comprised of faculty, staff, and, most importantly, of graduate students, ideally G.S.O. representatives, T.A.s, G.A.s, R.A.s, M.A. students, and part-time graduate students—a group representative of the diverse graduate student community.

Initially, this committee would be asked to write a full report addressing the following questions:

- a) When, why, and how were each of the students' fees implemented?
- b) How much have fees increased over time?
- c) What persons and/or institutions take part in the decision making process to raise fees?
- d) How have fee increases been justified by SUNY-Stony Brook?
- e) Does SUNY-Stony Brook follow the same decision-making process that other SUNY campuses employ?
- f) How are graduate student fees expended and who decides on expenditures?
- g) Are there examples of fee waivers in the SUNY system for students who earn lower stipends?

Though the committee's initial task would be merely to answer these questions, eventually, this committee would take on an even more important role: We want this committee alone, not an administrator who is unaware of the broad spectrum of concerns, to determine whether or not fee raises should be implemented. Obviously, graduate student inclusion on such a committee would ensure that graduate students are officially part and parcel of all discussions and decisions to implement fee hikes that impact the quality of their lives. Graduate student inclusion on such a committee would help the university move in what we view as the right direction: total democratization of the mechanisms and institutions that affect the student body.

Perhaps needless to say, a research committee devoted to investigation of fee increases is vital to the integrity of the university as an institution committed to the students it aims to educate. We seek transparency and efficiency in the management of resources generated by students. We seek to be active members of a university community that values its students' voices, not merely the revenue that students can potentially generate.

Students Welfare Advisory Group
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