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Working to Meet The Needs of Graduate Student Families: The Case of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

The following is from a presentation given December 28, 2000 at the Modern Language Association 2000 Convention in Washington, DC:

While graduate education has been evolving rapidly over the past several decades, the relationship that graduate students have had with the university administration at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill had changed very little, until recently. As UNC has increased its undergraduate population, it has become increasingly more reliant upon graduate students to teach undergraduate classes. The graduate population has nearly tripled in the past thirty years and graduate teaching assistants and fellows now teach 40% of all undergraduate classes.

The “typical” graduate student is markedly different from several decades ago. A “typical” undergraduate at UNC-Chapel Hill remains a single, young adult between the ages of 18 and 25 with no children, generally receiving support from parents, or using financial aid to pay for schooling. Approximately five percent are married and only 1% have children.

In examining the graduate population, those percentages change dramatically. In a 1998 study done by the Graduate and Professional Student Federation at Chapel Hill, we found that nearly one-half (47%) of the graduate and professional student population was either married or cohabitating with a life partner. In addition, 16% of graduate and professional students have children in their household. This is a marked change from 1963, when married graduate and professional students comprised only 6% of their demographic.

Until recently, very little had been done to assist this changing graduate and professional student population. Prior to 1997, graduate student financial aid was handled in much the same way as undergraduate financial aid LOANS! The only exception was for graduate teaching fellows and teaching assistants. They received a stipend for the work that they performed and out-of-state graduate students could receive tuition remission to the in-state tuition rate.

In 1997, many of the difficulties that student families encounter began to be addressed. In addition, the Graduate and Professional Student Federation assisted in forming an organization for student parents and helping them to get their message heard. That message is that students of the 90’s have spouses/partners and children. Student populations with the exception of a handful of traditional undergraduate liberal arts universities like Chapel Hill are vastly different than they were in, say 1950, and the university must recognize this change and begin to deal effectively with all segments of its student body.

In 1997, the Graduate and Professional Student Federation (GPSF) began lobbying heavily for health insurance benefits for graduate teaching fellows and teaching assistants. We took our case all the way to the state legislature to secure funding. Unfortunately, a divided General Assembly produced a political tightrope. A Democratic-controlled Senate voted to fund higher education items such as ours, but a Republican-controlled House was not so willing. We found it very difficult to appeal to both sides and still stay on message.

Luckily, our then-Chancellor, the late Michael Hooker, was very sympathetic and he chose to use Chancellor's discretionary funds to pay for graduate student health insurance at Chapel Hill. His counterpart at North Carolina State University did likewise. Unfortunately, our colleagues at the other fourteen UNC-system schools did not fare so well.

In 1998, I ran for and was elected to the position of President of the GPSF. The GPSF is the recognized graduate and professional student government organization at UNC-Chapel Hill. My platform included many "family friendly" proposals: full tuition remission (the elimination of in-state tuition for graduate teaching assistants and fellows), state funding of graduate student health insurance, and reducing the cost of family health insurance policies.

The situation in which we found ourselves was tenuous. We had been unsuccessful the previous year in securing funding for health insurance. No elections had occurred yet, so the political climate was largely unchanged, and this time we were taking on an even bigger project than the previous year.

Talk of unionization was heating up and the thought of unionizing graduate teaching assistants and fellows was certainly on my mind. In a state such as North Carolina, with right-to-work laws and striker replacement laws, however, I felt that unionizing would set us back considerably. I strongly support unions and grew-up in a union family, but felt that, in our situation, unionizing would never get us what we wanted right now.

Instead of officially forming a union, I set out to mobilize graduate students throughout the state and to put together the largest lobbying effort for graduate student issues that North Carolina had ever seen. My administration worked with graduate students at three other UNC-system schools that had significant graduate populations and helped them form graduate student associations (GSA). Several other schools already had existing GSAs so we tapped into those networks, as well.

The message we crafted was sweet and simple. We knew that we could "catch more flies with honey than with vinegar" as the old saying goes, so we created a sweet deal. With the help of the UNC system, we determined that \$8.1 million would extend full tuition remission to every graduate TA and fellow in the system and would also fund health insurance. What a bargain!

Then the schmoozing began. We organized regular lobbying trips to Raleigh with students from all over North Carolina. We gave our elected leaders the same message over and over: we are the future of higher education; we currently teach as much as 40% of the undergraduate classes at some UNC campuses; undergraduate students overwhelmingly support their teaching assistants. In many cases they know TAs better than they know faculty. And the "closer" was this: UNC-Chapel Hill is one of the top five public universities in the country and it will not be able to continue to compete for the best graduate students with its peer institutions like Virginia and Michigan (both of whom offer these benefits) if we do not immediately follow suit.

The hard sell worked and we got the \$8.1 million. In the last three years, graduate students at UNC-system schools have also secured a pretty significant pay raise - from \$4,100 per class in 1998 to \$5,000 in 2001.

In addition to winning state funds for tuition remission and health insurance, we made some great strides

with family insurance policies. UNC-Chapel Hill was in the process of renegotiating its student health insurance contract with Blue Cross/Blue Shield of North Carolina. The GPSF got involved in that process and pushed for an affordable family plan. At that time, the cost of an insurance policy was \$734 for twelve months. To insure a spouse and children, a graduate student had to purchase a policy for *each* person in his/her family. During the negotiations, we developed a new pricing plan for students with families. The cost of insuring a spouse would remain the same as the student price; however, the cost of insuring children dropped significantly. Whether a student had one child or five, the cost for children would be the equivalent of one student health insurance policy. That meant that in 1998, it would cost \$1,468 (approximately \$120 per month) to insure any family with children, regardless the number of children. (Remember that the graduate teaching fellow/TA had his/her policy paid for by the university.)

Lastly, we learned that we needed a network of student parents in order to improve communication among the graduate student family population. We helped a group of graduate students and their spouses to form the Student Parent Interest Network (SPIN). SPIN grew quickly and established a forum for student parents to meet one another and to create informal co-ops. Members held picnics and potlucks, created an on-line swap meet for baby items; and a swap network for childcare.

It was a busy year for the Graduate and Professional Student Federation at Chapel Hill, but it was also an extremely successful one. We carried the banner for student families and secured the assistance we needed to meet the needs of our graduate student population with children.