

Hello, my name is Zoe Hu and I am chair of the PSC chapter at the Graduate Center.

I was heartened to see that the Board of Trustees recent budget request included 10 million dollars for graduate student funding. This request will be crucial in alleviating the hardship that many graduate students experience, at a time when their average salary is 27,000. Hundreds of tuition-only students make even less because of the Graduate Center's unfair two-tier funding system.

As chair of the PSC chapter, I see first-hand the toll that my colleagues experience as they attempt to teach and research on scant wages. They have faced evictions and food insecurity; they are working multiple full-time jobs. Having seen what I have, it does not surprise me that the median time to degree at CUNY, according to its own data, is between 6.3 and 8 years, depending on the cohort. I know for some it can be 9 or 10.

Given the situation, it is dismaying that CUNY has failed to provide basic support to graduate students and address their survival needs. As you may know, the Graduate Center cafeteria has been closed since the pandemic, leaving students without a subsidized food option in the midst of expensive midtown. In response, graduate students have started their own food pantry and weekly potluck events. While this demonstration of mutual aid is gratifying, we should not be asking struggling graduate students to fill the vacuum. Food options on campus is a basic expectation for any functioning university.

Furthermore, months after CUNY closed down Brookdale, the only low-income housing for Hunter students, it has begun raising the rent of Graduate Center housing. This is the third time in five years that rents have been raised on those in the building. Moreover, building management has had to provide inhabitants with space heaters because central heating does not work, though inhabitants continue to pay utilities bills, which are exorbitant because the building is commercially zoned. They also continue to pay for non-functioning building Wi-Fi even as most apartments are forced to purchase personal set-ups.

That CUNY is both employer and landlord for these students means that this rent measure is essentially a wage cut, one I fear undermines the boon this requested 10 million represents to us. How can we be sure that the same 10 million won't be further pared down when the PSC begins bargaining for graduate student wages? Because the stipend and teaching wages represent separate portions of the overall graduate student package, CUNY can give with one hand and take with the other. I fear we may be in a one step forward, two steps backward situation, unless CUNY looks away from the bottom line and takes seriously the well-being of graduate students.

I urge CUNY to reconsider these rent hikes and to reopen the cafeteria. Though the stereotype of graduate students is that we pursue our academic passions for little money, the situation has become reached a critically untenable point. We must stop relying on a workforce that is underpaid and underfed. A one-time wage boost is not enough. We need serious structural adjustments.