

TAs deserve more...

Are you worried about how simple-minded cost cutting is eroding the quality of education at Dalhousie University? Then read on!

Last year, wages for Teaching Assistants (TAs) at Dalhousie University ranged from \$220 to \$7,166 for an 8 month contract. Presumably this almost \$7000 disparity in wages reflects a disparity in the duties assigned to TAs, and the number of hours each worked.

Nonetheless, Dalhousie feels that it is fair to standardize wages of TAs by simplistically taking an average of all TA-ships, which works out to \$2,350, and declaring that average to be the wage which all TAs will receive, as of the 1998-1999 academic year. The TA who made \$220 will receive a more than

ten-fold raise, while the TA who made \$7,166 will be reduced to less than one-third of his/her former wage, taking no account of disparity of duties.

This is a ridiculous solution to a complex problem, and reflects the contempt in which Dalhousie's administration holds Teaching Assistants.

TAs at Dalhousie perform a variety of tasks, from grading papers to running labs, from giving lectures to running tutorial discussion groups. Virtually every student at Dalhousie will be taught or evaluated by a TA at some point during his or her university education.

Three years ago there was a union drive at Dalhousie, and a strong majority (over 80%) of TAs voted in favour of unionizing.

Among their concerns were the disparity of duties and wages which TAs in different departments face, the arbitrary manner with which some departments hire TAs, and the deplorable wages which TAs are paid at Dalhousie.

Since the union drive in 1993 some progress has been made in negotiations between the union representing the TAs (Canadian Union of Public Employees local 3912) and the university administration. The university has agreed to allow CUPE 3912 to monitor the advertisement and awarding of TA contracts, and has agreed in principle that TA wages and working conditions ought to be standardized. But now the negotiations have broken down over the issue of wages.

It is worth noting that despite

having the second highest tuition in the nation Dalhousie pays its TAs shamefully low wages, well below those of other unionized universities in Canada. For example, whereas a TA would be paid \$6,596 at Carleton University in Ottawa or \$9,429 at York University in Toronto, at Dalhousie he or she would be paid \$2,350.

Dalhousie needs to standardize TA wages, but equally importantly Dalhousie needs to begin to pay TAs a fair wage. TAs are, after all, an essential part of how the university functions, and how it brings in tuition dollars.

Consider the following scenario: a course with 40 students enrolled can be taught by one professor, who personally leads all lectures and tutorials, and does all of the grading. The tuition which these students pay, at \$700 per student (more if the student is in commerce, sciences, phys-ed, etc), comes to a total of \$28,000, which reasonably can be

assumed to pay a portion of the professor's salary. But by simply hiring a TA, the university can enrol another 40 students in the class, bringing in another \$28,000 in tuition fees, of which the TA will be paid only \$2,350. This leaves the university with a net profit of \$24,050. Surely the university could afford to be a little less tight-fisted with TAs wages.

The administration of Dalhousie University is determined to apply Scrooge-like zeal in keeping TAs wages as low as possible. In doing so, the administration is demonstrating not only a lack of concern for the TAs themselves, but also for the standards of education which Dalhousie provides. You deserve better. Tell your TAs that they have your support, and tell Dal's president that his parsimonious ways have to change. (You can reach President Tom Traves at: tom.traves@dal.ca).

GREG BAK

...maybe they don't

The job of a TA is vital to Dal's continued functioning as a university. They grade tests and papers, and hopefully help students out with problems and assignments. Students need TAs in order to do their work, and to have it graded in a timely manner. This system allows TAs the chance to work with professors or at least pad their resumes. It also gives grads the opportunity to make some money given that it can be tough for them to support themselves when they spend so much time at school. Students and professors also benefit from this system as marking can be expedited so that students can get feedback quickly and professors do not have to do all that mundane marking. However, none of that is especially relevant in determining whether the TAs deserve a pay increase when tuition is rising sharply and the university is becoming less and less well funded.

Dal students can pay as much as twice the tuition paid by Quebec residents at Quebec universities. That is a cost of going to school at Dal. If Dal can't afford to cut the second highest tuition in the country, how can it afford to support increases to TA salaries without taking that increase directly out of tuition increases?

Not increasing TA salaries would still hurt grad students, as they would continue paying high tuition and would not be able to make the money back by doing TA work. The real problems include the following:

1) The perception that TA jobs are all very similar and require the same amount of work is erroneous. How

can marking papers for fourth year history be compared to grading low level math or business tests? Grading examinations, homework, and papers in different courses and at different levels require different levels of training and expertise. As well, each course has a different time requirement of its TAs. Paying all TAs the same amount of money means that the best qualified TAs doing the most difficult, time intensive work end up subsidizing TAs who do not have to work as hard or know as much.

2) York TAs being successful in collective bargaining does not mean that any TA is worth ten grand. As mentioned above, TA salaries are composed partly of remuneration for actual work done and partly of subsidies for grad students who have trouble supporting themselves when they spend so much time at school. York grads receiving a larger subsidy is the same issue as Dal students paying more tuition. The added expense of attending Dal is unavoidable for all Dal students, grad and under-grad. I would argue that there is a benefit to the university in subsidizing grad students if the funding is available, but TA sponsorship is not the right way to do it.

3) How valuable is the grading service provided by TAs, and how high is the demand for TA positions? As mentioned above, different skill levels are needed for the different jobs, but some of the work done by TAs does not require much skill. For example, consider manual grading of multiple choice and basic exams involving calculations, or supervising exams.

These are functions that probably aren't worth much more than \$8/hour because there is little about them that requires the skills that it takes to earn a TA position. Dal could test this by offering professors the opportunity to either keep money allotted for TAs and do without their services or to pay TAs out of some budgeted amount and keep the excesses if any. Most likely there would be fewer TAs grading multiple choice tests and an increase in expensive cars driven into faculty parking spaces.

Given those concerns, grad students still need cash to continue their research. There are some courses of action that the university should consider. The union uses the example of York TAs making \$10,000/year. If Dal has the money (approximately \$5,000,000 total, based upon an increase to \$10,000 per TA, for approximately 700 TAs) to pay grads that much, then start applying it directly into scholarships and reward programs for academic work. If Dal really doesn't have that kind of money then it should start applying resources towards becoming the national leader in corporate sponsorships and recruitment and give grads the opportunity to support themselves through their research and help them find jobs for when they finish their academic work.

Grads are important for the welfare of a university, but it is ridiculous to assume that a TA is worth \$10,000/year or \$18/hour because that is what they get at York.

MICHAEL HOLLINGER

Write for the Gazette
room 312 SUB

All T.A.'s and PART TIME
INSTRUCTORS:

YOU ARE IN THE
UNION!

GET INFORMED!
GET INVOLVED!

CUPE 3912 MEETING
Tuesday, 30 September
4:30

SUB room 224-6

To be discussed...

Should we
STRIKE?

More information?

Email: CUPE3912@is.dal.ca

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LIFE.

THIS ISN'T IT.

THE ALL NEW GAZETTE ON-LINE.

INFO THE WAY IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE — SPOON
FED.

WATCH FOR IT...COMING SOON.