

FAQs: Why Full and Fair?

1) Why is it important we demand full and fair funding for PhD students?

We believe that offering students a PhD position without pay is unrealistic and therefore unethical. It sets people up for years of overwork, underpay, and debt. It is also completely out-of-step with even the most basic standards for PhD programs in the US.

2) What is the harm in keeping tuition-only as an option? Isn't a tuition-only fellowship better than nothing?

There is no way to complete a program "on the side," even in a seven-year timeline. Many of our unfunded students are forced to take on extremely precarious, low-paying adjunct jobs just to qualify for NYSHIP, and sit with the anxiety each semester that they will lose their job, healthcare, and ability to continue in the program. As these students struggle to maintain their livelihoods, they face outsized obstacles to their studies and time-to-degree, often forsaking commitment to scholarship because they must make ends meet. If a student is to successfully progress through a PhD program, a majority of their work time must be devoted toward it.

Inadequate support results not only in material strain for these students, but a consistent devaluation of unfunded students. It fosters a culture of inequality, feelings of inadequacy, and need-based competition for other GC resources.

Funding PhD studies is essential for the quality of research, the well-being of students, and the resulting reputation of departments. Research quality, student health and development, and department standing fall together. Paying people for the work they do as PhD students is a key factor in raising all departmental standards.

3) Aren't there other fellowships these students can apply for within the Graduate Center?

Although in previous years there were some opportunities for tuition-only fellows to apply after their first-year to fully-funded fellowships, current austerity measures have diminished the number of opportunities to almost zero. There are far more tuition-only students than fellowships, and tuition-only students spend a disproportionate amount of time applying for these limited opportunities. Further, many of these fellowships are open to all students. When an already-funded student receives one of these fellowships, their previous funding is not

equivalently allocated to another student, providing little relief to students without funding. In fact, the Graduate Center depends on internal institutions (Futures Initiative, PublicsLab, Center for the Humanities, etc.) to grant these fellowships to already-funded students in order to balance its budget.

4) Isn't it the choice of the admitted student whether or not to accept a tuition-only fellowship? Why take that away?

Many students, including those of us organizing around this issue, accepted tuition-only fellowships without understanding the full weight of the decision. Potential students without the institutional knowledge of how funding works, many of whom are from working class backgrounds, are particularly vulnerable to take on this burden. In Full and Fair's research, we found that two-tiered departments across the GC tend to use their small minority of unfunded students who later did encounter funding to recruit students to fill tuition-only slots.

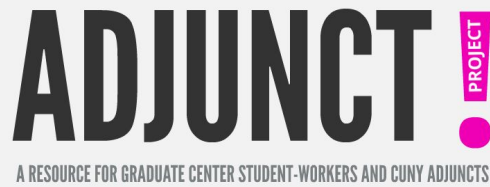
Most are drawn in by vague promises regarding the possibility of future funding. Those handling admission in our departments stress the existence of alternative opportunities for students to get funding and health insurance after admission. However, as mentioned above, these opportunities are scarce and growing nearly impossible to come by, with some of the best options now only offering one or two years of funding. It is better that the admissions committee has no tuition-only offers to begin with, as it is nearly impossible to make this unfunded opportunity enticing while being completely transparent about the tuition-only experience.

5) What about students that do not need funding (because they have outside resources, fellowships, or prefer to keep previous full-time jobs)?

Students who don't need the fellowship can be offered the option to decline the stipend portion of the offer, freeing up another spot for a different student.

6) I have a full fellowship. Why should this matter to me?

Current fully funded students in the social sciences need an immediate 30-percent increase in overall funding just to reach the poverty line in New York City, yet the mere existence of unfunded students forecloses that possibility. The continued admission of students without funding, especially in high-concentration programs like those in the social sciences, significantly weakens the ability of the PSC to bargain for graduate assistants and undermines the overall bargaining power of our union. When administrators can push back with rhetoric such as "feel lucky you have any funding at all," fighting for a living wage seems impossible. Funding all



students equally is the necessary first step in achieving Full and Fair funding for all doctoral students across the Graduate Center.

7) Why are we demanding this at the departmental level and not directly to Graduate Center or CUNY Central management?

For years the Full and Fair Funding Group, the CUNY Adjunct Project, the Doctoral Student Council, and other concerned community members have demanded that the Graduate Center administration secure equity in funding and health insurance for all doctoral students. These calls have, as of yet, gone substantively unanswered.

Individual departments can, however, negotiate with the administration to change the student funding structure of their respective PhD programs. Decisions about student funding are made cooperatively between departments and GC administration.

Around ten years ago, the English PhD program went from distributing 18 five-year fellowships among more than 30 students, the rest of whom received only some partial or else no funding, to only admitting students they could fund fully – 21 in total. The deal was negotiated between then President William Kelly and the Board of Trustees to boost the reputation of the Graduate Center as an institution that produces world-class researchers. As part of that deal, the English department was offered two fellowships that provided tuition relief only, which the faculty refused to implement in order to avoid creating a two-class hierarchy of students.

We believe their transition to funding all students, and refusal to offer tuition-only fellowships, is a model we can and should follow, and hope other departments will follow the example.

8) Will we be able to offer as many courses if we eliminate the tuition-only positions?

Probably not. When the English department transitioned to this model, fewer of their college-based faculty could teach a course every year, class sizes shrunk, and some classes were cancelled for under-enrollment. But faculty decided that those difficulties – which affected them most – were a worthy tradeoff to abandon an unjust funding model that robbed students of union representation, medical insurance, and the dignity and respect afforded to their peers.

9) If this is so much better for students, and departments can choose to make the decision to end the two-tiered structure, why haven't departments like Sociology and Anthropology done it yet?

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Offering students a PhD position without pay serves tenured faculty by boosting numbers of enrollment and freeing up university funds to pay faculty, but at the expense of unfunded students. When faculty insist on admitting students without funding, they are serving their own interests, not those of doctoral students.

10) Why can't we just give health insurance to all students? Wouldn't that help?

NYSHIP is tied to employment with guidelines set by the state. CUNY cannot give NYSHIP benefits to students that are not employed by the Graduate Center with specific work hour requirements. This means that one third of current and incoming doctoral students at the CUNY Graduate Center – as much as 50% in some departments – who receive only five-year tuition waivers do not qualify. While some students are able to take on extremely precarious, low-paying adjunct jobs to qualify for health insurance, these are not guaranteed each semester and when a position is not available, they lose their ability to seek medical care. Furthermore, they often force students to sacrifice financial wellbeing for access to healthcare.

The present global health situation, increasing in urgency with a case of COVID-19 already reported within the CUNY system, shows the importance of structurally guaranteed, universal access to health insurance.

The contract ratified in December of last year by the PSC has set up infrastructure for expanded access to NYSHIP. However, four months later, there have been no implemented changes in student's access to health insurance at the Graduate Center. It is now that we must see a firm and rapid commitment from CUNY to secure non-contingent access to healthcare for all doctoral students.

Further, we strongly believe healthcare is not enough. Ability to see a doctor is critical, but so is having enough income to pay for rent, food, and living expenses. Providing full fellowships to all students secures all of those basic rights.

11) Why isn't the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) fighting for this?

Unfunded students are forced to rely on unstable employment and thus are not guaranteed consistent union representation by the PSC. Even as the existence of unfunded students weakens the union's bargaining power, the PSC can't legally fight for their rights, leaving this task up to us