

Better pay for grad students



Graduate employees at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign rally in 2018. (Courtesy of the Graduate Employees' Organization at UIUC.)

News articles published in *Nature* and *Science* last year bring attention to a simple fact: Graduate student wages are low.^{1,2} Data on median stipends for physics graduate students from the American Institute of Physics Statistical Research Center (AIP is the publisher of *Physics Today*) confirm what we all know to be the case—that the field of physics is no exception.³ At this year's American Physical Society (APS) March Meeting, a group of physics graduate students held an invited session on that topic.

An excellent piece by Jacqueline Acres in *APS News* last November highlights the ills that low pay levies on individual graduate students and the field of physics at large.⁴ Some in physics view living through the low wages of graduate school as a rite of passage, something to weed out those who are not truly interested in the science—those who are not willing to subsist on ramen noodles and free seminar lunches for four to seven years in pursuit of their PhD. But that stoic view is wrong. Low graduate wages act as a bar-

rier all right, but rather than keeping out those students who do not have the purest penchant for research, low wages keep out those from less privileged, less wealthy, marginalized backgrounds. Physics has always had a problem with diversity; raising graduate wages may help.

Low graduate wages are a national problem, and it is a problem that affects almost every field in academia. Within STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields, physics seems to be falling behind. At my institution,

the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which has one of the largest physics graduate programs in the country, physics was for many years one of the lowest paid departments in the engineering college, rivaling the engineering administration program for the bottom spot. Through the efforts of the graduate labor union, a small group of concerned graduate physicists, and a supportive graduate director over several years, physics graduate students have gotten a raise. But the process was far from guar-

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A student protests at the 2020 May Day Car Rally held by the Graduate Employees' Organization at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. (Photo by Ben Joseph Lash, courtesy of the Graduate Employees' Organization at UIUC.)

anteed, and record inflation last year has ensured that we are still paid far below the living wage in our city.⁵

What can be done? A national problem requires a national solution. Ad hoc raises to graduate wages on the level of individual universities are a Band-Aid fix (and, like Band-Aids, should be assessed and reapplied often while in use). The optimal solution requires national legislation. Physics organizations, such as APS and AIP, ought to use their government affairs and public policy offices to lobby Congress on the issue. It will be a long road, and only one of many issues addressed by such offices, but it should at least make the docket.

Graduate students in other disciplines are rallying around the issue. The biological sciences seem to be leading the way.¹ Physicists should be wary not to fall behind.

References

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