

TAA Leads Campaign for A Better Biosciences

Madison, WI (November 1, 2024): The graduate worker labor union at UW-Madison has launched a campaign to improve the working conditions of the Biosciences. Graduate workers in Biomedical Engineering, Botany, Cellular & Molecular Biology, Integrated Biology, Biochemistry, and Microbiology are requesting:

1. **\$40,000 stipends**
2. **The elimination of unpaid teaching requirements**
3. **Laboratory graduation & retention rates, and other efforts for improved lab environments**
4. **Respect to our rights to concerted activity**

United Faculty and Staff (AFT Local #223) has endorsed the letter. Currently, there are over 180 signatures, including over half of Genetics. This campaign is ongoing.

Biosciences programs are proposing a raise from \$36,000 to \$37,000; a 2.5% increase in a year when inflation (2023-2024 FY) averaged 2.9%, per the Consumer Price Index.

“A raise which does not match inflation is detrimental for graduate workers in the Biosciences, who already do not make a living wage¹,” TAA co-president and Microbiology PhD student Madeline Topf said. “We do the research which leads to cancer cures, vaccines, and often work overtime on our 20-hour/week contracts. Low stipends hinder the competitiveness of our training programs, recruitment and retention of underrepresented students, and our scientific output.”

“I am a first-year Ph.D. student who is already **seeking part-time employment in addition to my responsibilities as a graduate student because my stipend is nearly unlivable,**” a graduate worker in the Biosciences said in response to a union survey.

“**Low stipend rates along with the housing price increase make it infeasible to focus solely on research work,**” another said.

Many Biosciences graduate students are required to TA without pay for one or more semesters. “**I was not able to get any research done when I had to TA because of how demanding it was,**” a graduate student said. The elimination of unpaid teaching requirements in Biosciences programs will allow for more time dedicated to research which benefits our community.

For graduate students, access to the training (retention, graduation rate) records of individual laboratories is essential in choosing an environment where they can succeed, and to track, reward, and/or improve lab environments.

“There is a power dynamic between students and their mentors,” a Biosciences graduate student said. “**If you're not lucky in your choice of mentor, this can have severe consequences,** and even if you are fortunate to have a decent PI, the knowledge of how vulnerable you would be if they did choose to abuse that dynamic is stressful.”

The union stands with graduate student workers in the Biosciences in exercising their protected right to concerted activity. “The TAA is ready to assist and represent any graduate worker facing threats or retaliation for participating in legally-protected concerted activity,” said Bennett McIntosh, History of Science PhD candidate and chair of the TAA’s Contract Enforcement Committee.

Letter: bit.ly/bio-letter

Webpage: taa-madison.org/a-better-biosciences

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¹ Defined as \$44,480 for a single adult with no dependents, per MIT Living Wage calculator.