

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK
COLUMBIA ASTROPHYSICS LABORATORY

April 24, 2001

George Rupp
President
Office of the President
202 Low Library, MC 4309

Dear George:

The Executive Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences has been discussing, with students and among ourselves, the issue of graduate student unionization and the current organizing campaign. While we hold divergent views on the substance of the matter – whether or not a union for graduate students is appropriate or desirable – we share several areas of agreement on the mode and tenor of the University's response. We write to share our views on these matters, as we expect they are broadly representative of the faculty at large.

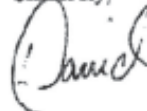
We are unanimous in our view that it would be inappropriate for the Dean of the Graduate School to take the lead in representing the University's case opposing the Union. The Dean's primary role is to provide for our graduate students the best possible experience at Columbia. Requiring someone in this position to take an adversarial position toward a significant fraction of these students is fundamentally inconsistent with that role, just as it would be if the Vice President were required to be the point person in opposing a faculty unionization effort. Naturally, Dean Lindt and her successor will hold views on the desirability of a graduate student union and should be free to express them, but institutionalizing the role as spokesperson for the University in this complex matter would be, in our view, counterproductive. Likewise, we trust that in the selection process for the new Dean, the candidates' views on the unionization effort or the role they are willing to play in opposing it will not be a litmus test for suitability. While clearly an important matter for the Graduate School and the University, this is not likely to be the most important challenge the new Dean will face in leading the School over the next five years.

As noted above, our membership represents a broad range of views on the desirability of a graduate student union. However, we are in general accord that our students should be permitted to organize an election. While there are clearly some procedural issues that need clarification, and we agree that the University should negotiate these issues, we would question the desirability of impeding and/or delaying progress toward a vote by challenging the right of graduate TAs to union representation (an issue already adjudicated in the NYU case). As we are sure you agree, overly aggressive steps that needlessly polarize the situation are unlikely to be in the long-term interest of our institution.

Finally, we believe it would be helpful for the whole University community if authoritative, factual updates on the unionization issue were regularly distributed by the appropriate University office (perhaps that of the Executive Vice President for Administration). These communications should be free of argumentation and simply state the facts. Dean Lindt's recent email updates on April 13 and April 23 are a model for such communications. Any letters or emails stating the University's views on the substance of the issue should be clearly distinguished from these regular updates. Such a procedure should help to avoid a situation in which misinformation from any quarter needlessly inflames an already delicate situation.

We trust you will consider our views in conducting the University's response to the unionization effort; we stand ready to assist in assuring that Columbia successfully emerges from this process.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David".

David Helfand for ECFAS

cc: Jonathan Cole, Provost
David Cohen, Vice-President, A&S
Gillian Lindt, Dean GSAS