

## Expanded health care access tops GEO agenda

With more than 70 union members in attendance at the Jan. 10 bargaining session, GEO presented health care proposals designed to keep costs low and availability high to its members.

"Neither perfect health nor deep pockets should be a requirement to attend graduate school," GEO bargaining team member Julie Robert told UM's team. "We are the best employees we can be when we aren't worried about getting sick."

Two major highlights of GEO's proposal included locking in health care premiums at zero for all employees over the term of the contract and freezing co-pays at current levels.

Currently, employees with a fraction of .2 or under have to pay 50 percent of their premiums, which has resulted in several departments, like Art & Design, artificially lowering their GSIs' fractions from .25 to .2 to avoid having to provide health care coverage to their employees. Premiums for high fraction employees are calculated by a university formula, which has kept health care premiums at zero so far, but issues no guarantee they will stay that way.

"We appreciate that premiums have remained at zero over the life of the last contract, but we'd like to take away all the guesswork with a simple guarantee," GEO bargaining team member Spencer Piston said.

GEO also proposed included UM paying 100 percent of the cost of all members being enrolled in the university's basic vision plan and upgrading all members to Dental II coverage from Dental I coverage, which only covers preventative treatment.

Other major parts of GEO's plan would expand access to mental health and physical therapy services, by lifting the artificially low number limits on the numbers of visits for physical therapy or mental health counseling. Provision of the mental health plan would also retain a member's right to self-refer for an appointment with a mental health therapist, instead of first going to their primary-care physician.

## From the grassroots: An Interview with Brooklyn Walker

For Brooklyn Walker, a third-year student and second-year GSI in the political science/public policy joint program, one of the most striking things about attending her first bargaining session was the ability of GEO rank-and-file members to influence the bargaining team during caucus meetings.

"It's interesting that members are still able to influence the bargaining platform," she said after making some suggestions to GEO lead negotiator Colleen Woods that would potentially improve to a pending GEO proposal on summer funding. "I thought [the platform] would be pretty much set, but there's still flexibility. It seems like GEO's bargaining team is open to hearing comments and ideas from members."

In general, Walker said that she was pleased to see the negotiations seemed to be conducted in a professional manner on both sides.

"There were many polite questions," Walker observed. "It was much less adversarial than I pictured it. The sides were really trying to understand each other were saying, and there wasn't any eye-rolling or sarcastic comments from either bargaining team – keeping that unnecessary stuff out helps us work toward agreements more easily."

Walker added that she was impressed with the abilities of the GEO bargaining team, who essentially moonlight as labor negotiators in their time spared from taking classes and teaching. "They don't have a ton of flexibility in their schedules, but it's impressive that they're doing as well as they do."

And what advice does Walker have for her fellow GEO members?

"If you want to get a better contract, it's important to come to negotiating session," she said. "The university team is actively aware of where people stand," Walker added, noting that the members of the university team made active reference to the crowd of GEO members in the room on one occasion.

"A large graduate employee audience really communicates to the team that we care. It's one of a few ways we can make a big difference," she concluded.

### YOUR GEO Calendar of Events!!

Schedule for Jan 2008.

Bargaining open to all! Drop by for any amount of time!

**Thu, Jan 17, 2-5**  
*Michigan Union  
Anderson ABC*

**GEO presents last proposal:  
COMPENSATION!**

Summer funding, wage increases, and tuition waivers

**Thu, Jan 24, 11-5**  
*Michigan League  
Hussey Room*

**Bargaining continues!**

Support our team and hear the admin's initial responses to our proposals!

**Thu, Jan. 31, 7pm**  
*Rackham  
Amphitheater,  
4<sup>th</sup> Flr*

**MEMBERSHIP MEETING!**

Come discuss where GEO is at in bargaining, and what next steps should be!

**After-party at Arbor Brewing Company!** (114 E. Washington Street, b/w Main and 4<sup>th</sup>)

# Looking beyond burdens to find assets

**By Patrick O'Mahen**  
GEO Communications Chair

Last winter when I was facing down a relapse of my depression, I confided my struggles to a sympathetic professor. She asked me if I was getting treatment, and I told her I was, but added that my therapist and I were having some trouble calibrating the dose of my antidepressant, which was frustrating.

My professor, whom I regard with great affection as a mentor and role model, smiled warmly at me and said, "Well, I guess that because different people need different types and doses of medication just means we're all unique individuals – and that's really neat."

I laughed somewhat ruefully in response, but I later realized that her remarks had some very profound implications.

As I've been watching GEO present proposals mandating improved access to childcare, expanded coverage for mental health care and physical therapy and better classroom support for GSIs with disabilities, I find myself thinking often on that conversation with my mentor.

In the coming weeks, we're going to start to grapple with the university telling us that our proposals cost too much, that those of us who need mental health treatment or improved access to the classroom or childcare are burdens on the UM community who ought to fend for themselves.

One argument that GEO will use to counter these claims was expressed eloquently last Thursday by our colleague Julie Robert. As we presented our health care proposal, she framed its goals by stating that "neither perfect health nor deep pockets should be a requirement to attend graduate school."

This rhetoric is powerful – in her statement Julie affirms that as long as we have the intelligence, ideas and work ethic to gain admission to a graduate program, then our varying individual needs – providing for a large family, needing treatment for chronic conditions or living with a disability should not disqualify us from pursuing our professional interests.

But after reflecting on that meeting with my professor, I know we can take Julie's comments even further. Our diverse needs are not merely burdens to be compensated for, but rather they are part of what make us fundamentally unique people.

From that uniqueness stems the differences in how we perceive the world; and those different perceptions give root to novel ideas and approaches to solving problems in every scholarly and artistic field studied at UM and the world at large.

For example, I work in political science. My colleagues who have children might – and do – often approach issues regarding government social policy from a much different set of assumptions than my childless colleagues. On a more abstract level, the different interactions in a home with

small children will generate different approaches to communicating and problem-solving than interactions in the household of a single male caring for his elderly mother. Think of how a vision-impaired person might design a building and come up with engineering solutions that a person with vision might not even dream of.

In the humanities, recall the unique sculpture of Degas, who had macular degeneration, the art of Frida Kahlo, who was paralyzed, or of Vincent Van Gogh who had mental illness. In many cases their "disabilities" directly contributed to their artistic expression and generated novel approaches to artistic subject matter and technique. Yet none of these individuals would have their needs served by the University of Michigan's current policies – although I'm pretty sure the university would be quite happy to get any of them to be in residence here.

And scholars have mathematical proof and empirical evidence that these different perceptions do generate better problem solving. UM Professor Scott Page, in a recent book called *The Difference*, shows how a group of people with differing perspectives generated from different socialization experiences solve problems more effectively than a group of like-minded people – even if the homogenous group has more technical skill. Those results hold up across formal mathematical modeling, experiments and statistical analysis of real-world data. Page cites real-life examples from making better-tasting ice cream to improving the efficiency of Chicago's mass transit system.

The "difference" comes from having a diverse work force. By accepting GEO's proposals, UM can increase the diversity of its graduate community, improve the quality of its scholarly work and teaching, and ultimately increase its prestige as an institution. This is a golden opportunity for the university to stand behind its goal for an institution that embraces diversity in all its forms. GEO needs to carry its three-decade old fight to make UM live up to its rhetoric to this new frontier,

So when UM team tells us our proposals cost too much, we need to tell them that rejecting our ideas costs all of us much more in lost potential. Those of us with mental illness, physical disabilities and children aren't burdens to the university. We are assets, not merely in spite of our needs for support, but often because of them.

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**Do you have any thoughts or opinions that you'd like to share about bargaining with your fellow GEO members in this space?**

**Let us know – e-mail [umgeo@umich.edu](mailto:umgeo@umich.edu).**

**By working and talking together we come up with better proposals, organize more effectively and will ultimately get a better contract.**