

# **GSI Talking Points**

For Discussing the Job Action/GEO with Undergraduate Students

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Below are talking points and general approaches that GSI's can use for discussing the job action with their students. Since different approaches work better in different contexts and with different personalities, these are simply intended as possible tools that we can use to approach the subject. If you've found an approach, idea, analogy, etc., that has worked especially well when discussing GEO with your students, please share!

## **Initial Ways To Approach the Conversation...**

### Approach it in terms of upcoming assignments.

Once the dates of the walkout are decided, it may be easiest to simply initiate the conversation in terms of how the walkout will affect their assignments, class sessions, etc. Something like, "You may have heard about a possible walkout by GSI's at the end of the month. I thought we'd discuss how this might affect your paper deadlines, etc. Then I thought we could spend a few minutes discussing what this is all about." It might be helpful, if applicable, to also discuss the professor's stance on all this—i.e., if the prof has already expressed to the GSI's whether she or he will cross the picket line.

### Approach it in terms of the elephant in the room.

"If you read the *Daily*, you've probably seen some of the coverage of GEO and might have been wondering how this is going to affect this class specifically. So I thought we'd set aside a few minutes in class to have a discussion where I can answer some of your questions and address any concerns you may have."

## **Helpful Ways To Keep the Conversation Going**

### Address their concerns.

Stress that this is not a decision we take lightly, and that we are concerned about the way the job action will affect their education (but that we're also committed to a fair contract). Keep them updated. Assure them we have concern for their situation—they won't get screwed over—and that we're making a concerted effort to make their concerns one of our major priorities. Assure them the GEO leadership is especially committed to meeting undergraduates halfway.

Possible ways to convey this: "This time around the GEO leadership is making a special commitment to do our negotiations in a way that avoids compromising our students' education or interests in the end. We're still going to play hardball with the university, but we want to do so

in a way that treats our students as our allies. There is a very strong sense among members that it's important for us to maintain our ties to the whole university because we know that when this is all over, we're all going to need to come back to class and work together."

Emphasize we aren't simply self-serving.

We'll win friends if we demonstrate that we're willing to listen and that we have the entire university community's best interests in mind. As a group, we've done a nice job on this front so far this year and we seem to be getting a lot of support as a result.

Historicize the bargaining/GEO process.

There is something to be said about the longstanding pattern of a one-day work action virtually every time a contract year comes up—perhaps it could be described as a "bizarre dance" that GEO and the administration both do every few years. In other words, assure them that this isn't the first time a walkout has happened.

**Specific Issues That We May Need To Address:**

The notion that our demands drive up their tuition.

Patrick wrote a fabulous letter that addresses this very notion in the *Daily*. Read it here:

<http://media.www.michigandaily.com/media/storage/paper851/news/2008/03/03/LettersToTheEditor/Letters.To.The.Editor-3247127.shtml>

GSI wages and tuition are both financial items on the UM budget, but not necessarily connected in any meaningful way. I find it useful to ask people, "Do you actually believe that if GEO accepted the wages offered by the administration that tuition wouldn't increase next year?" As we often say, the admin could easily make the choice to meet our salary demands and freeze tuition if it made different decisions. Budgets are political documents and reflect choices and priorities, and UM could be choosing to spend its money quite differently. Treating unequal groups as if they are equal means you are taking the side of the more powerful. The administration hasn't even articulated any scarcity arguments yet—they don't have to because the dominant paradigm is already set and observers like this woman tend to follow the narrative rather than question it.

It is crucial to explain, with some simple numbers and figures, how the University's budget works—that is, where the money comes from (less and less from the State), and how much money it costs to pay GSIs (not much). It's also worth mentioning that all of our raises together would amount to approximately \$1.5 million (by my conservative/exaggerated calculations: approx 1,500 in bargaining unit if all of them got a 1,000

dollar raise) for the first year. By way of comparison, UM has an approximately \$7 billion endowment. Moreover, recently many universities have been re-vamping their financial aid (in part because of U.S. Senate Finance Committee pressure) to give more grants instead of loans to all students and to give free tuition to many middle- and working-class students. For example, Duke, Dartmouth, and Brown give free tuition to students with family incomes below \$60,000 (and many, like Dartmouth give free room and board, too). All three of those universities have SMALLER endowments than UM. So, we're talking about UM's priorities of how the endowment money is spent. In this respect, GSIs and many UM students are in the same boat: UM has the money to spend on us, but they're simply choosing not to do it.

#### The picket line.

Ask students to do the very most they can to avoid crossing a picket line. The strike is likely to be short if it comes in a quick, dramatic action that gets the administration's attention. GEO is lucky to have the support of the vast majority of the professors in the university who recognize this. Most will understand if you choose to honor the picket line and stay out of campus buildings on a strike day. If a professor chooses to be hostile to your decision to show your support for graduate students, we tend to view that professor as the responsible party. We simply ask that you do the best you can to assess the relative level of risk to yourself and then act accordingly. It's often really encouraging to us when students actually stand on the picket lines and show their support, but this is a personal, voluntary decision.

#### The teacher/student power dynamic.

This probably won't come up in actual discussion, but the GSI may feel the need to acknowledge the power dynamic at play between the teacher and students. Perhaps something along the lines of, "You may not agree with GEO's stance, and you don't *have* to agree with GEO or me. Your opinion on this does not affect the grade you receive in this class. However, if you are sympathetic with GEO's efforts there are things you can do as well... like wear these beautiful buttons I've brought, etc." (This could tie into the picket line discussion as well.) Stress that the conversation is about explaining the situation to them, addressing their concerns, and expressing that you're open to any questions they may have—not that you're "recruiting for the cause."

#### That we're "paid to go to school."

It is probably worth emphasizing that graduate school in almost any discipline, unlike college, entails a number of "opportunity costs"—that many of us still have educational debt ourselves from college that we will be unable to pay for a number of years, and that our degrees will in all likelihood not lead to especially lucrative careers down the road (as MBAs

or JDs might, or as even a bachelor's degree might if one goes into banking, finance, etc.)

That we're "asking for too much."

First, you could explain the cost of living issue.

Second, explain that U-M has been so prestigious precisely because it has offered competitive benefits in the past and consequently has attracted elite graduate students. This makes Michigan an appealing place for professors and commercial investment. Unlike the vast majority of public universities, the name "Michigan" carries the same kind of weight that many Ivy League schools do. If benefits are allowed to slip beneath living standards, the entire university loses its competitive edge when compared to other places. In the past, the forward progress has always been a product of professors, graduate and undergraduate students coming together to say to the administration that we value strong programs. When it boils down to it, the prospect of a strike is often about giving the administration that periodic "nudge" to remind them that we are serious about our requests that we keep pace with both inflation and with other universities.

Third, we're all in our mid-20s (at the youngest) and we're trying to live adult lives on \$15,000 a year. Many of us have outstanding undergrad debts. Many of us have children. All of us have to deal with increasing rents, increasing gas prices, increasing milk (!) prices, etc. In the end, all of this has to try to shift their frame of reference from thinking of us as students (like them) who are getting a good deal (relative to them) to thinking of us as professionals, workers, and adults (who should be thought of in relation to their older siblings, parents, and/or their future selves) and who are NOT, from that vantage point, really living on all that much.

## **How To Handle Resistance From Students**

It is not uncommon to experience visible/verbal resistance or animosity from students (maybe just some frown faces) when discussing this issue. Of course this is awkward, but it can often be minimized by (a) an open discussion that addresses their concerns, and (b) keeping lines of communication open communication each week this month. The second time that you discuss it with your students can be *much* easier and go *much* better.

## **Other Helpful Things To Consider**

Maintain a professional tone.

Strive to appear reasonable—avoid emotional or exaggerated appeals that might play right into the hands of critics who would label us as unreasonable or unnecessarily militant. Recognize that (right or wrong)

undergraduates will be hard-pressed to view us as blue collar workers engaged in a heroic struggle for social justice. Most undergraduates see us as a privileged population and we have to be mindful of this in our approach. This is not, however, to say that we concede any of our demands. Rather, in making our arguments, we need to project our sensitivity to undergraduate concerns about the strike (see above).