Why You Should be Concerned about Background Checks

UM Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO)

May 7, 2014

The University of Michigan has recently started running criminal background checks on GSIs.

- **Will I be background checked?** The University's stated policy is that you will be checked if you start as a GSI for the first time in or after Winter 2014. If you were a GSI prior to that, you won't be checked, even if you teach again in the future. However, this policy hasn't been implemented consistently so far. In Winter 2014, background checks were run on some returning GSIs and not on some new GSIs.
- **What does the check involve?** The University contracts with an external vendor to carry out the background checks. The vendor will ask for your five most recent addresses and will use that information to find your arrest or court records. Unlike in some background checks, your credit history is not included.
- **What happens if the check finds something?** Your job offer could be withdrawn. The University doesn't have a central policy stating what information in a background check could disqualify you from working as a GSI, so this is at the discretion of your department. Standards might vary significantly: Academic Human Resources has suggested that you might be able to find a different GSI position even if you are disqualified from your original one.
- **What's wrong with background checks?** They're inherently unfair. In the US, people of color are more likely than whites to be arrested for minor offenses, including marijuana posession. And **the background check process itself has built-in biases** against trans* people and undocumented students, because anyone who has changed their name or whose personal information contains gaps or "inconsistencies" will provoke extra scrutiny.

  Without a consistent University-wide policy, we're also subject to the arbitrary judgment of whoever makes decisions in our individual departments. **You could find your job offer revoked** because of that person's (conscious or unconscious) biases or just plain personal animus.
- **Can they really just withdraw my job offer?** Our contract contains strong job security language, which commits the University to paying your salary once you are offered a GSI position except in very specific cases (see, in particular, Article IX, Section C, 9). The University argues that it can make "conditional appointments," but we don't believe the contract allows it.
- **Don't we need background checks to find sex offenders?** No. Sex offenders already belong to a public registry, so there's no need for a full background check.
- **What can we do to fight this?** GEO is using the grievance procedure in our contract to challenge the new background checks. We've also filed a request for information, to try to find out what motivated the sudden change in policy.

If you're denied a job as a result of a background check, if you encounter any other trouble with the policy, or if you'd like to be involved in our efforts, please don't hesitate to contact us: grrrchair@geo3550.org.