

Comments to Board of Regents  
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Good morning. I'm Bill Peterson, a PhD student at the University of Iowa, a Research Assistant in the Department of Physics and Astronomy, and President of the Campaign to Organize Graduate Students which is affiliated with the United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers of America. Our union represents roughly 2550 graduate teaching and research assistants at the University of Iowa. I would like to thank the Board of Regents for inviting me to speak here today.

We began this academic year with 150 fewer funded graduate students at the University of Iowa. I know that you are considering eliminating more funding lines as well as instituting a Spring tuition surcharge in response to the recent drastic budget cuts. I'm here to urge you as strongly as I can not to take these actions. Both would harm the academic mission of the University more than enough to offset any short-term financial gain.

Teaching assistants play a huge role in education at the University of Iowa. In addition to teaching discussion sections, labs and lectures, they have a great deal of contact with students outside the classroom. Many undergraduates will have more one-on-one time with teaching assistants than with faculty. Teaching assistants also have a unique commitment to the academic integrity of the university, both because they are earning their degrees here and because many of them will likely teach in some capacity after graduation. This commitment would not be shared by employees hired at an hourly rate and without benefits to fill the vacancies in classrooms created by cutting teaching assistantships. Loss of graduate students also degrades the ability of faculty to teach effectively and to perform research, and may cause smaller departments to effectively shut down. Eliminating teaching assistants at the University of Iowa will effectively decrease revenue, both by driving down undergraduate enrollment as the quality of education declines, and by reducing the number of skilled graduates and faculty who are willing to work in such a poor academic climate.

Withdrawing funding lines will make it difficult or impossible for many graduate students to complete their degrees, leading them to seek funding at other institutions or abandon their education entirely. At a time when there is already concern about a "brain drain" out of Iowa and its effect on the financial health of our state, driving educated people away seems an ill-conceived notion.

The majority of undergraduates and graduates across the state are opposed to a tuition surcharge. A \$100 fine is not insignificant to graduate students who make only \$16,575 per year, or to many undergraduates who work to pay for rent and tuition while taking classes full-time. The cost of alienating this many people is not worth the relatively small gain it produces.

Other public universities have managed to find ways to deal with budget problems while avoiding layoffs and tuition hikes. The University of Michigan saved \$135 million from their budget over the past six years with a combination of energy conservation, negotiating better contracts with suppliers and by making changes to employee health care. Ohio made a commitment not to raise tuition for a period of three years, and was able to do so and give state employees a 2.5% payroll increase by using state money. The revenue crisis in Iowa has been caused by tax cuts, including the 10% across-the-board income tax cut in 1998. Crippling cuts to our universities will not solve these problems. Not only will teaching assistant cuts and a midyear tuition hike sacrifice the academic and scholarly mission of the university, they will worsen the university's budget problems by decreasing revenue.

I'm aware that finding other ways of balancing the university's budget will be complicated. It may mean that some disproportionately-paid state employees will have to accept a pay cut. It may mean searching for and eliminating sources of waste. However, as a publicly-funded university, we owe it to the citizens of this state to make a decision that is not merely a short-term fix with dire long-term consequences.