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From: **Provost** <[Provost@columbia.edu](mailto:Provost@columbia.edu)>

Date: Tue, Jan 30, 2018 at 2:34 PM

Subject: Status of student assistants under federal law

To:

Dear fellow members of the Columbia community:

The effort by the United Auto Workers to unionize graduate and undergraduate students who serve as teaching and research assistants elicits strong views in and outside our community for understandable reasons. At stake, from the perspective of those seeking to establish a union, are promises of higher compensation and improved benefits. Others among us are deeply concerned about what it means to have an outside party involved in what are ultimately academic and intellectual judgments by faculty members.

We are announcing today [our decision](#) not to engage in bargaining with union representatives and to seek review of the status of student assistants by a federal appellate court. We recognize the potential, indeed the likelihood, for disappointment and dispute in our community. Needless to say, we have not come to this decision lightly. Because of the principles at stake—principles essential to the University's mission of training scholars—we have declined to bargain until the legal process has been allowed to run its course. We remain convinced that the relationship of graduate students to the faculty that instruct them must not be reduced to ordinary terms of employment. It is a conviction that, in the end, made this admittedly difficult decision straightforward for us. While the National Labor Relations Board's position on student assistants has shifted repeatedly with changes in political administrations, the University's view has remained constant, as has our well-established record of collective bargaining with the several unions that appropriately represent thousands of Columbia employees.

Our concern for these principles and for safeguarding the University's mission exists alongside our acknowledgment of the concerns students have expressed during the period of union organizing. This is why we have been working productively with the Graduate Student Advisory Council, the Engineering Graduate Student Council, and other student government bodies to address stipend and quality of life issues, and why we will continue to do so. Indeed, within a short time, the University will be announcing a series of new enhancements for graduate students.

In past communications to you about unionization, I have said that we are determined to improve the experience of research and teaching assistants at Columbia because we want to continue to attract the very best graduate students in the world. Our current research and teaching assistants belong to that group of world-class students and future scholars. We have made a lasting commitment to your future, want you to thrive intellectually and personally while you are here, and, therefore, are deeply invested in addressing your concerns. I look forward to continuing to work with you—and for you—in pursuit of these goals.

Sincerely,

John H. Coatsworth  
Provost