

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

JOHN H. COATSWORTH
PROVOST

March 1, 2018

Dear representatives of GWC-UAW Local 2110:

The University will not be altering the position set forth in my January 30 letter. Our principled disagreement with you about the employment status of teaching and research assistants is an issue that the NLRB has been unable to resolve conclusively, alternating every few years between the view you espouse and the one we hold. As I have said, this fundamental legal question is one that should be decided by the courts; only that outcome will bring clarity and stability to the operations of universities and colleges in the United States.

Recent decisions to withdraw union organizing efforts at other universities have reduced the likelihood that a broader national resolution of this issue will occur. I therefore want to take this opportunity to be transparent about several facts that, in our view, are incompatible with treating research and teaching assistants as employees.

Graduate students attending Columbia are admitted because of their potential to excel as scholars and teachers. This is not an abstract idea but the essence of what the University is engaged in doing every day. For example, in the event a graduate student's performance is subpar, she would not be fired as may be the case with an employee; instead, the student is provided additional training and tutoring, and every opportunity to raise her standard for successful completion of the research, dissertation, and other academic work necessary for fulfillment of the relevant degree requirements. When those requirements are met, graduation does not mark the end of our relationship with that scholar; rather, faculty invest considerable time and employ their professional relationships to identify positions at another institution, an effort that in commercial settings would be akin to training personnel and then placing the emerging talent with a competing business. In keeping with this reality, graduate student compensation cannot be measured simply by stipend paid and benefits provided—as essential as those are to our students' quality of life—but includes the far larger value, typically in the range of \$50,000 annually, of the full tuition cost of attending Columbia University. In all of these ways, we are training and helping to launch the careers of the next generation of scholars and scientists. The model in place today has allowed us to pursue quite successfully this core mission of the University; a different model may not.

None of this is to say that we are unmindful of the many challenges of being a graduate student in 2018, and particularly in New York City. Pursuant to an earlier commitment, Ph.D. students on our Morningside campus are in the middle of a three-year period during which their stipends are being increased by a minimum of 3 percent annually, a rate of increase exceeding that secured by graduate students represented by unions at other institutions. We have also announced improvements in parental leave and childcare subsidies, and the assumption of service fees for our international students. These will soon be followed by enhancements in other significant areas.

I urge you to consider these points should you remain determined to contemplate a course of action that might result in a strike, a momentous act that would cause incalculable damage to the world class teaching, scholarship, and research that has attracted thousands of students and faculty to Columbia.

Sincerely,



John H. Coatsworth