RECOMMENDATION FROM THE FACULTY ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON ACADEMIC PRIORITIES  
(April 26, 2005)

NYU’s Provost, David McLaughlin, charged the Faculty Advisory Committee on Academic Priorities with providing the University Administration with advice on the issue of NYU’s maintaining or withdrawing recognition of the United Auto Workers in representing graduate assistants.

The Committee framed its discussions in terms of academic mission and goals, asking what is in the best long-term academic interest of the university as a whole and of its graduate programs. Over the past two decades NYU has become one of the leading research and teaching universities in the country, characterized by an impressive flow of faculty and student talent to all of its schools and a corresponding improvement in program quality. The question the Committee posed is whether, with respect to this academic trajectory, it is better to maintain recognition or withdraw recognition of the United Auto Workers, and if the latter, whether there is an alternative arrangement that would better serve the needs of students and the university.

In addressing this question, the Committee began with an overarching assumption: it is of fundamental importance to faculty, departments and programs that NYU be able to attract outstanding graduate students and create conditions in which they can flourish academically while at NYU; that which promotes these elements is to be encouraged, and that which inhibits them discouraged.

The Committee believes that the environment in which this mission is best achieved is one in which faculty across NYU’s diverse departments and schools have the flexibility to tailor programs that are in the best academic interests of their students, and one that also emphasizes the mentoring relationship between faculty and students. Again, that which promotes these elements is to be encouraged, and that which inhibits them discouraged.

The Committee judges there to be compelling reasons for preserving and indeed improving the conditions in the current union contract that deal with stipend levels, health care coverage, sick leave, posting of positions, work loads, and grievance procedures. These conditions are directly related to the university’s ability to attract top graduate students and help ensure their success. The Committee recognizes, moreover, that the process of negotiating a union contract facilitated progress on a number of these matters.

The Committee also observes, however, that a traditional employee/employer relationship should not be at the core of students’ relationship with the university; educational and intellectual matters are. Graduate students make vital contributions to the university in their roles as teaching assistants, graduate assistants, and research assistants, but graduate students should be regarded, first and foremost, as students, apprentice
researchers, and trainees of their faculty mentors rather than employees. Similarly, assistantships should be regarded, first and foremost, as part of their professional training.

The Committee is concerned that the United Auto Workers has filed grievances over issues that have threatened to impede the academic decision-making authority of the faculty over such issues as: the staffing of the undergraduate curriculum; the appropriate measures of academic progress of students; the optimal design of support packages for graduate students; and the conditions and terms of fellowships (as opposed to graduate assistantships). The Committee is also worried by the willingness of the United Auto Workers to take such issues to arbitration and by the nature of the arbitration process, in which an outside arbitrator, who rarely has prior experience with the environment of universities, makes decisions that are legally binding on departments and programs. Although no case involving academic decision making has been decided in the favor of the United Auto Workers, this result was only achieved by a combination of vigilance and good fortune, and there are no assurances that the results will be the same in the future. Had any of the cases been decided differently, the ability of faculty to staff the curriculum and to design and implement programs in accordance with their best academic judgment would have been impaired.

The readiness of the United Auto Workers to grieve issues of academic decision-making and the nature of the arbitration process leads the Committee to conclude that it is too risky to the future academic progress of NYU for it to have graduate assistants represented by a union that has exhibited little sensitivity to academic values and traditions. The Committee therefore recommends that NYU not re-enter into negotiations with the United Auto Workers and that it replace the current contract with more appropriate arrangements for governing its relationship with graduate students and providing them the support and respect they deserve.

The Committee urges the university to formulate a set of basic principles concerning its relationships with graduate students, including principles that commit the university, its schools, its programs, and its faculty to:

1. the highest possible standards of teaching and research;
2. competitive and predictable financial aid, health insurance, and other support to enable students to concentrate on their academic work and flourish at NYU;
3. honest and open discussions in good faith on all matters of common concern and processes that ensure fair resolutions of disputes;
4. opportunities for graduate students, individually and collectively, to have a voice in the educational issues that directly affect them.

A commitment to the above principles will help ensure that the university is able to continue to attract outstanding students and maintain conditions in which they can fulfill their potential. The principles should be applicable to all graduate students at the university, not just those in the departments and schools governed by the current union contract, and should be publicly disseminated. The document articulating these principles should also contain instructions and guidance to schools and departments on
specific matters governed by the current contract (for example, minimum stipend levels for graduate assistants, posting of assistantship positions, etc.) as well as matters of importance to graduate students that cannot be addressed in a union contract governing graduate assistants, either because they concern all graduate students (for example, housing) or because they are not part of wages and benefits (for example, teacher-training programs). Finally, graduate students themselves must be involved in the university and school processes going forward that consider how best to implement the above basic principles and how best to address other matters of graduate student concern.

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