

2025-26

DGSU New Member Guide



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Welcome to DGSU

The Duke Graduate Students Union is dedicated to ensuring that every graduate student has a voice in shaping our work and study conditions. By becoming a member, you will be part of a collective effort that has already led to significant victories at other institutions, including **securing \$42,500** in our first contract. We achieved these successes because of strong membership, and with your support, we can achieve similar outcomes here. In 2025, DGSU members won our first union contract after 19 months of bargaining, securing significant gains in pay, healthcare, protections, and funding stability.

What is a Union?

A union is a group of workers who have come together to secure better working conditions. As a federally recognized labor union, we collectively bargain with Duke for better pay, benefits, and policies that improve the lives of graduate student workers.

Glossary

- **E-Board (Executive Board):** Co-chairs, co-secretary, Treasurer
- **Officers:** All elected positions within the union: Co-chair, co-secretary, Treasurer, solidarity team lead(s), Communications lead(s), Fun team lead(s), Solidarity team lead(s), Contract action team (CAT) lead(s), Steward/Membership Coordinators, Website Commissar, Data Commissar.
- **OC (Organizing Committee):** This is a weekly meeting of the officers and any other members who want to attend.
- **Stewards:** Active members charged with organizing their departments. All should attend OC two times per month.
- **Bargaining team:** Members who are involved in the negotiation with Duke University
- **Bargaining unit:** All PhD students. (The University is still arguing about this, but our goal is everyone enrolled in a PhD!).
- **Union members:** People who signed the union cards.

- **NLRB (National Labor Relations Board):** A federal agency that protects the rights of private-sector workers
- **MAT (Membership Action Team):** The Membership Action Team is dedicated to increasing union membership. Each member pledges to add fifteen new union members by phone banking and lab walking to reach other PhD students.
- **CAT (Contract Action Team):** The Contract Action Team is responsible for coordinating the contract ratification process and ensuring our membership is ready to escalate in case we cannot secure a fair contract.
- **Weingarten rights:** Weingarten rights, established by a 1975 US Supreme Court case, ensure that all members of a union bargaining unit have the right to union representation during investigatory interviews.
- **Grievance:** A grievance is a formal complaint filed by a member of the bargaining unit against their supervisor or general working conditions.
- **SEIU (Service Employees International Union) Workers United Southern Region:** SEIU is our “parent union.” SEIU represents 1.9 million healthcare, public, and property services workers. We pay member dues to SEIU in return for legal representation, staff support, and building a network of connected unions in other workplaces. Workers United Southern Region focuses on union representation and organizing the South. This means that our dues also go towards supporting unionization efforts throughout the region! SEIU helps use their expertise to guide us- but we are collectively in charge of our union!
- **DWA (Durham Workers Assembly):** The Durham Workers Assembly is the local branch of the Southern Workers Assembly (a network of organizations dedicated to building worker power in the South). DGSU partnered with the DWA on their campaign to demand \$25 an hour for city workers. The DWA meets weekly at the People’s Solidarity Hub.

Join Us!

Membership is Necessary to Building Power

- **Having a seat at the table:** Being a union member means having a say in your working conditions.
- **We are stronger together:** When more workers stand together to speak out, our employer listens and takes our demands more seriously. High membership has been key to big wins on other graduate student union contracts, and was essential to wins in our first contract.
- **Right-to-work laws:** North Carolina has right-to-work laws, which are meant to undermine union power. Unlike in other states where workers are automatically members, workers here have to sign up manually.

Membership Benefits

- **Vote on Our Contract:** As a member, you have the right to vote on the contracts that affect your pay, benefits, and working conditions.
- **Have a Voice:** Your membership ensures that you have a say in the decisions that impact our lives as graduate students.
- **Exclusive Discounts:** Enjoy significant savings on services like car rentals and more.

Dues Keep Our Union Strong

In any union, dues allow the Union to sustain itself and continue to fight on behalf of workers. SEIU's Southern Region has some of the lowest dues in the county, which are capped at 1.5% of our salary or \$50/month. The 6.25% raise to \$42.5K we won in our first contract fully covers and exceeds the cost of dues.

join today



dukegradunion.org/member

Union History- How did we get here?

OUR PATH TO RATIFICATION

FALL 2016	Duke grads begin organizing with SEIU! Inconclusive vote following a strong anti-union campaign from Duke Admin.
SPRING 2017 - 2021	Duke grad students union (DGSU) forms as a direct-join, direct-action union to win better funding, working conditions, and healthcare on campus.
SEPTEMBER 15TH, 2022 - MARCH 2023	DGSU launches official card campaign for formal NLRB recognition. In March, we announce a strong majority and request voluntary recognition from Duke (they refuse and launch a legal challenge).
SPRING 2023	In our recognition fight, DGSU launches a "No Dollars for Duke" alumni campaign, have over 250 faculty sign a support letter, picket outside alumni donor events, and gain community support.
JULY 2023	NLRB rules in DGSU's favor and schedules a mail-in election. Duke grads vote overwhelmingly to unionize (88% in favor!)
NOVEMBER 15TH 2023 - JULY 22ND 2025	Over the course of 32 bargaining sessions grounded in member input and organizing, we have reached a tentative agreement on a strong first contract! Historic gains in pay, benefits, rights, and protections.
AUGUST 2025	Let's vote to ratify our first contract!



We built this union together, now let's seal the deal! Vote to ratify our first contract!



What is Ratification?

From August 18th to August 30th, 2025 you will have the chance to help decide whether we approve our first-ever union contract. This process is called ratification. Every graduate worker in the bargaining unit will have the opportunity to vote “yes” or “no” on the tentative agreement reached between our bargaining team and Duke.

If a simple majority votes “yes,” the agreement becomes a legally binding contract that Duke must follow. This means all the raises, protections, and benefits in the agreement will go into effect immediately. If the vote is “no,” we return to the bargaining table to continue negotiations, with no guarantee that we will win more than what is currently on the table.

Ratification is one of the most important moments in our union’s history. It is your chance to directly decide whether to lock in the pay increases, healthcare coverage, protections, and funding guarantees we fought for over nineteen months of bargaining. Your vote will shape the future of graduate work at Duke for years to come. [Click here](#) to see up-to-date voting times and locations and check the status of ratification voting.

How Does DGSU Organize?

What is workplace power?

Power is the *ability to make the changes we need at work*. Persuasion is not power (e.g., asking a dean nicely) because we are still relying on someone else’s goodwill to make a change. It’s always easier for a decision-maker to say no instead of yes, and *worker power is our united ability to make inaction more costly*. We build worker power by connecting with a base of involved coworkers, developing workplace leaders, and making plans to win.

How do we make change?

Once we know what we’re fighting for, we make change by demanding it! We win by identifying decision-makers and demanding a specific change by a specific deadline. We developed an escalation strategy to *make it increasingly harder for them to keep saying “no” instead of “yes” to what workers need*. With a contract, we renegotiate baseline working conditions that union members democratically vote on.

The Union Difference

Issue	Without a Union	With a Union
Stipends	Stipend increases not meeting the rising cost of living in Durham	Historic 11.4% increase in pay in 2023, followed by 6.25% raise in 2025.
Guaranteed Funding	Only 2 years of summer funding are guaranteed	12-months guaranteed for 5 yrs; increased min. funding by >30%
Dental Care	No dental healthcare option is funded	Aetna PPO Dental health care plan
Continuation Fees	\$3,700 per semester for students in 6th year and above (AY 18/19)	\$0 for students in 6th year
Health Insurance Premium Coverage in Years 6+	Not guaranteed after year five	Guaranteed through year 6
Gym Access	Revoked for 4th and 5th years	Reinstated for 4th and 5th years
Stipend Supplementati on	Maximum \$2,000 per section and \$3,000 in a calendar year	Maximum \$3,000 per section and \$5,000 in a calendar year
Childbirth and Adoption	7 weeks for primary caregivers, 1 week for	9 weeks for primary caregivers, 2 weeks for

Period	non-primary caregivers	non-primary caregivers
Parking	No parking at the Chesterfield building	40 parking spots reserved for grad workers at Chesterfield
Additional funds and benefits	Unclear process to apply for childcare supplement and medical and financial hardship funds	Per person: Additional \$500/year for dependent insurance costs, \$535 for visa fee reimbursements, a total of \$10,000 for childcare support, a total of \$12,00 for medical and/or financial hardship, and clear application and eligibility for all.
Advisor Transitions	No common process, no guaranteed funding	Guaranteed 2 months bridge funding to find a new advisor
Protections	None	Just cause for discipline, grievance & arbitration procedure, academic retaliation protections

Summary: Your Contract Rights and Benefits

In August 2025, DGSU members are likely to ratify your first union contract, a legally binding agreement that sets the baseline for our pay, benefits, protections, and working conditions. This contract is the result of nearly two years of organizing and negotiations, and it guarantees rights that we can enforce through a fair grievance process with union representation.

Every PhD worker now benefits from a 6.25% raise to a \$42.5K minimum stipend, with future increases tied to faculty raises. All graduate workers have “just cause” protections, meaning you cannot be disciplined or removed from your appointment without a valid reason and a documented process. Funding is guaranteed year-round for five years, including health insurance through year six.

The contract includes fully paid individual health and dental coverage, up to \$10,000 per year for childcare, \$500 dollars annually to offset dependent insurance costs, and \$535 annually to cover visa-related fees for international students. It establishes \$100,000 per year for the Medical Assistance and Financial Hardship Fund and guarantees two months of bridge funding if you need to change advisors or labs. Clear workload limits protect your time, ensuring that appointment duties cannot exceed 19.9 hours per week and that you are not regularly required to work more than 40 total hours per week on your degree progress.

This contract is more than a list of benefits. It is a foundation we can build on in future bargaining. These rights and resources exist because graduate workers stood together, and they will remain strong as long as we stay organized and ready to enforce them.

How is the Contract Enforced?

Where do I start if I am having an issue at work?

If you think something has happened that might violate our contract, you don't have to decide on your own whether to file a grievance. Your first step should be to reach out to your department steward, who can listen to your situation, explain your options, and connect you to other union members who may have had the same issue. You can also fill out our [workplace issues form](#) if you don't have a steward in your department, or get in touch with either of our steward coordinators. Whether or not you move ahead with a formal grievance, talking to a steward ensures you know your rights and have support from the start.

Filing a grievance

Our contract is a legally binding agreement, and we have clear procedures to make sure Duke follows it. If a graduate worker believes the university has violated the contract, they can file a grievance, a formal complaint that must be addressed through a step-by-step process. This process includes meetings with university representatives and, if needed, a neutral third-party arbitrator whose decision is final and enforceable. Throughout the process, you have the right to union representation to guide you, present evidence, and advocate on your behalf. This system ensures

that the protections and benefits we've won are not just promises, but enforceable rights.

Know Your Rights

Right to Organize

Under the National Labor Relations Act, all employees have the right to join together to improve our working conditions. We can discuss job-related issues such as pay, hours, safety, or unfair treatment with colleagues.

Weingarten Rights

As a unionized graduate worker, you have the right to union representation during any meeting with your supervisor or the university that you reasonably believe could lead to discipline related to your appointment. These protections, known as Weingarten rights, ensure that you are not alone when facing questioning about your work or conduct. If such a meeting is called, you can request that a union representative be present to help you understand the process, advocate for your rights, and ensure the conversation is fair.

Protected Activities

As a union member, you have the right to raise concerns about work-related matters with your supervisor or any other person and advocate for your colleagues. You are free to express support for the union in your workplace, assist in organizing your coworkers, and encourage others to join together to improve working conditions. Additionally, you have the right to file a charge with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) if needed and to choose not to support a union if that is your preference.

Protection from Retaliation

Under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), neither Duke University nor your department can retaliate against you for exercising your rights. This means they cannot dismiss or demote you, reduce your stipend or benefits, or make your academic or work conditions more difficult or unpleasant. Additionally, the university is prohibited from threatening you, questioning you about your union activities, or monitoring your union-related actions.

Who is Protected?

As PhD students, you are protected under the NLRA if you are employed by the university, whether through teaching, research, or other positions. This protection

applies regardless of your field of study, covering students in all disciplines, from humanities and social sciences to STEM fields. **Importantly, you are protected under the NLRA regardless of your immigration status, whether or not you have papers allowing you to work in the U.S. Additionally, joining a union cannot affect the status of your current or future US visas.**

DGSU Structure and Contacts

General Body

The general body consists of all DGSU members. When convened, the general body votes on union actions and policies requiring majority support. The general body has ultimate decision-making power in the union and can delegate decision-making to other bodies within the union.

Department Stewards

Department stewards serve as the primary contact between departments and the union. Stewards communicate with the graduate student body about membership actions, connect interested graduate students with the appropriate working groups, receive concerns about working conditions and pass them on to the appropriate body, and maintain a roster of members in their departments. A department may have multiple stewards. Steward lists are updated at the start of each semester. Find your steward below.

<https://www.dukegradunion.org/union-stewards>

Officers

Officers are elected graduate workers who oversee the operation of the union. Officer roles include co-chairs, co-secretaries, treasurers, steward coordinators, contract action team leads, and data commissars.

Organizing Committee

A group of union members, including officers, department stewards, and any other members who want to attend, who meet weekly to discuss planning and strategic decision-making. To get involved and attend OC, contact your steward or email dukegradunion@gmail.com

Other Committees

Committees are responsible for conducting research and designing campaigns on issues of interest to the general student body. They are also responsible for running the union's day-to-day operations and maintaining the DGSU's mission. Current committees include:

- Solidarity committee
- Fun committee
- International Student Issue Committee
- Comms committee