

Compensation, Student Workers of Columbia

One of Columbia's favorite strategies is to claim that our demands are unreasonable, especially with respect to compensation. Let's explore this claim: how much does it really cost to live in New York?

First, what the union is asking for is \$45,000 annually for workers on 12-month appointments, with 3% raises per year comparable to average inflation. This number is drawn from the [MIT Living Wage calculator](#), which gives a living wage in New York County for a single adult with no children as \$45,285 as of June 2020. In NYC, inflation from June 2020 until the beginning of academic year 2021-2022 was [4.66%](#) (even higher, [6.41%](#), nationally), and adjusting suitably and capping medical expenses at \$3000 gives a living wage for this year of \$47,304, well above what the union is asking for even for workers on 12-month appointments. For workers on 9-month appointments—who are still expected to make academic progress over the summer—we are asking for \$35,500 annually and \$6,500 summer stipend, even further below a living wage.

But Columbia doesn't accept the numbers from the living wage calculator, and has repeatedly sent their millionaire lawyer to explain to us why actually living in NYC is easy and we must just be bad at it. So okay, let's not use these numbers: **let's use the numbers that Columbia itself provides.**

Let's start with workers on 9-month appointments, since Columbia usefully [lists](#) its estimates for "living expenses based upon reasonable expenditures over the nine-month 2021-2022 academic year" (archived [here](#) in case Columbia changes this page). These include room and board (\$22,284), personal expenses (\$5,400), books and supplies (\$2,000), and transportation (\$1,143). This does not include "additional expenses that are not covered by the standard cost of attendance, such as the purchase of a computer, medical expenses not covered by insurance, conference expenses, etc."; let's ignore all such expenses except out-of-pocket medical expenses, which Columbia claimed this past spring averaged \$500 per year per student. If we prorate this expense for the academic year, Columbia estimates out-of-pocket medical expenses to be \$375 for a total of \$31,202 for living expenses during the 9-month academic year.

All this is expenses before taxes: although graduate students on 9-month appointments, at least in GSAS, are paid close to this amount already, their effective pay is much lower, so the next question is: what salary would workers need in order to earn \$31,202 *after* taxes?

Columbia estimated taxes on the current 12-month salary of \$41,520 to be \$6,545, or 15.76%. This is much lower than the MIT Living Wage calculator's estimate, but since the pre-tax income necessary to earn \$31,202 after tax will be lower than \$41,520 let's take 15.76% uniformly as a generous compromise. This means that **in order to earn \$31,202 after taxes workers would need to be paid \$37,041 for the 9-month period**. Note that this—Columbia's own estimate of a subsistence wage for nine months—is already substantially higher than the estimate used for the union's proposal.

We have to live during the summer too, despite Columbia's apparent belief to the contrary (the current summer stipend, \$4,000, barely even covers average Columbia Housing rent in apartment shares with 2 to 3 roommates, and is often insufficient even for that). It's at least plausible that no additional books and supplies are needed over the summer, so let's leave that cost at \$2,000; all other expenses scale uniformly to the 12-month setting to give total living expenses of \$40,936. Using the same tax rate implies that **in order to earn \$40,936 after taxes, which precisely covers living expenses with no savings, workers would need to earn \$48,595 for the year 2021-2022**, well above the union's proposals. (Note that this is actually *higher* than the MIT Living Wage calculator's estimate, likely because of a number of expenses graduate students have that the calculator does not take into account: these include e.g. the \$2,000 estimated for books and supplies, as well as various fees Columbia charges us which may be included in "personal expenses.")

These estimates only cover single workers with no children. For parents with just one child, Columbia estimates an additional cost of \$4,770 for the nine-month academic year (the MIT Living Wage calculator estimates that child care for one child costs \$10,067 annually). Taking Columbia's number, this raises living expenses for nine months to \$35,972, necessitating a pre-tax income of \$42,704 for the nine-month period alone; in particular, after accounting for taxes, an additional expense of \$4,770 requires an increase in pre-tax income of \$5,663. Extending this to twelve months, this means that parents need an increase in pre-tax compensation of \$7,551 in order to cover Columbia's own estimate of the cost of childcare. The union's current proposal is \$6,000; Columbia's proposal is \$4,000.

Finally, note that these estimates from Columbia for the 2021-2022 academic year were made this past summer (in fact, some time between June 17 and July 30, as per the [Wayback Machine](#)). From August to October alone, inflation in NYC was [0.87%](#) ([1.10%](#) nationally), so even accepting Columbia's own estimates we should expect true costs to be even higher.

But, you may ask, that's all well and good, but where is the money supposed to come from?

Columbia made [\\$3.1 billion](#) in returns on its investments this past year alone. For all its claims that it can't afford to pay us a living wage, around 3% of its *increase* in net assets from investments alone just this year would be enough to pay for the full three-year cost of our proposal. Separately, Columbia had a [\\$151 million](#) surplus in its operating budget this year, on top of all the gains from its endowment, which would again be more than enough to pay for the full three-year cost. Columbia can afford our demands, but they would rather use their power over us to keep us working for [the lowest wages, compared to cost of living, of peer institutions](#).

Columbia has decided to withhold both student worker stipends and salary even as we continue with our academic responsibilities while withholding our labor on strike. This comes after we filed an [Unfair Labor Practice \(ULP\) charge](#) with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) against Columbia for freezing our pay for this academic year at last year's levels in the face of a national 31-year high in year-over-year inflation ([6.22%](#)). We are now taking further legal action against Columbia by filing a [second ULP charge](#) with the NLRB for unilaterally changing our stipend disbursement schedule to make student workers even more financially precarious. Student workers on appointment are losing between \$806 and \$973 per week while on strike for a fair contract. Donate [here](#) to help us pay for food, housing, and medical expenses that we now cannot afford.

Our demands are not unreasonable. We are asking for the bare minimum. Please join us in demanding Columbia provide its student workers with a living wage now.

More On Inflation:

Over the 12-month period covering August 2020-August 2021, [inflation was 3.7ppt](#) in the New York-Newark-New Jersey metropolitan area. Yet this last spring, Columbia was offering us a 3ppt increase in compensation, arguing that it could not afford more.

Needless to say, Columbia University does not play by the rules of CPI inflation. It has a professionally managed \$11b endowment, for which returns can reach [double-digit rates](#).

After the rejection of the contract in the spring, Columbia illegally froze compensation levels for all our members. Yet, at the same time Columbia Housing was increasing rent by 1.5% for the

upcoming year - following a freeze of rental prices in the year 2019-2020, the year where rent prices dropped [on average by 15.5 ppt](#) in Manhattan.

In the follow-up of this increase in rental prices, Columbia unilaterally decided to restructure stipend disbursement schedules for its student workers on appointment. This August, the administration announced that students would start the year with a [stipend lump-sum payment \\$8k less](#) than the previous years, the rest being disbursed semimonthly along the semester.

Our workers are already paid below living-wage. With this restructuring, Columbia is further pushing them into debt - and is now even offering loans for students who would need anticipated stipend payments in order to pay rent or cover healthcare expenses.

**Columbia's disregard for our living conditions cannot go on any longer.
Columbia University cannot simultaneously be our employer, our landlord and our
creditor.**

We need a living wage for every student worker at Columbia. This is why we are asking for increases in annual compensation that meet the cost of living in New York City¹, accounting for both membership dues or fair share fees, and annual cost of living adjustments.

We need to ease the financial burden of raising children in New York City. This is why we are asking for an increase in childcare subsidies, stop-the-clock funding extensions and long term parental leaves of absence.

We need adequate funding extensions to match time lost in research due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This is why we are asking for clear criteria giving rights to funding extensions for all PhD students who might need one.

We estimate that the entirety of our demands - including healthcare-related ones - would only increase Columbia's current budget dedicated to our membership by 7.2ppt. By comparison, Columbia's endowment increased by 8ppt on average over the past 4 years, now totaling over 11 billion. Our proposed approximately \$20 million increase would not even constitute a fraction of a percent of Columbia's endowment.

¹ We ask for a \$45k compensation level for student workers on 12m appointments. The [MIT living wage estimator](#) indicates a (pre-2021 inflation) \$45,285 living wage for New York City.

Our demands are more than fair, and more than reasonable. Much more, they are crucial if we want student workers to have decent living conditions - while living in one of the most expensive cities in the world, working for the most well paid university president in the country, and one of its richest universities.

Our current asks:

Payroll Compensation:

- \$45k for 12m appointments, \$35.5k for 9m appointments + Pay Parity conditional on the length of appointment (12m or 9m) - across all programs and schools,
- Yearly increases of 3% in the second and third year of the contract,
- Hourly rates: \$26 for hourly workers — annual increase by \$1.5
- Those above these minimum rates (post-increase) get a 3% increase

Summer stipends:

- 6,5k for summer 2021 for all PhD workers on a 9m or 10m stipend (extending summer stipends to students past year 5, and to programs currently not getting a summer stipend while being on a 9m appointment like Social Work)
- Yearly increase by 3% in the second, and in the third year of the contract

Funding extensions :

- Specific criteria giving right to a funding extension - specifically for:
 - those who were prevented from having access to research collections or sites, including lab spaces;
 - those who were forced to depart from research locations;
 - those who were sick with COVID-19 resulting in research interruption;
 - those who were primary caretakers for an immediate family member.
- Possibility to appeal if extension request is refused.

Childcare:

- increase in childcare subsidy, beyond the 4k obtained in February,
- funding extensions for parents giving birth during the course of the program, and taking their parental leave,
- extended leave of absence

Fee and Tuition Waivers:

- All fees and tuition waived (including Matriculation and Facility charges) with the exception of the student activity fee - for all doctoral students in years 1 through 7.

Evolution of our proposals:

The history of our bargaining positions on economic items can be accessed here:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1-LOa-cfTxMhbrReWuV8IPBfH3EIMKk-u9DdLfoZzM68/edit#gid=0>

State of last proposals presented in bargaining - pre-mediation

Total compensation (March 25th)

- \$42,766 for 12m, \$32,074 for 9m
- Public Health Biostatistics, Epidemiology, Sociomedical Sciences on 12m get \$38,667, Social Work gets \$29,000. Get to parity in 2022/2023.
- Yearly increases of 4% second year, 5% third year.
- Hourly rates: \$20 for undergraduate workers, \$25 for graduate workers — annual increase by \$1
- Those above these minimum rates (post-increase) get a 3% increase

Summer stipends (March 30th):

- 5.5k for summer 2021 for all PhD workers on a 9m stipend (extending summer stipends to students past year 5, and to programs currently not getting a summer stipend while being on a 9m appointment like Social Work)
- Yearly increase by 4% in second, then 5% in third year

Funding extensions (March 25th):

- Asking for a joint financial effort - across department - to finance funding extensions
- « To support such students, the **University shall provide an option for PhD students enrolled in PhD programs in the 2020 calendar year to apply for an additional year of funding at the full [Bargaining Unit Employee] total support rate.** The University strongly encourages all schools with PhD programs

to identify such students. The University will **work in a joint effort with individual schools to provide resources** that will allow these PhD students to pick up the thread of their research agenda as soon as it is practicable.”

Childcare (February 24th):

- 4k subsidy per child under 5yo, per parent registered as a PhD student

Proposal as of the MOA - CU agreed to it (April 12)

Total compensation

- \$42,350 for 12m, \$31,763 for 9m
- Mailman School of Public Health - \$41,520 for 12m — Social Work - \$29,000 for 9m — both get to general minimum levels in 2022-2023
- Signing Bonus: Lump-sum of 1% of total semester compensation - for PhD students - if on appointment in Fall 2021, Spring 2022 or Summer 2022 ,
- Yearly increases: August 2022, minimum level of support will increase by 3% - same in August 2023
- Non-PhD appointments: undergraduate students, master students, non-PhD doctoral students and who hold an appointment as Teaching Assistant, Teaching Fellow, Preceptor, Reader, Teaching Assistant III, Graduate Research Assistant, Department Research Assistant increase by no less than 5% or \$100, then 3% in 2022, 2023;

Hourly rates:

- 17\$ in 2021,
- 18,5\$ in 2022,
- 20\$ in 2023

Summer stipend:

- Amount of 4k this summer 2021 + covid 1k (1k covid available for people in 6th and 7th year if they used to be on a 9m appointment)
- Increasing to 4,5k summer 2022, 4,750 summer 2023, and 5k summer 2024

Childcare:

- 4k subsidy per child under 5yo, per parent registered as a PhD student

Funding Extensions:

- Stated intention to help