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KU Graduate Teacher Union Responds to Harmful KU Emergency Response Plan

Lawrence, KS — In a letter to University of Kansas Provost Bichelmeyer, the Graduate Teaching Assistants Coalition, a labor union of over a thousand GTAs, expressed serious concerns over the illegal and harmful mandates in KU's COVID-19 emergency response plan. The letter outlined the rights of union workers under Kansas state law and expressed disappointment with rights violations by past administrations.

Union President Neill Kennedy expressed hope that Provost Bichelmeyer will guide KU back into line with the fair and equitable labor practices mandated by Kansas state law and discussed frankly a sharp increase in GTAs reporting escalating mental health conditions to their union, including suicidal depression, as well as reports of increased anxiety and decreased quality of work from their students.

The letter stated that some departments have guided graduate teachers in lightening student workloads and grading standards, as well as introducing “no-fail” policies. These changes leave GTAC questioning the required continuance of all courses, rather than only those necessary. As more GTAs are forced to use their paid leave benefits under the GTAC-negotiated contract and the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, GTAC wonders how long this can continue.

Statement from GTAC President Neill Kennedy (she/her):

“The first question teachers ask us is, “What will happen to our students?”. Even in a pandemic, KU graduate teachers’ top priorities are the health and well-being of our students. KU’s own research shows that GTAs regularly suffer with depression and anxiety, as well as food and housing insecurity, and this crisis has elevated those conditions. KU’s directives force teachers to sacrifice what little is left of their health – and then some. Right now, every GTA has the choice to continue teaching or to take paid leave for the rest of the semester, and GTAC will continue to support teachers in accessing their paid leave to care for their health and families. But only KU can say what will happen to those classes.”

Kennedy emphasized hope and openness to discussions with the new administration, citing lack of a living wage for graduate teachers and poor planning as factors in the failure of KU’s emergency response plan.

“KU’s historical refusal to agree to pay a living wage or allow access to adequate healthcare is a daily crisis for our graduate teachers, who make up half of KU’s teaching workforce. When teachers are already stretched so far, it limits how much more we can do for our students and community during a real crisis. It’s really unfortunate because KU’s teachers and students are the ones being hurt by this lack of planning from former KU administrators.” said Kennedy. “But the appointment of a new Provost could change everything. We believe that GTAs and KU can do better together, and GTAC is looking forward to sharing our extensive experience with the Provost and her administration.”

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