

Educating and Lobbying for Tuition Protection at Local Pub
Press Release - For Immediate Release
CUPE 2278

On Thursday January 20th, 2011 the University of British Columbia's *Graduate Student Society (GSS)* and the Teaching Assistant Union at UBC, *CUPE Local 2278*, hosted a Tuition Protection Panel event marking the beginning of a joint campaign between the GSS and the Union. The purpose of the event was to educate GSS Constituents / Local 2278 Union Members (whose membership significantly overlaps) on recent trends in tuition increases and how this increase is influencing the living conditions and academic progress of graduate students on the UBC campus.

The event took place at Koerner's Pub on a slushy, snowy day. In spite of the weather over 100 people were in attendance. Sitting on the panel were Brian Sullivan (UBC Vice President of Students), Arvind Saraswat (GSS President), and Geraldina Polanco (CUPE 2278 President). The tuition protection panel was held to increase awareness on the negative consequences that rising tuition has on the wellbeing of Undergraduate Students / Graduate Students / Teaching Assistants and the relationship between tuition and the allocation of public funds. The objective was to create space for discussing the link between rising tuition costs and graduate completion times, graduate financial support as well as graduate student wages. This was contrasted to a comparable University and employment worksite (the University of Toronto), which has secured protection for graduate students against tuition increases and rises in fees through collective bargaining.

A substantial proportion of graduate students constitute the workforce that the University relies on to support the teaching of undergraduates on the campus. Since being a student is a requirement for being employed as a Teaching Assistant at UBC, a rise in tuition is equivalent to a loss in wages. This sheds light on the direct overlap between the working conditions of Undergraduate and Graduate Teaching Assistants at UBC and the learning environment of undergraduate students on UBC's campus.

When Brian Sullivan polled the room the majority of the students identified themselves as both Teaching Assistants and Graduate Students, demonstrating the overlapping concerns regarding rising tuition and learning / working conditions at UBC. As Brian Sullivan explained, a lack of provincial funding raises challenges for all parties, an area where both administration and student / employee groups would like to see change. Sullivan's insights are especially informative in this regard as he is uniquely positioned to comment on the provincial / university relationship; his job title is Senior Vice President Students, and he is responsible for managing the relationship between the University and the students of UBC (both undergraduate and graduate).

Part of the problem is the lack of consistency between policy and practice. Brian Sullivan expressed his embarrassment over the length of time required for PhD students to complete their programs. The length of time someone takes to complete a degree is strongly correlated with the monetary support they receive, support that is chronically eroded by increases in tuition. Sullivan expressed the University Administration's desire to push harder for 4-year completion rates in particular because it would like to see increases in international student enrollment. Geraldina

Polanco expressed concern regarding International Students who are an especially vulnerable sector of UBC's Graduate Student Body / Graduate Student Employees as there is currently no cap on the amount tuition can increase for International Students (in contrast to the current 2% cap for domestic students). They are therefore especially vulnerable to increases in tuition. This must be directly addressed both by lobbying efforts on the part of the GSS and through Collective Bargaining by CUPE 2278.

According to Geraldina Polanco the average completion time for PhD students in Canada's major research universities is 6.5 years. This reveals a serious disconnect between the policies and funding advocated by the University and the reality of what it takes to complete degrees in Graduate Programs across the country. One Anthropology student came forward, explaining her frustration that her program is designed around a year to be spent in the field. This in effect makes Anthropology PhD programs 5 years by design. Yet there is no consideration given to the design of many PhD programs to extend over 4 years and the actual funding provided by the University.

Arvind Saraswat spoke passionately about a need for a greater sense of fairness in light of the lack of protection against rising tuition and costs of living. Geraldina Polanco closed by saying that many great scholars-in-training might turn away from UBC because it does not protect against tuition hikes or offer adequate Graduate Student support, deterring prospective students from choosing UBC over other major Canadian Universities.

All parties would like to express their gratitude to the Graduate Student Society, the President's Office, CUPE 2278, and to all the students who attended and shared their experiences and struggles. This event is the first in a series of upcoming events that seeks to increase the sharing of information in order to organize and educate UBC Students / Employees.

**For more information, see <http://www.cupe2278.ca>
or contact us at cupe2278@interchange.ubc.ca**