To Chancellor Christ,

We, the graduate students in the Rhetoric Department at UC Berkeley, stand unequivocally in support of the striking and now-terminated graduate student workers at UC Santa Cruz.

Last November, graduate students at UCSC went on strike to demand a cost of living adjustment (COLA). This demand emerged out of the severe rent burden in Santa Cruz. The call for COLA aims to mitigate the overwhelming and widespread financial hardship that graduate student workers face. Rather than meet workers at the bargaining table, the UC has consistently chosen tactics of retaliation and escalation. We condemn the UC’s firing of 54 graduate student workers to date, and explicit refusal to assign future teaching positions to an additional 28 for their participation in the strike. Among those terminated include international students who now face risk of deportation. Moreover, we are deeply disturbed by the university’s use of militant tactics, including deploying riot police and arresting students. The UC’s inhumane response and refusal to meaningfully address worker demands have mobilized graduate and undergraduate students, staff, and faculty at every campus. The UC-statewide campus shutdown on March 5 is a testament to these growing efforts. The struggles faced by our colleagues at UCSC are shared by all of us, and point to an underlying crisis across the UC system.

Indeed, as graduate students at UC Berkeley, we acutely experience these conditions. Living in the Bay Area we know the insecurity of surviving on a graduate student wage in one of the most expensive housing markets in the United States. The UC Berkeley Financial Aid and Scholarships Office estimates the academic year cost of living for a
graduate student to be $25,170, which exceeds a Rhetoric GSI-1’s academic year take-home pay by $6,000. Moreover, the university’s estimated figure only includes housing, food, and transportation, and does not account for additional personal and medical expenses. This gap between income and cost of living further widens for graduate student workers with dependents, international student status, and low-income backgrounds.

This fall, the Department of Rhetoric underwent a comprehensive external review. Presaging the concerns at the heart of the strike, the report by the External Review Committee concluded that, “It is imperative that the University move to urgently provide financial packages commensurate with students’ actual costs of living, and to integrate cost of living increases over time.” It warned, “the Department’s research excellence is threatened by the inadequate levels of graduate student funding.”

This critical disparity between graduate student workers’ wages and cost of living profoundly affects our well-being, the quality of our research, and the teaching and mentoring of our undergraduate students. In its failure to support its workers, the UC system can make no claim to institutional excellence. COLA is essential to the cultivation of a sustainable learning environment and academic community where all UC members may flourish. We echo the demands of the COLA movement for the reinstatement of UCSC graduate students, for the UC administration to drop its charges against UAW 2865, for the demilitarization of its campus police force state-wide, and for the elimination of single-semester lecturer appointments. We are thankful for the steadfast efforts of graduate student workers at UCSC and across the UC system. We stand in solidarity with them and unanimously declare ourselves to be strike-ready.

Signed,
The UC Berkeley Rhetoric Graduate Students