February 21, 2020

Dear faculty, staff, and fellow grads,

Today Greg invited me to attend a small meeting of grad students and department chairs (or proxies) proposed by Lori Kletzer and Quentin Williams. EEB, Astronomy, HVAC, History, Computational Media, and Psychology were also represented. This took place at 4pm, shortly before the 4:30 General Assembly for grads, and was presented as was a chance to share information and ideas. My fellow grads permitted me to represent them and Karen joined as Greg was unavailable. Karen can offer her own reflection, but here is what I found important:

Lori acknowledged that there have been numerous cases of poor messaging during the grad student strike, e.g., in relation to the offers in Chancellor Larive’s Jan. 27th email as well as the warning letters that were released Feb. 14th. It was acknowledged that unclear communications have contributed to a severe lack of trust on all sides.

I took the opportunity, along with other grads in the meeting, to emphasize that the threat of retracting spring appointments has escalated things drastically. Many grads who are withholding grades see little if any incentive to submit them tonight, despite the known consequences. All signs suggest there will be few submissions this evening, that mass firing of TAs will spark escalation both at UCSC and around the UC system, and that this action will make dialogue harder going forward. Concerns were shared about the specific impact of mass firings on international students, who will face de facto deportation, and on departments that will see a huge loss of TAs, not to mention the struggles of all grads faced with this threat.

Faculty and grads alike proposed (repeatedly) several immediate steps, including extending the grade submission deadline to allow clarification on points of confusion and enable continuation of today’s conversation, perhaps in a format that allows representation of all departments. Lori and Quentin were also pressed to put forward, in writing, tonight, a good faith offer on the subject of retaliation in exchange for fall grades.

I left this meeting incredibly discouraged by Lori and Quentin’s unwillingness to commit to any actions. I tried my best to communicate that the midnight deadline presents a massive escalation and could have life-changing impacts on many graduate students. At the time of writing, I have seen no communication from the administration. This experience helped firm up my own decision.

I will not be submitting the grades that I’m withholding tonight, and I am prepared to lose my spring appointment as a result. I think it’s important that you understand my reasons, which are shared by many others:

1. Not all graduate students have the privilege to hold their ground in the face of this threat. I am a white, upper-middle class graduate student with the means to support myself next quarter,
with family who can help me financially, and with little fear of how this action will impact my future employability. Graduate school should not be an option available only to people like me, and I feel a responsibility, as a person of privilege, to take this risk on behalf of those who can't.

2. My undergraduate students support me. I have submitted grades for every student who has asked, and for those for whom Financial Aid has requested grades. I have had open discussions with my students, anonymously polled them, received emails from them asking me to continue withholding their grades, and received hugs from them at the picket line. They know this fight is about them, too.

3. This is about something bigger than me. I was drawn to the UC and UCSC in particular for its commitment to excellence in research and to social justice, both of which are threatened through the administration's proposed actions. If we can't take steps to make graduate education more accessible here at UCSC, what hope is there for making the rest of the UC system and US graduate education more inclusive?

I want to end by sending love and appreciation to my fellow grads tonight, because it has been a week of exceptional emotional upheaval as so many of us grapple with a decision we should not be asked to make.

In conclusion, #firemejanet.

Rachel

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Rachel Voss
Ph.D. Candidate, Environmental Studies, University of California, Santa Cruz
Rent Burden: 74% (what's this?)