OU grad student prez: Union push needed

By Larry Di Giovanni Special to The Messenger  Sep 2, 2015

The president of Ohio University’s Graduate Student Senate, Carl Edward Smith III, informed peers during an Aug. 20 Graduate Student Orientation that they should unionize to receive higher annual stipends and health insurance subsidies. Doing so will put them on equal footing with “peer universities,” he said.

OU graduate student employees include about 1,700 graduate assistants and teaching assistants, or “GAs and TAs.” Their median annual stipend is $9,000, compared to $15,000 annual stipends given to “peer universities” that are similar to Ohio University in size and programs, Smith said.

Following his Aug. 20 morning plenary session presentation — and afternoon presentations describing graduate student senate plans for an “Ohio University GA and TA Organizing Committee” — Smith did not return subsequent emails and calls requesting further clarification for “peer universities.”

University Communications and Marketing replied Monday via email to questions posed by The Messenger, including a response to Smith’s contention that OU’s median GA and TA stipends are well below peer institutions.

“Awards vary and waiver amounts can be set by programs, but the vast majority of students on a minimum stipend receive a tuition waiver and, if necessary, a waiver of the non-resident surcharge,” said Katie Quaranta, OU spokeswoman.

A flier handed to graduate students during the orientation’s afternoon sessions does specify peer institutions on the subject of healthcare subsidies. According to Smith and the flier, Ohio University provides its graduate employees with a $40 health insurance subsidy each semester. That is far below OU’s peer institutions, which reportedly offer an average annual subsidy of $1,500 per academic year. The peer universities cited are West
Virginia University, with a $1,448 per year health subsidy; Colorado State University, $1,165; Oklahoma State University, $1,422; Oregon State University, $2,000; University of Missouri, $3,049; University of Rhode Island, $1,636; University of Utah, $1,901; and Iowa State University, $1,434.

“All statistics on this flier were taken from the results of a Graduate Student Senate survey from the 2014-15 school year,” the flier states.

Ohio University’s cost for health insurance this academic year is $867 per semester, or $1,734 per year.

Graduate and undergraduate students at Ohio University must accept OU's provided health insurance unless they have their own health coverage. Quaranta said graduate student employees receive the $40 per semester health subsidy regardless of whether they accept university-provided health insurance.

According to the online website Campus Reform, University of Missouri graduate student employees were informed Aug. 14 that they would lose their health insurance subsidies because the Affordable Care Act prohibits businesses from providing subsidies specifically for purchasing health care from individual market plans. Missouri doctoral student Mike Horton replied through Twitter that “The obvious response is for grad students to unionize.”

One other issue Smith emphasized is that Ohio University GAs and TAs can lose their status if they miss time due to extended injury or illness. That needs to change with real workplace protections, he said, adding that universities with graduate students who have unionized fare better on negotiating such issues with administration. Quaranta did not respond to a question on the extended medical leave issue.

Smith also said that the Graduate Student Senate’s positon is that Ohio University has the budgetary capacity to bring OU in line with peer universities on stipends, health insurance subsidies, and extended medical leave.
“At Ohio University, there are more students on a graduate assistantship performing basic teaching, research, or administrative support than there are faculty, administrators, or classified staff employees,” Smith states in the flier. “Hands down we are the biggest and most underrepresented labor force in this university. Unionizing has become a ‘no-brainer’ for us.”

jhiggins@athensmessenger.com; Twitter @joehmessenger