

## **Student Priorities: Compiled by the English Students Association**

During our most recent English Students Association (ESA) meeting, those present established the following as our main concerns:

- Program Diversity
- Faculty Membership and Attrition
- Labor Conditions
- Departmental Culture

### **Program Diversity**

Addressing concerns about program diversity has been central to the ESA's work this academic year. According to institutional data available through the Graduate Center's website, 63 percent of the GC's student body is white while 77 percent of the English program's student body is white. Meanwhile, across CUNY, the student body is only about 23 percent white. Moving forward, students hope to begin a conversation around the significant issues of diversity that exist within our program and across the university. How, in short, do such disparities influence our work as educators, writers, and researchers, especially in light of CUNY's historic mission to educate "the whole people," not just "the privileged few," and the Graduate Center's mission to "enhance access to doctoral education for traditionally underrepresented groups"? Additionally, students have proposed adding to our program application a Personal History and Diversity Statement similar to that of the University of California system. We believe the addition of such a document will allow prospective students the agency to self-identify outside of the dehumanizing practice of checking boxes. Furthermore, such a document would allow students to discuss fully those identities and experiences that may be overlooked by our current application, including economic status and disability.

### **Faculty Membership and Attrition**

Students desire a clear vision regarding how the English program is working to prevent needless faculty attrition and how it plans to fill all or some of those faculty positions that have been left vacant. Over the last four years, we have lost sixteen faculty members. Of those sixteen lost, ten of them were lost, for varying reasons, over the last two years. Issues of faculty attrition are of the utmost concern to students as faculty appointments and retention directly influence both students' timely progress to degree and the program's wider reputation.

### **Labor Conditions**

In a survey in which about 600 PhD students at the GC participated, the top priorities for improving student life were: (1) a minimum of \$7k per course for all adjunct instructors; (2) extension of tuition remission for PhD students beyond 5 years; (3) a path for part-time faculty to become full-time faculty and for GAs to get lecturer lines at CUNY after graduation; (4) a universal standard for fair and full funding for all PhD students across departments. As the survey shows, there is a wide concern to improve the stability and security of our lives both as students and teachers, and a wide recognition of the institutional failings that make our lives more difficult and precarious.

For example, this year, in the transition to CUNYfirst, many students received their stipend two months late. There was also a sudden restructuring of the WAC (writing across the curriculum) program which mandates twice as many hours of work for the same pay. Both of these examples especially affected international students, who must follow restrictive work requirements; and demonstrate the kinds of barriers to entry that the school imposes, despite its claims of diverse accessibility, to students without the money or resources to sustain themselves through the routine failures of CUNY's opaque bureaucracy that make all our lives less secure.

The survey also shows the institutional concern PhD students have about our participation in a revolving, contingent labor force of part-time teachers exploited through unprofessional and unethical practices. Besides the larger structural changes to all universities we need to escape the threat adjunctification poses to all our careers, there are specific challenges of teaching at CUNY as a graduate employee. The arbitrary process by which students are assigned to campuses—at which teaching requirements, class sizes, and instructional support all wildly vary—across New York is another instance where the fairness and regularity of experience for students in the same department can be greatly improved.

### **Departmental Culture**

Concerns have been raised about the kind of interpersonal environment fostered within the program, specifically in the context of administrative matters. As a student organization, any actions that dissuade students from seeking the administrative resources they need and/or participating in the life of the program are of significant concern. Moving forward, we are wondering how to address this issue in such a way that prevents further conflict and creates stronger community among students, faculty, and administrators.