

THE VICE PROVOSTS WANT YOU TO BE A STRIKEBREAKER: BREAKING DOWN AN ANTI-UNION MEMO

A GUIDE FOR FACULTY, BY FACULTY FROM PENN'S CHAPTER OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

Colleagues, did you know that the Penn administration has been fighting graduate research and teaching assistants in contract negotiations for a year? Graduate workers in [GETUP-UAW](#) are bargaining for essential protections against discrimination, support for international workers, and fair compensation—all of which would make Penn a better place to research, teach, and learn. But instead of bargaining in good faith as required by law, the Penn administration has hired the anti-union law firm Cozen O'Connor to run an anti-union campaign, stonewalled at the bargaining table, and is now asking faculty members to prepare to serve as strikebreakers if graduate workers vote to strike.

Below on the right you can read the reproduced text of a memo that the Vice Provosts for Education wrote in September 2025, asking chairs and graduate chairs to recruit you to be a strikebreaker. In the notes on the left, you'll see our analysis. **In asking you to break a strike, the administration is asking you to compromise your integrity, your relationships with graduate workers and colleagues, the quality of your students' education, and your ability to recruit graduate students for years to come. Don't do it.**



Office of the Vice Provosts for Education

Maintaining teaching continuity – guidance for Department and Graduate Group chairs

Anti-union literature relies on euphemisms that sound benign. When the Vice Provosts instruct you to “maintain teaching continuity,” they are asking you to be a strikebreaker.

It is wrong to suggest that strikebreaking will help your students. Graduate workers' working conditions are students' learning conditions, and GETUP is bargaining for equitable conditions that will make Penn a better place to learn. The administration can ensure that students learn without interruption by settling a fair contract.

This document is intended to help Penn department and Graduate Group chairs plan for maintaining teaching continuity in the event of a work stoppage or other forms of disruptions to teaching. In this context, teaching continuity ensures that students enrolled in courses continue to receive instruction in those courses and make progress in their academic programs. This document is only preparatory in nature, and the guidance provided may change over time.

1. Know who is teaching each term

By the start of the academic term, the following information must be entered into University systems for every rostered course:

- the instructor of record
- all individuals who lead required course components (recitations and lab sections, for instance)
- every individual who serves as a grader or learning assistant.

This information will help department and School leaders determine which courses are potentially impacted by a teaching disruption and is therefore essential for maintaining teaching continuity.

This information must be readily accessible to University leadership in the event of a teaching disruption.

2. Have a back-up plan

Department chairs and School leaders should have a back-up plan in case the instructor of record is unable to continue or complete the instruction for a course. This plan should include identifying an individual with appropriate expertise and qualifications who will assume the instructor of record responsibilities for the course for the remainder of the disruption.

The first choice should be an internal resource – either faculty or staff. Enrolled graduate students who are not members of the bargaining unit should not be engaged to provide teaching coverage.

Similarly, department chairs and School leaders should have a back-up plan in case the leaders of required course components (recitations and labs, for instance) are not able to perform their duties. The first choice should be that the faculty member who is the instructor of record for the course cover recitation sections and/or labs. The instructor of record may consider whether recitation sections or labs can be consolidated.

Here, the Vice Provosts are asking chairs and deans to recruit faculty to serve as strikebreakers by teaching the classes of striking instructors. You can and should say no. Chairs and deans should also say no.

The reason they don't want graduate students who are not in the bargaining unit to serve as strikebreakers is that, by taking on teaching duties, they might become eligible to join the union. Penn spent decades fighting to prevent graduate workers from voting to unionize at all, and is still working to keep some from becoming members.

If you are teaching a class with a TA, the Vice Provosts want you to do their work if they go on strike. That's strikebreaking, and you should say no. They are not acting out of concern for students' education: they say that strikebreakers can increase class size, meaning students will get less attention, feedback, and opportunity for participation. The administration should settle a fair contract so that students can get the education they deserve.

If you are teaching a class with a grader, the Vice Provosts want you to do their work if they vote to strike. Again, that's strikebreaking. And again, they are willing to sacrifice students' education: strikebreakers can cut back on assessment, meaning that students may receive less feedback and learn less. Don't do it.

If course graders are not able to perform their duties, the instructor of record should grade student assessments or identify an alternative solution to student assessment during a teaching disruption.

FAQ

Can we hire additional course graders or recitation leaders?

In the event that the leaders of required course components (recitations, labs, etc.) and/or course graders are not able to perform their duties, the instructor of record for the course should deliver the required course components and should grade student assessments throughout the teaching disruption. Department chairs and graduate group chairs should not expect to hire additional recitation leaders, lab leaders, or course graders.

The Vice Provosts are clear: if two TAs in your lecture class go on strike, they want you to do the work of three people. The students lose out, and so will your research and service obligations.

How is it different for students teaching as part of academic requirements versus teaching extra and getting paid just to teach?

Bargaining unit members who participate in a work stoppage – whether they are providing instructional services as part of an academic requirement or simply to make more money – will have their pay for those instructional services reduced on a pro-rated basis for the duration of their participation in the work stoppage (for those who receive a stipend) or will not be paid for the hours they do not work (for those who are hourly paid).

And while you're doing the work of three people, you won't be paid a cent. The people who will benefit from your strikebreaking are the lawyers at Cozen O'Connor running Penn's anti-union campaign.

Will faculty and staff be compensated for additional work they may perform to maintain teaching continuity in the event of a disruption?

Faculty who perform additional instructional work to maintain teaching continuity in the event of a disruption should not expect to receive compensation for that additional work.

Non-Exempt Staff who assist with covering for graduate students who are engaging in a work stoppage may be eligible for additional pay for the hours they work beyond their regularly scheduled hours to provide this additional assistance at their hourly wage. If the coverage they are providing causes them to work overtime (i.e., more than 40 hours in the work week), they would receive overtime pay (one and half times their regular rate) for hours worked beyond 40 in the work week.

Is the TA still getting paid? What if I already paid my grader? What if I didn't already pay my grader?

Bargaining unit members who participate in the work stoppage and who receive stipends will have their stipends reduced on a pro-rated basis for the duration of their participation in the work stoppage. Non-striking employees who refuse to cross picket lines will also have their stipends pro-rated unless, in the University's opinion, the refusal to cross was based on a legitimate fear for their safety.

Bargaining unit members who participate in a work stoppage and are hourly paid will not be paid for the hours they are not working. If they already did work, they need to be paid for the work they already did.

Maintaining teaching continuity – guidance for course instructors

This document is intended to help Penn course instructors plan for maintaining teaching continuity in the event of a work stoppage or other forms of disruptions to teaching. Proactively designing a plan for how you will approach instructional team absences will enable you to help your students continue learning amidst such a disruption. The Center for Excellence in Teaching, Learning, and Innovation has resources for instructors on teaching during a disruption at [WEBSITE](#). This document is only preparatory in nature, and the guidance provided may change over time.

This is a threat directed at graduate workers who do not strike but refuse to cross a picket line. It takes courage and commitment to go on strike; it isn't easy for a Penn graduate worker to go without a paycheck when they earn only \$39,425 per year—roughly \$12,000 under the living wage for Philadelphia, according to the MIT Living Wage Calculator. If GETUP members strike this fall, they will willingly make that sacrifice in order to win fair and equitable working conditions. For the administration to threaten those who refuse to cross picket lines with loss of pay is a gratuitous gesture designed to divide employees, spread the pain, and intimidate all of us.

While there is no link in the memo, it appears that the administration is also asking CETLI to do more work by hosting a website with strikebreaking instructions—euphemistically called “resources.”

Do not teach sections, courses, or office hours that are normally taught by striking GETUP members. That is strikebreaking.



1. Course schedule and contact hours

Every effort should be made to maintain the course meeting pattern, including days and times of days, for every component of a course as specified in the course roster. Making changes to the meeting pattern for any component of a course may introduce time conflicts for students with their other courses, thereby potentially interrupting the student's progress in their coursework.

Do not grade assignments or submit grades for classes where TAs and graders normally do that work. That is strikebreaking.



2. Course assessments

Every effort should be made to maintain the schedule, quantity, and type of student assessments/assignments specified in the course syllabus. That said, the instructor of record has the authority to decide how best to manage their courses through a disruption in teaching, including assignments and grades. Assignments may be changed or replaced by other forms of student work. The instructor of record should maintain standards of evaluation needed to assess student achievement of course learning goals.

Do not ask striking TAs or graders to provide you with grades, and do not submit grades over their heads if it is normally their job to do. That is strikebreaking.



3. Grading

The instructor of record should ensure they will be prepared to assign final grades in the event of a teaching disruption that impacts the end of the semester, with particular attention paid to submitting grades for graduating students. Accordingly, the instructor of record should always have access to all information that teaching assistants, learning assistants, and course graders use to determine student grades, including any spreadsheets that contain information relevant to assessing the work of students enrolled in the course.

A Note on AI

- The university's contract with Microsoft prohibits the use of Copilot Chat for grading student work. Additionally, unless you are using a Penn-licensed tool [link], it is a violation of student privacy to enter their work into an AI tool. Ultimately, using Generative AI for grading has not been shown to be a best practice for ensuring fair and effective grading for students.

4. Communication with enrolled students

To the fullest extent possible, the instructor of record should maintain all aspects of the course as specified in the course syllabus through a teaching disruption. However, any changes to course activities, course assignments, course instructors, class meetings times, and/or requirements necessitated by a teaching disruption must be clearly communicated to students enrolled in the course in a timely manner.

5. Course organization

- a. At the beginning of the semester, talk to your teaching team about where you will host central class information (Canvas, for instance) and how you will communicate with students.
- b. Discuss communication best practices with your teaching team to maintain learning continuity for students in all recitations and labs.
- c. Discuss with your teaching team how to handle class absences. Together, identify how those who facilitate live sessions will communicate with you and identify who will cover recitations and labs.
- d. Be aware of the other forms of support your teaching team provides for students and find ways to ensure those services are readily available to them.
- e. Clearly communicate where students should go for help. Share office hours, email contact information, and review session information in one, centralized location, for instance on your Canvas site.
- f. Assign students to study groups to ensure they have support from members of the class.

FAQ

What is the academic expectation of students during a disruption?

All enrolled students are expected to continue attending classes and making academic progress toward their degrees during a teaching disruption.

Study groups can be great for students. But they are no substitute for teaching assistants, graders, and faculty with manageable teaching loads and fair working conditions. Once again, the administration is acknowledging that they are asking you to do more than you can reasonably do, and they are not prioritizing students' learning. Instead, they are looking to cut corners on education while they union bust.



Unfortunately, it is the Penn administration that is threatening the university's accreditation. The administration has been dragging its feet in contract negotiations for a year—they have not responded to a single one of GETUP's proposals on wages and benefits—creating conditions in which graduate workers might have no option but to strike for a fair contract. If the administration wants to prevent disruption and protect its accreditation, it can do so today by bargaining in good faith and coming to a fair agreement. It is disingenuous to present graduate workers pushed to the wall, or faculty who decline to break a strike, as the problem here.



Can I cancel my remaining classes?

Every effort should be made to maintain continuity of the academic experience and ensure that students enrolled in courses continue to receive instruction in those courses and make progress in their academic programs. Remaining meetings of required course components – lectures, recitations, lab sections – should not just be cancelled.

Continued institutional accreditation depends, in part, on the University's meeting the PA Department of Education requirements regarding instructional hours. Maintaining institutional accreditation is essential for maintaining School accreditations, the ability to offer financial aid, and eligibility for federal and state funds.

Once again, in asking you to serve as a strikebreaker, the administration is asking you (and here, also asking colleagues on staff in CETLI) to take on more work than you can reasonably do—and is offering to sacrifice the quality of students' education to convince you to go along. You can and should say no.



Can I cancel office hours/study sessions/review sessions?

Office hours, review sessions, and study groups may be replaced by alternative ways to support learning and help students. Instructors should not simply cancel all outside of classroom support for students during a teaching disruption. The Center for Excellence in Teaching, Learning, and Innovation is a great resource for considering alternative ways to support students.

Can I move my course online?

The course delivery method as described in the course scheduling system and course syllabus should be maintained through a teaching disruption. Further, all students in a course should receive instruction via the same methods.

Can I move my final exam online?

Every effort should be made to maintain assessments for the course including final exams to the extent possible. Assessments in the course are at the discretion of the instructor. Any changes to any assessments must be clearly communicated to all students in the course.

The administration can ensure that students receive their grades on time by settling a fair contract. It is particularly concerning that some items on this list, including financial aid eligibility, may be issues that the administration itself controls.



What if I am not able to submit grades for my students?

Failure to submit course grades may have numerous negative impacts on students and the University's ability to fulfill reporting requirements.

Missing grades can:

- hinder financial aid eligibility and delay aid disbursement;
- impact the ability of students to graduate;
- impact graduating students who are international students applying for Optional Practical Training (OPT);
- prevent the Office of the University Registrar from being able to report grades for student veterans as required by the VA;
- prevent the university from determining continued NCAA eligibility for student athletes.

The instructor of record should always have the information about student performance in the course required to determine course grades.

Who decides who takes over a course?

If the instructor of record for a course stops fulfilling their teaching duties, the department chair or the appropriate School leader should assign a new instructor of record for the duration of the teaching disruption.

I am teaching through a disruption. How do I get extra help if I need it?

The Center for Excellence in Teaching, Learning, and Innovation has resources for instructors on teaching during a disruption at [WEBSITE](#). Department chairs are encouraged to reach out to their School Dean for more information.

Not sure what's right for you and your students? Read your AAUP-Penn colleagues' [guidance and FAQ](#)—written by Penn faculty, for Penn faculty.