



BREAKING THE STALEMATE

*Looking beyond positions to
find collaborative solutions*

December 1, 2025



CASE SCENARIO

- It's late March 2023 at a public research university
- Dr. Taylor, a third-year Ph.D. student, stands at a crossroads. She teaches two sections of introductory biology—90 students depend on her for lectures, labs, and grades. Her stipend barely covers rent. Her contract expired four months ago, and negotiations between her Graduate Employee's Organization (GEO) union and the university have stalled.
- University administrators face a dilemma: 2,000 graduate employees are threatening to strike, and finals are six weeks away.
- On March 27th, the union walks out. What follows is a five-month standoff that will test everyone's principles about fairness, power, responsibility.

THEIR POSITIONS - WHAT DO THEY WANT?

The Graduate Workers union “**demanded**”:

- Significant wage increases (*since pay isn't covering basic living costs*)
- Equal pay across all three campuses (*identical jobs were paid differently*)
- Guaranteed summer funding for Ph.D. students
- Better health coverage, including mental health options
- Stronger protections for reporting sexual misconduct without retaliation

THEIR POSITIONS - WHAT DO THEY WANT?

The Administration was holding steady that:

- The strike violated their existing contract (*later confirmed by a judge*)
- They couldn't afford the full demands without cutting programs elsewhere
- Different campuses served different communities with different costs of living
- They had already made "fair" offers that graduate workers rejected
- Academic operations must continue—that they were hurting students who had a right to complete their semester

ADDITIONAL COMPLEXITIES

- After finals in mid-May, striking teaching assistants did not submit grades, so university administrators announced they would input grades.
- After a judge ruled the strike violated the contract in April, the university withheld paychecks from striking workers.
- Graduate workers were both employees *and* students, so walking a picket line risked relationships with faculty who controlled their academic futures.
- 30K undergrads were impacted. Some supported the strike; some felt abandoned; many felt their grades wouldn't reflect their learning.

Fraud vs. Protecting Students

Hostile/punitive vs. contract enforcement

Fight for rights vs. avoiding retaliation

Support, fairness & consistency

DISCUSSION

Balance between “Legal” and “Ethical”

- **Legally:** Was the university on solid legal ground to withhold pay?
- **Ethically:** *What other ethical considerations hung in the balance?*

Just because you can, does it mean you should?



WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO BREAK THE GRIDLOCK?

CAN YOU VS. SHOULD YOU?

The Legal Parameters:

- **Contract violation:** *Disagreement between a University and graduate student union.*
- **Unfair Labor Practice Charge:** *Alleged an illegal strike affecting over 47,000 students*
- **Wage increase and policy changes:** *Bargaining over “compensation and safety” were permissible subjects.*

The Ethical Implications:

- **University Policy 804, Standards of Ethical Conduct:** *“Members of the University community are expected to conduct themselves ethically, honestly and with integrity in all dealings.”*
- **Statutory Purpose of The University of North Carolina:** *“...foster the development of a well-planned and coordinated system of higher education, to improve the quality of education, to extend its benefits and to encourage an economical use of the State’s resources.”*

**LET'S
REFRAME**

**WHAT ARE THEIR
INTERESTS?**

LET'S REFRAME: WHAT ARE THEIR INTERESTS?

The Graduate Workers core interests:

- **Economic security and stability:** *"I can't afford both rent and groceries on my stipend. I need to focus on teaching & research without being in financial crisis"*
- **Dignity and respect:** *"Doing the same work as someone on another campus but earning less feels devaluing"*
- **Safety:** *"I need to report misconduct without fearing retaliation"*
- **Recognition:** *"My contributions are important and I hope are valued"*

What are some other interests?

LET'S REFRAME: WHAT ARE THEIR INTERESTS?

Administrators core interests:

- **Financial sustainability:** *"We have real budget constraints from state funding cuts"*
- **Academic continuity:** *"Students must be able to complete classes & degrees on time"*
- **Reputation:** *"Accreditation is a big risk that could damage our standing"*
- **Flexibility:** *"Different campuses have different revenue models and constraints"*

What are some other interests?

LET'S REFRAME: WHAT ARE THEIR INTERESTS?

What interests do they both share?

- Quality education and research
- Attracting and retaining talented graduate students
- The university's long-term reputation and success
- Positive working relationships
- Avoiding protracted conflict that harms everyone

*What else do they have in common? and
How could those shared interests inform potential outcomes?*

RESOLUTION APPROACHES

What questions could help spark joint problem-solving?

- I hear you're demanding x% raise across the board. Tell me more about how you came up with that number. Can we look at the data together?
- Tell me more about why that is important to you? Be genuinely curious.
- What is truly non-negotiable and where is there room for flexibility and compromise?
- Rather than “all or nothing” and “take it or leave it” “demand” language, be open to alternatives and creative solutions (*e.g. some now - some later, a slightly different option that still meets the underlying interest*)
- What's at stake? What is the best thing that could happen? Worst? In the middle?

RESOLUTION APPROACHES

Broad philosophy and collaborative approach

- Express commitment to working it
- Focus on maintaining partnerships and relationships
- Ensure environment is marked by sharing/understanding, not interrupting/dominating
- Take an optimistic “we can work through this together” approach
- Show patience, especially when talking through the toughest issues
- Display a genuine desire to find a mutually beneficial outcome
- Expand the pie for everyone; don’t just “split the orange”
- Protect others’ dignity; avoid accusations, blame, dismissiveness and personal slights
- Be open and embrace new ideas, including variations to proposed options

WHAT HAPPENED IN REAL LIFE (2020)?

University of Michigan – 2020 Strike

- Graduate Employees' Organization launches a strike over COVID-19 testing, right to remote work, and defunding campus police
- Strike ends after nine days.
- Results: First University offer rejected; second offer accepted
 - Pandemic childcare options, international grad student support, transparent COVID-19 testing protocols, movement on policing demands.

WHAT HAPPENED IN REAL LIFE (2023)?

University of Michigan – 2023 Strike

- Graduate Employees' Organization votes to strike over pay, benefits, and working conditions.
- The Union represents approximately 2,300 graduate student instructors and staff assistants.
- Strike lasted nearly five months.
- Results: New, three-year contract and fall classes began in August of 2023