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Do Graduate Assistants Earn a Living Wage? Not in These Cities

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5–6 minutes



Graduate teaching assistants continued striking across the University of California system this week, even as administrators began to crack down on them. Tensions between labor and management [have intensified](#) since the institution said on Friday

that it would [fire 54 teaching assistants](#) on the Santa Cruz campus for refusing to submit final grades.

Strike supporters argue that the monthly stipends earned by grad assistants at Santa Cruz have failed to keep up with the area's cost of living. According to the [Bureau of Economic Analysis](#), in the U.S. Commerce Department, the cost of living in the Santa Cruz metropolitan area was 27.6 percent higher than the national average.

To offset rising costs, particularly for housing, labor organizers [have asked](#) that the assistants' monthly stipends be increased by at least \$1,400, from the current \$2,200.

The protesters' grievances have resonated with grad students across the country. So *The Chronicle* set out to find other parts of America where stipends are inadequate to cover a region's cost of living.

Using data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, we compared the 2018 estimate of median annual wages for graduate assistants with one measure of basic need, the living wage.

That measure, [developed](#) by Amy K. Glasmeier, a professor of economic geography and regional planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was designed as an alternative to metrics like the federal poverty threshold, which does [not account](#) for costs like child care and health care.

Nationally, the [estimated](#) median annual wage for grad assistants is \$33,700. The living wage can be approximated to the level of states, counties, and metro areas.

Here's what we found: Santa Cruz is no anomaly. In several metro areas, the median annual wage for a graduate teaching assistant falls well below Glasmeier's living-wage threshold.

For instance, in the Virginia Beach metro area, the bureau estimates that the median annual wage for graduate assistants in 2018 was \$20,740. To make a living wage there, a household consisting of a single adult would need to earn at least \$28,225. Even if a household's income was increased by the wages of a working spouse or partner, the most equitable distribution of breadwinning would still require each adult to earn at least \$21,070 for a living wage.

In the Atlanta metro area, the median-wage estimate for grad assistants was \$18,500. On the basis of projections from MIT, the median grad assistant would need to earn an additional \$10,000 to make a living wage.

Other metro areas in which median graduate assistants' earnings failed to keep pace with the living wage for one-adult and two-adult households included those of Corpus Christi, Tex.; Nashville; and Miami-Fort Lauderdale. Wage data for graduate assistants in the Santa Cruz–Watsonville metropolitan area for 2018 were not available from the BLS.

The Chronicle was able to identify only one metro area where the

reported median earnings for a graduate assistant would have qualified as a living wage for a one-adult, one-child household. According to the bureau, graduate assistants in the metro area of Greenville, S.C., earned a median wage of \$51,730. Glasmeier and her team found that a working parent with one child in Greenville needed to make at least \$47,382 to satisfy the cost of living in 2018. (Colleges in that area include Clemson University and Furman University.)

What constitutes “affordable living” differs from person to person, of course, making the value of such analyses limited. For instance, in calculating the living wage for a single working adult, Glasmeier and her team assumed that this person would rent a studio apartment. But what if the renter had several roommates, as many grad students do? Individual circumstances make for more-complex considerations than a single set of numbers can convey.

Limited Data

Region-specific, aggregated data can tell us only so much. What about the colleges themselves?

Standardized, institution-level data on the earnings of graduate students are hard to come by. And graduate-assistantship stipends can vary based on the kind of work (teaching or researching) and field of study (engineering, English, and so on).

Job-search websites like Glassdoor collect user-submitted data across a variety of employee roles, including graduate assistantships. *The Chronicle* has pulled the average values of monthly base compensation and compared them with the median gross rent of the city where the employing university is located.