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Columbia University Grad Students Join UAW After Battle for Right to Unionize

Schools fear rising cost of compensation as teaching assistants flex their new muscles



ENLARGE

The vote to unionize by Columbia University graduate students was made possible by a ruling by the National Labor Relations Board that private universities are required to treat graduate student teaching assistants and researchers as employees. Other cases are pending at Harvard, Yale and Duke. *PHOTO: ISTOCK PHOTO*

By [DOUGLAS BELKIN](#)

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Columbia University graduate students have overwhelmingly voted to join the United Auto Workers union, becoming the first Ivy League school to do so and culminating a years' long effort to gain the right to unionize.

“Today, 3,500 RAs and TAs like me have won a voice to make sure Columbia University is the best place possible to learn and work,” said Addison Godel, a teaching assistant in the Architecture School at Columbia University, in a statement. “This marks a major victory for the entire Columbia community.”

Students voted 1,602 to 623 to unionize, according to a tally posted online by the National Labor Relations Board on Friday.

The vote was made possible by [the NLRB's August ruling](#) that private universities are required to treat graduate student teaching assistants and researchers as employees. Other cases are pending at Harvard, Yale and Duke.

[Graduate student unions](#) are common at public institutions and adjunct professors have been joining unions across the country at an increasing clip for several years. The August NLRB ruling opened the door to the approximately 535,000 graduate students now enrolled at private colleges and universities.

“The unionization efforts will continue in the private sector and I'm quite confident the institutions will continue to resist,” said William A. Herbert, executive director of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions at Hunter College, City University of New York.

Columbia University didn't immediately return a call seeking comment.

New York University graduate students had already joined the UAW thanks to an earlier NLRB decision which had since been reversed. That relationship gave the auto workers organization a toehold in higher education in Manhattan, which led to their relationship with Columbia students.

The case brought before the NLRB by the Columbia students was stiffly fought by some of the pre-eminent private universities around the nation, including Harvard University, Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In a joint legal brief, the schools said injecting collective bargaining into graduate programs could disrupt their ability to choose who would teach specific classes because the choice could be subject to union rules. They said the ruling could also cost schools millions of dollars in increased compensation.

University administrators' main argument was that although most graduate students get financial support from their school, which can include grants covering tuition, health-care coverage, and stipends for living expenses, they aren't working a trade for wages but are instead getting an education in preparation for a career.

Write to Douglas Belkin at doug.belkin@wsj.com