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TOP STORY

## Texas A&M graduate workers protest working conditions

Megan Rodriguez

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Texas A&M University graduate students and supporters protest what they say are unsafe working conditions during a rally Monday, Sept. 14, 2020, on the steps of the Jack K. Williams Administration Building.

Eagle photo by Laura McKenzie

Megan Rodriguez

## WATCH NOW: Texas A&M graduate students rally for safer working co...

Dozens of Texas A&M graduate students protested in front of the university's Administration Building Monday, calling for the university to allow any student instructor who wants to teach remotely to do so.

Dozens of students marched at Texas A&M University's campus on Monday, calling on the school to permit any graduate worker to teach remotely if they so choose.

Provost and Executive Vice President Carol Fierke said graduate student employees, like faculty, are given a provision for remote teaching to accommodate personnel with a higher risk of COVID-19 complications. The Grad Aggies for Worker Safety group is asking for the offer to be extended to everyone who makes a request to teach remotely, regardless of medical necessity since undergraduate students are permitted to learn online for any reason.

GAWS spokesperson Desirae Embree, a Ph.D. candidate in the department of English, said her department has honored all requests for remote teaching, but she knows of many others who have had requests denied.

"We're looking for the university to implement the best departmental practices at a university level," she said, "so that there aren't graduate students that are being left to sort of fend for themselves under pandemic conditions."

Other demands that GAWS outlined in an August letter to A&M officials include hazard pay for graduate workers who choose to teach in-person courses and one-year extensions of assistantships or other employment for graduate workers whose progress is delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The letter has garnered more than 650 signatures from graduate students alone, and hundreds more from A&M and non-A&M affiliated supporters. Twenty-four graduate student organizations have backed the demands.

Embree said GAWS has met with A&M officials but was disappointed since they were told that the administration has already accommodated graduate students. She said they were also told that many graduate students are likely going to the grocery store, which they believe is more dangerous than the classroom, and that the school has made the safest possible environment for people to be in.

“When we tried to stress that human element to university administration, there was a deep lack of empathy in their response,” Embree said.

After chanting in front of the Administration Building, where the A&M president and the provost both have offices, the group discussed challenges its members have faced this semester. Graduate workers said they’ve been tested for COVID-19 multiple times. Others expressed concerns about the inability to have students distance themselves from each other in the classroom. Some cited frustration about technological problems they’ve encountered.

Today will be chemistry graduate student Elisa Ferrara’s first day back in the classroom after having to quarantine and be tested for COVID-19 due to a student who contracted the illness. She said she is worried about going back, unsure if the same thing will happen again.

“We want our health and safety to be given importance and to be treated as a significant issue by Texas A&M,” Ferrara said. “Texas A&M needs its graduate students. Any professor who does research will tell you that their lab goes nowhere without their graduate students.”

A&M is proud of graduate students and values their role in the school as students and employees, Fierke said via email after Monday's protest.

"We believe that face-to-face classes are important for providing the best educational experience for many students," she said. "The university has made an enormous number of alterations to enhance the safety of in-person instruction, including mandating face coverings, social distancing and enhanced ventilation, and there is no evidence of disease transmission occurring in the classroom."

The Office of Graduate and Professional Studies worked with A&M human resources to develop a form and process in early August for graduate workers to request remote instruction assignments or teaching modifications for fall 2020 assignments, Office of the Provost Communications Director Kelli Reynolds said in a Monday email.

Reynolds said 129 requests were submitted and HR categorized requests to teach remotely or for teaching modifications according to risk, based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines. OGAPS gave the lists of requests to department heads to use in making teaching assignment decisions, noting 31 students were categorized as having factors that increase the chance of complications related to COVID-19, Reynolds continued.

While chemistry graduate student Sam Kempel said he is not teaching a class this semester, he was at Monday's protest to show support for others who are. He said he hopes to see a more "human" response from administrators following the Monday rally.

"I don't think we're asking for the moon," Kempel said. "I think we're asking for basic human compassion and I would like to see at least a step in that direction."

For a full list of the demands from GAWS, visit **[tx.ag/gawsCOVID](https://tx.ag/gawsCOVID)**.

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Gallery: TAMU graduate student protest

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