December 20, 2017

To:          All Graduate and Professional Students  
From:     Wendell Pritchett, Provost  
Subject: NLRB Decision

Last night the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) issued a ruling that will allow eligible graduate students to vote on whether you want to be represented by GET-UP, a union affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers. The students eligible to vote in this election are graduate students who provided instructional services and/or performed research in 2017, or will engage in these activities in the 2018 Spring Semester, in the following schools and programs: Annenberg School for Communication, School of Arts and Sciences, Biomedical Graduate Studies, School of Design, School of Engineering and Applied Science, Graduate School of Education, School of Nursing, School of Social Policy and Practice, and the Wharton School.

The NLRB has yet to schedule an election date. More information on the timing of the election and the places to vote will be provided as soon as it is available.

At this time, I strongly encourage all eligible graduate students to learn more about the critical issues involved, to consult widely with each other and your faculty mentors, and above all to vote when the date arrives. All graduate students who are eligible to vote will be bound by the results of the election, even if you do not agree with them – and even if you do not vote.

I was a Penn graduate student myself, in the History Department, so I know directly the rewards and challenges of this pursuit. The years that I spent writing my dissertation and studying with my great Penn mentors were among the most important of my life. I strongly believe that every member of our community must be treated with respect and provided with the resources they need to not only succeed but also to flourish. And as a scholar of twentieth century American history, I am keenly aware of the essential role played by unions.

Yet I also believe that a union does not offer valuable or relevant solutions for graduate students – and would in fact be counterproductive to the goals for graduate student success that we all share. President Gutmann and I believe strongly that graduate students are our students, mentees, and future colleagues rather than our employees. We are proud of the relationships that exist between graduate students and their mentors, and we are concerned that a union would negatively impact those relationships and your overall academic experience. A model born from industry and designed to represent units of workers doing the same type of work is not the right fit for students in a wide range of disciplines, with differing expectations and varying needs.

We are very proud of the collaborations with graduate students and their elected leadership that have advanced every aspect of graduate student life at Penn. Between 2005 and 2017, we have increased the minimum stipend for funded PhD candidates by nearly 60% – and by nearly 75% in the School of Arts and Sciences – which is more than at peer universities with graduate student unions. During this period, we have also continued to expand benefits for funded students in response to what we have learned about students’ changing needs, including improving health insurance benefits, providing fitness center access as part of the general fee, and enhancing our widely used Graduate Student Center while creating a dedicated Family Center for students with children.

You can learn more about the University’s initiatives to enhance graduate student life at:  http://www.upenn.edu/pages/valuing-grad-students and in the letter that President Gutmann and Provost Price first sent to graduate and professional students in March:  https://provost.upenn.edu/uploads/media_items/32017.original.pdf.

The University has also prepared a comprehensive page of Frequently Asked Questions to help further this dialogue:  https://provost.upenn.edu/education/graduate/faq.

Thank you for your careful consideration of this important issue. We will continue to update you as new information becomes available.