

Open Letter
July 31, 2016

Dear Dean and Associate Dean of Students,

In response to your previous email, I am providing this letter of clarification:

Starting August 11, 2015, I informed my department that I was undergoing an emergency family hardship, which would make it impossible for me to engage with the University for a period of time. I formally requested a Family Health Crisis Leave for Fall 2015, spring and summer 2016. I notified, in writing, the following:

- Sociology Department Advisor, Associate Professor Nilda Flores
- My faculty mentors from the Sociology Department
- Director of Graduate Study, Associate Professor Claire Decoteau
- Interim Director of Graduate Study, Associate Professor Paul-Brian McInerney

I asked in writing on August 11, 2015 what is the paperwork I must submit and what is the official process for this. I received written instructions, all of which I diligently followed.

I took my leave of absence confident that I fulfilled all my responsibilities to the University before leaving. Over the course of my leave, I had limited physical, psychological and financial resources to access email or even be in communication. My department was fully aware of the circumstances of my leave. I did not in any way agree to continue work responsibilities or regular communication with the University, nor was I notified that there would be any expectations of actions from my part either pertaining to my TA assignment or pertaining to my status as a student on leave.

However, on October 27, 2015, Tara Williams tried to contact me via my UIC email to notify me that the University had neglected to request an official resignation from my TAship, and therefore the University had erroneously made an electronic transaction into my account in September. I was unaware of this: I was unable to check my UIC email, and also unable to access electronic bank statements due to the circumstances of my leave. Several weeks later Tara reached out again to my personal email; as it happened I was able to access this message and, at considerable cost to myself, I responded. I sent the resignation email on November 6, 2015.

When my leave ended, upon my return to the United States and Chicago, I tried to register for classes and was notified there was a hold on my account. I requested information from University Payroll who produced a piece of paper dated November 10, 2015, which they

claimed they emailed me. In this paper they demanded that I return funds to the University in the amount of \$1,454.22. I was given 2 weeks deadline and threatened: if I failed to make the payment I would be referred to Collections. This letter also indicated that I could request a hearing about the situation. As soon as I was aware of this I immediately requested a hearing and requested for the hold on my account to be lifted while this matter is investigated. For three weeks now I have been emailing and writing and requesting to be heard instead of just being threatened and bullied; I still demand a hearing, as it is the only way I can express my position on what has happened.

Following is my list of objections:

1. In a recent email thread about my request for a hearing, Blanca Lorenzo stated: "At the time of our conversation you didn't feel that this was an overpayment and wanted to discuss this further with the department you worked for during the time the overpayment happened." This is false; I never stated that the payment was not erroneous. The question is who made the mistake and what is the proper way to address it.
2. The university made a payment transaction to my bank account while I was officially on leave; I was not able to attend to this because I was dealing with an actual Family Health Crisis! How can the University grant me a Crisis leave and then expect me to be available whenever something comes up? I was not notified that I have official work responsibilities for the University as a student worker while on leave, and I never agreed to be responsible for electronic communication during this time. Instead, the University initiated a process via email during my absence, gave me a 2-week deadline, and then took punitive actions against me, even though it was clear that I would not be in a position to do correspondence or official business at all.
3. I did not request this money; I did not consent to the transaction. This was the University's mistake not mine. I returned to Chicago and was treated as though I stole money or did something wrong, and as a result I am being punished for not fixing the University's mistake, for not accepting their mistakes as my own. I did not neglect to pay for any services nor did I ever take something that was not mine.
4. There is a fundamental institutional hypocrisy revealed by this situation. The University pretends to have understanding and to care about students as human beings by creating a mechanism through which we have the right to take emergency leave; but as soon as we leave we become exposed to blackmail from Payroll and Collections. Our so-called "rights" as students are a sham.
5. Finally, UIC brands itself as a social justice university, an institution that is inclusive of poor students of color and especially those experiencing extreme marginalization. I am one of those students. I was not on some vacation, backpacking through Europe or some other "exotic" destination. I was not somewhere surrounded by computers and convenience. Maybe UIC is out

of touch with the realities of people's lives who do not fit a specific social and economic profile. For those of us whose lives are entangled in systems that isolate and deprive us of the most basic conveniences, something as "simple" as sending an email or arranging for electronic transactions can be prohibitive and can take a lot longer than the two weeks Payroll decided on. Maybe this is a reasonable expectation for students and workers from a certain social and economic class but not for those "disadvantaged" and "minority" populations the University pretends to care about.

My requests for a hearing have not been answered. For me this was never about denying that the payment was made in error or wanting to keep the University's money. This is about whether the University has the right to accuse me, treat me as though I went into the Payroll office and took out \$1454.22 and now I must be coerced to fix that by placing a hold on my account. It is about whether the University can deprive me of my status as a student without giving me a chance to be heard. So far no one has acknowledged this and no one has tried to work with me to resolve the situation, preferring instead the blackmail approach: pay first, and we will talk later. As a result my status as a student and also my TAship appointment for Fall 2016 are being jeopardized.

My concerns were not heard, no one has taken responsibility for the mistaken transaction the University conducted, and instead I was "offered" options for how to pay. As I wrote already in a previous email, the attitude of the University does not address any of the issues I have put forth. On the contrary, it devalues my experience, devalues my point of view, but more importantly it reinforces a certain power politics that I disagree with, and that I constantly have confront on a daily basis.

My proposal for a just solution is the following:

1. Remove the hold on my student account
2. Allow me to register for my Ph.D. courses
3. Confirm my TA appointment for Fall 2016
4. Once these conditions are met I will be happy to resolve the overpayment mistake.
5. And a formal accountability hearing about what has happened

Thank you for your time in this matter.

José Guadalupe Herrera Soto

Ph.D. Student in Sociology

University of Illinois-Chicago