



THE
GRADUATE SCHOOL

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HOUSE APPROPRIATION COMMITTEE
House Bill 214
Higher Education – Collective Bargaining – Graduate Assistants
January 28, 2020
Urging an Unfavorable Report

I write to share my concerns regarding House Bill 214, which authorizes graduate assistants to collectively bargain. Collective bargaining is inappropriate, unnecessary, and not in the overall interests of graduate students and graduate programs.

Collective bargaining is inappropriate because graduate assistants are students and the duties they perform as graduate assistants are part of their education. Some graduate programs expect or require all students to teach. Most teaching assistants lead discussion or lab sections under the guidance of a faculty member; in doing so, they gain valuable teaching experience and learn the subject more deeply by learning to explain it to others. Research assistantships allow students to learn to do original research under the guidance of a faculty mentor—research that often is identical to their doctoral dissertation research. In both cases, the assistantship is more like an apprenticeship or traineeship than traditional employment.

Collective bargaining is unnecessary to address the concerns of graduate assistants. The university has a “Meet and Confer” process in which an elected group of GAs, the Graduate Assistant Advisory Committee (GAAC), meets with university leadership (Provost, Vice President for Finance and Administration, and myself) at least once per semester to discuss concerns and possible solutions. Partly as a result of these discussions:

- Minimum stipends have increased 17.6% since July 2018, bringing minimum stipends to above the cost of attendance and above the Big Ten median (see attached table).
- Expectation-setting meetings between GAs and their supervisors are required and statements of mutual expectation have been developed to guide those discussions.
- Policies have been adopted to allow for time away from duties and parental leave.
- A grievance policy and process have been implemented.
- In response to concerns that GAs were working much more than 20 hours per week, a time-use study was commissioned. This study showed that GAs spend an average of 18 hours per week on GA duties.
- The new position of Graduate Academic Counselor was created and filled, to help GAs and students experiencing difficulties access university services.

The “Meet and Confer” process provides GAs with many of the perceived benefits that collective bargaining offers, including the right to engage a labor organization to assist them in this process. In the ten years that the “Meet and Confer” process has been in place, GAAC has declined to engage a labor organization.

In addition to the “Meet and Confer” process, graduate students serve on the Graduate Council, which helps make policy for graduate education, including policy relating to graduate assistants. I also meet regularly with leadership of the Graduate Student Government.

The Graduate School is an advocate for all graduate students, including GAs. We want all graduate students to succeed and we want to help resolve any problems that arise. The Graduate School encourages students to report violations of Graduate School and University policy, including excessive hours, harassment, unacceptable behavior, or unsafe conditions. The Graduate Student Ombudsman provides confidential and informal assistance in resolving conflicts and promotes fair and equitable treatment. If necessary, the Graduate School can take formal action to investigate and resolve problematic situations. Collective bargaining would limit the University’s ability to address problems for all graduate students as they arise and reduce the current flexibility to tailor solutions to the situation of a particular student.

Finally, collective bargaining is not in the best interests of graduate students and graduate programs. Advocates of collective bargaining believe it will lead to higher stipends and additional benefits. But if stipends and benefits increase and State funding does not increase proportionately, the number of graduate assistantships likely would be reduced, fewer students would be supported, and the size of our doctoral programs will shrink.

Today, stipends vary considerably by discipline. Some departments offer more than \$30,000 for the academic year (20 hours/week for 9.5 months) and \$40,000 for the full year (20 hours/week for 12 months). Collective bargaining could result in more uniform stipend levels across campus, as it has at some peer institutions. Bringing all stipends to a high level would result in very large cost increases for some departments. Without substantial additional State funding, those departments would be forced to offer fewer assistantships. But capping stipends to limit disparities across campus would undermine the ability of some departments to pay higher stipends to recruit and retain high-caliber students in competitive fields. Either would lead to a decline in the quality and quantity of research and scholarship produced by the University.

With regard to benefits, GAs already have access to the same health plans as faculty and staff. Some students advocate for collective bargaining as a means to gain additional benefits, but these could lead to additional taxes. GAs currently are exempt from FICA (Social Security and Medicare) tax because they do not meet the IRS definition of “professional employees.” Providing additional benefits could change this determination and make GAs subject to FICA, in which case the University would have to withhold 7.65% from a GA’s taxable compensation and pay an equal employer’s share. GAs might also have to pay for unemployment insurance, and GAs would have to pay dues set by the union (2% of compensation is standard). In all, the cost of a GA to a department could increase by more than 17% without any increase in take-home

compensation for the student. Students whose duties are not related to teaching or research could be excluded from GA appointments, or their tuition benefit could be subject to income tax.

Research assistantships, which are included in HB 214, are particularly difficult to adapt to collective bargaining. There often is a large overlap between the research a student does for a faculty member as part of the faculty member's research grant or contract, and the research the student does for his or her dissertation. The former is essential training for the latter, and it is often impossible to determine where one ends and the other begins. Completing a dissertation—a piece of original research and scholarship—requires long hours of effort regardless of whether the student has a research assistantship, and the amount of effort required for the dissertation cannot be affected by collective bargaining. For this reason, most institutions that have collective bargaining for teaching assistants do not extend collective bargaining to research assistants. Of the five Big Ten institutions with collective bargaining for GAs, only Rutgers includes research assistants, and the contract specifies that it has no impact on the work needed to satisfy degree requirements.

Thank you for the opportunity to express my concerns about House Bill 214.

Steve Fetter
Associate Provost and Dean, The Graduate School
University of Maryland, College Park

Minimum Graduate Assistant Stipends and Collective Bargaining Status
Big Ten Public Universities, Spring 2020, 20 hour/week appointment

Institution	Minimum Stipend		Collective Bargaining?		
	Academic Year	Full Year	TA	AA	RA
Rutgers ¹	28,569	32,204	Y	Y	Y
Michigan ²	21,779		Y	Y	
Penn State	20,790	27,720			
Wisconsin	20,000	24,443			
Iowa	19,629	23,982	Y	Y	
Maryland³	18,979	23,973			
Illinois	17,788	23,717	Y	Y	
Ohio State	17,280	23,040			
Michigan St ⁴	16,185	21,580	Y		
Purdue	15,448	18,538			
Minnesota	15,343	20,456			
Nebraska	10,000	13,333			
Indiana	9,910	11,892			

¹Standard appointment is 15 hours per week.

²No minimum full-year stipend.

³For 9.5-month appointments as of 1/1/20. All TAs, and 68% of all academic-year GA appointments, are 9.5-month appointments. The minimum stipend for 9-month appointments is \$17,980.

⁴For TA. The minimum academic-year stipend for non-union AAs and RAs is \$13,895.

Average Cost of Attendance and Average Stipend, AY19-20 (9 months)

Cost	Graduate Student	Graduate Assistant
Tuition (10 credits/semester)	\$32,500	—
Mandatory fees	\$1,635	\$1,635
Off-campus rent and utilities	\$9,314	\$9,314
Food and meals	\$5,120	\$5,120
Personal expenses	\$1,144	\$1,144
Books and supplies	\$624	\$624
Health insurance	\$1,298	\$572
Transportation	\$522	\$522
Average cost of attendance	\$52,157	\$18,931
Average academic-year stipend	—	\$21,135

Tuition is the maximum covered for graduate assistants at the non-resident rate. Transportation cost is from the Bureau of Labor Statistic's Consumer Expenditure Survey for public transportation in the Northeast region. (Mandatory fees cover shuttle bus service to most areas where graduate assistants live.) Other costs are estimated by the Office of Student Financial Aid according to federal guidelines; see <https://financialaid.umd.edu/resources-policies/cost-attendance>.

