

**Written Testimony Submitted to the
Maryland House Appropriations Committee
By Nate Beard, Graduate Assistant
HB 275**

**State Personnel - Collective Bargaining - Faculty, Part-Time Faculty, and Graduate Assistants
February 14, 2023**

FAVORABLE

Dear Chair Barnes, Vice Chair Chang, and Members of the Appropriations Committee,

Graduate assistants are teaching, research, and administrative employees. I am currently a teaching assistant teaching undergraduates about science and technology development, history, ethics, and policy, which is a part of the accreditation requirement for engineering programs and is crucial for our future technologists, researchers, and professionals to learn. I have been a research assistant. My research has included studying and supporting digital privacy rights that protect our freedoms at the state and federal level, as well as studying how student athletes in higher education collect and use data to advance not only their athletic goals but their professional and educational aspirations. While related to my dissertation research, this work does not directly contribute to the work that I am required to do to complete my PhD. My dissertation research aims to further advance our understandings of the ethical and social implications of surveillance, automation, and the future of work.

In general, graduate assistants do the everyday work that keeps the university running. We teach classes?many of us multiple classes a semester, and often without support?and design curriculum, hold office hours for students, and perform many other duties above and beyond what is expected of us. And what is expected of us is often unclear because we don't have mutual and democratic say over expectations. This often leads to overwork too?many of us working well over the 20 hours/week that we are told to spend on our assistantships, and on top of doing our own research, which is expected to serve the public.

Despite all of this, we receive poverty wages and are denied adequate parental leave, appropriate labor protections and grievance procedures, protections against harassment and abuse, and a voice in our workplace?which is also students' learning spaces.

When I started my program in late 2019, I was making around \$22,900 before taxes for 9.5 months out of the year (we are not guaranteed summer appointments and pay), which is about \$1,700/month during my appointment after taxes and fees. This does not include the fees (we pay our employer to work for them?more than \$800/semester for the first two years). I and the majority of other grads are rent burdened: we spend more than one third of our monthly pay check on rent. This forces us to take out loans and go into debt (which I have), and negatively impacts diversity by preventing the inclusion of graduates from poor and historically marginalized and oppressed backgrounds and communities. This negatively affects our teaching and research, undermines the university's public service mission, contradicts our university's values and democratic principles it purportedly espouses.

While we do the majority of teaching and research, the university has decided to increase spending on athletics?paying coaches over \$700,000 a year?and increase the hiring of administrators and upper management?who make on average around \$260,000 a year?while decreasing tenure-track professor jobs. This has made the university rely on teaching

assistants and contingent faculty. As PhDs, we are required to have tenured professors on our dissertation committee, but as the university decreases tenure-track positions, they are increasing graduate students, which is ironically going to lead to limiting the ability of the university to compete with other universities and to produce innovative research.

The right to collectively bargain is a democratic right—a right already granted to graduate assistants at private universities by the NLRB, graduates and other workers at public universities in just about every other majority Democrat state in the country, and employees at community colleges in Maryland. It is also a human right enshrined in Article 23 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And it is a human, democratic, and labor right because it provides a path to remedy the issues hurting us and other workers outlined here.

The right to collectively bargain is a crucial solution to these issues because it guarantees us a democratic voice in decisions that affect our workplace, working conditions, and our livelihoods. The university says that it has shared governance in place, but those systems and processes have failed. The evidence for this is not only demonstrated by the poor decision-making of USM leadership and mismanagement of funds (coming from tax payers), but it is also demonstrated by the fact that the meet-and-confer process established in 2012 has not led to better working conditions. Issues such as unlivable wages, unregulated hours, lack of childcare, unclear job expectations, insufficient grievance procedures, workplace abuse, harassment, and exploitation, disproportionate rates of mental health issues, and the lack of other basic workplace protections and support systems still persist. The administration has not been responsive to these issues, and the way to remedy this is to grant us the legal protections and rights that other employees get.

My friend and colleague testified before this committee in 2020. Not long after, she had to drop out of her PhD program during the pandemic. Even though we're not supposed to get jobs outside of our assistantships, many of us have to, and my colleague still couldn't make ends meet when working as an Uber driver on top of teaching and research duties. Unfortunately, this is not uncommon.

I love this university, the work that I do, and my student, colleagues, and professors, and I want all of us to succeed and live safe, secure, and dignified lives. As someone whose work is dedicated to social justice—studying social, ethical, and political dimensions of technology innovation—I honestly believe that this bill is a step in the right direction. So I thank you for considering this bill, and I urge lawmakers to support this bill that would give GAs and faculty a voice in creating a dignified, equitable, and supportive workplace and living conditions for all GAs.

Sincerely,
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