

UMBC TESTIMONY ON SB0247
Written by Zane Poffenberger, Chair of Legislative Concerns
UMBC Graduate Student Association

Dear Chair Barnes, Vice Chair Chang and members of the Appropriations committee,

The UMBC Graduate Student Association asks for a favorable report on SB 247. UMBC has the second largest USM graduate workforce with over 750 graduate assistants in research, teaching and administrative positions. We provide vital contributions to the research and teaching work of the faculty and the university as a whole and thereby to the prestige of education at UMBC and in the State of Maryland. GAs represent a diverse group as more than half are students of color, over 50% are women and almost 40% are international students. UMBC is a Minority Serving Institution as more than 50% of all of the student population are students of color.¹ We need the right to unionize if we choose to, in order to ensure that we have the ability to directly negotiate our pay, benefits and workplace conditions through the collective bargaining process.

UMBC graduate assistants work in both full-time (20 hours) and part-time (10 hours) capacities and receive various benefits which may include tuition remission, health insurance and a stipend. However, the benefits and stipend pay are inadequate to the living costs of GAs. The minimum stipend level for a full-time PhD student is \$2275 per month.² However, a survey of GAs at UMBC found that two-thirds of full-time respondents are Master's students, so most receive the lower pay of minimum \$1733 per month.³ MIT's living wage calculator indicates that the monthly living wage in Maryland for a single adult is \$3063 per month, which is 77% higher than the minimum GA pay at UMBC.⁴ The average rent for a 1 bedroom apartment in the surrounding area is \$1,000, which is unaffordable at \$1733 per month.⁵ More than 15% of the respondents reported responsibility for 1 or more dependents as well, which is even more untenable on these salaries, especially as there is no subsidized dependent health insurance available. Baltimore's cost of living is already 7% higher than the national average, and further increases in utilities, groceries, gas and other expenses often place an economic hardship on GAs. In addition, 64% of respondents said that their stipend does not cover their monthly living expenses. Graduate assistants are currently unable to negotiate pay with their departments if their needs are unmet. Graduate assistants also cannot engage with the university to create, negotiate, mediate, and enforce formal and binding contract agreements. GAs should be granted the right

¹ <https://gradschool.umbc.edu/glance/>

² <https://gradschool.umbc.edu/funding/assistantships/stipends/>

³ <https://gradschool.umbc.edu/funding/assistantships/stipends/>

⁴ <https://livingwage.mit.edu/metros/12580>

⁵ <https://livingwage.mit.edu/metros/12580>

that state and public sector employees enjoy in being able to enter into the collective bargaining process if we so choose. Under these circumstances, some qualified students have to forgo graduate school in Maryland, so we miss the contribution of their research, their ideas, and their participation in the workforce and the economy of Maryland.

The current process of "Meet and Confer " which is supposed to involve formal discussions between graduate school leadership and student leaders by way of the Graduate Assistant Advisory Committee is not a sufficient solution for problems that GAs encounter. Meet and Confer entails a formal meeting wherein GAs ask graduate school administrators questions and voice their current concerns regarding pay, workplace conditions and other important issues. At UMBC, the formal "Meet and Confer " process did not take place for 2 years, from 2020 until Fall of 2022. Further, this process does not bind nor does it create any agreements that the graduate school must pursue, and even the mandatory report that each university must make to USM each semester provides no way for graduate students to directly articulate lingering concerns. For instance, this past fall, numerous students across colleges and programs experienced not being paid for weeks or months, with no streamlined, systematic, or timely way to report or address these issues. Problems that GAs face in their departments cannot wait until the GA committee coordinates a meeting with administration. UMBC administration was unaware of these issues until a GA town hall halfway through the semester. These issues are not mentioned in the report to USM.

The UMBC GSA stands with other student leaders and graduate assistants within the USM system in calling for the right to engage in collective bargaining. We ask this committee to grant a favorable report to SB 247 and extend this basic labor right to graduate assistant workers within the USM.

Respectfully,

UMBC GSA