

**Written Testimony Submitted to the
Maryland House Appropriations Committee
By Lydia Quevedo, 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, rights to collective bargaining will make significant differences in the lives of graduate students and faculty in our community.

I feel it is essential to emphasize that I am not writing out of self interest. My story is not the most sobering you will hear today. What has compelled me to sit down and write this when I have heaps of work and reading is my commitment to solidarity and my empathy for my peers. I cannot simply sit by while fundamental rights are kept from a workforce whose exploited labor contributes to a multi-billion-dollar industry.

As graduate students, my peers and I are both students and faculty. Any undergrad who has taken an introductory logic course can demonstrate how this is a contradiction of terms. For anyone who hasn't taken Logic 101, a contradiction of terms just means that the definition of one thing is the exact opposite of the other thing. The two things--our being students and our being faculty--cannot be true at the same time. Our rights and responsibilities as students directly conflict with those we hold as faculty.

Being students, we are expected to complete our coursework in a satisfactory and timely manner; as faculty, we face a daily responsibility to the core functions of the university: teaching undergraduates and conducting research. But where, exactly, is the conflict? The answer: wherever is most beneficial for the university to deny our rights as workers. UMD could not run without graduate students, just as it could not run without adjunct lecturers, lab workers, or administrators. Yet when we ask for our worth--when we even broach the subject of collective bargaining--we are reminded that we are students first, and we are lucky to even be here. Students do not need the right for collective bargaining. We went through intense competition to be here. Even if we are paid by the university, a significant portion of that money is being used to pay for our presence. Therefore, being here is a privilege, and you do not need to collectively bargain about a privilege. That would make us entitled, and the worst thing we can be as young folks is entitled.

It works the other way, too. If we appeal to our status as students for lenience or flexibility, we are reminded that we, too, are faculty, and are subject to the same rules and restrictions. To provide an example, this means we are not expected to follow the same break schedule as regular students, a reality which heavily contributes to chronic burnout. This narrative that we should be lucky is pervasive. After all, what are we even complaining for? Isn't all this what grad school is all about? We should have known what we were getting ourselves into. After all, it's just a few years of suffering. Besides, our supervisors went through it too, and they survived. If we are truly committed to our research, our fields, and our departments, we then it shouldn't matter. If we want to succeed, we should resign ourselves to eating ramen every night and splitting with three housemates. Just suck it up,

take out a couple loans, and call it a day.

Yes, we're lucky to be here. Those of us who have received funding are especially so; we don't need to pick up side jobs during the summer or (God forbid!) during the semester. We can focus on our work. The fact that we're struggling to complete all that work is nothing in the grand scheme of things. We're making a sacrifice for our research, and shouldn't our work mean the world to us? Otherwise, why are we even in grad school?

All this amounts to a simple fact: our passion and enthusiasm are exploited by the university. We may be lucky to spend our days pursuing something meaningful, but we are hardly fortunate. What's fortunate about a work culture so intense that burnout, chronic depression and anxiety, and elevated risk for self-harm are simply par for the course? What's fortunate about working fifty hours a week and worrying about whether you're going to be able to afford rent? What's fortunate about watching prices tick up in your local supermarket, knowing that in a month or two it's going to be a rare luxury to cook a comfort meal from your home culture?

It's not like we have much of a choice here. If we can't take it? Well, obviously we're not tough enough for academia. We should just forget it and drop out.

This narrative is problematic for many reasons. For starters, it continues the broken trope that we young folks should work and struggle now because our forebears did the same thing before us. Suck it up, we'll be able to enjoy life later. But the promise of economic stability is a pipe dream for my generation. Not all of us will land cushy tenure-track jobs. And with a recession and climate crisis looming, it's questionable whether we have the same quality of life to look forward to.

Furthermore, although the university loves to tout its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), depriving graduate students of the right for collective bargaining is a massive institutional barrier to DEI in academia and the workforce. How can students from diverse backgrounds (in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, socio-economic class, language proficiency, and ability) succeed in a space that is not designed for us if we also have to worry about keeping the lights on? Without a safety net--like family with money--students from diverse backgrounds are in an even more precarious position. Should we speak up and rock the boat, risking our funding and plunging us into uncertainty? Or should we just grit our teeth, suffer the exploitation, and get to the end of the degree, whatever it takes? Again, it's not like we have a choice.

As a graduate student from an ethnicity underrepresented in my field, the right to collective bargaining will obviously impact my life in diverse and positive ways. But I am moved by solidarity. If I am as lucky as I have been told, then hopefully my appeal has invited you, too, to consider how this fundamental right will remove institutional barriers and expand protections for an extremely vulnerable workforce. Please vote in favor of SB247/HB275.

Sincerely,
Lydia Quevedo
Graduate Assistant
University of Maryland, College Park
1401 Marie Mount Hall, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742
lquevedo@umd.edu