

**Written Testimony Submitted to the
Maryland House Appropriations Committee
By Keegan Clements-Housser, Graduate Student Instructor of Record
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,

I am a graduate student instructor of record. I describe myself that way instead of using the more traditional nomenclature of "graduate teaching assistant" because I am not an assistant. I am not supporting a professor, or co-teaching with other graduate students, or leading the discussion or lab segment of a larger course; I do not assist anyone. Instead, I am teaching a class on my own. My name, and my name only, appears in the course catalog next to my course sections. I am responsible for writing my own syllabi, developing my own lesson plans, grading all coursework, dealing with instances of student plagiarism and academic dishonesty, helping to connect students in mental or physical crises with the right resources, etc. In essence, I am responsible for all of the same things any other instructor of record would be. In this capacity, the duties I perform are indistinguishable from those of an adjunct instructor or assistant professor.

I teach this class in addition to pursuing my own research work. In my case, having recently advanced to the status of PhD candidate by successfully defending my comprehensive exams?an arduous, intensive, months-long process that, notably, I had to complete while also continuing to teach?this means preparing my dissertation prospectus, coordinating with scholars at other institutions, submitting original to academic conferences and journals, navigating funding needs and IRB approval, and all the myriad other responsibilities inherent to the daily life of an aspiring scholar. Combined with my teaching responsibilities, my day-to-day academic life is not dissimilar to that of an entry-level assistant professor.

Unlike that assistant professor, however, I am not an employee. I am not working toward tenure. I don't have any sort of employment contract. I don't receive formal sick days (a serious issue, since I have multiple chronic health conditions to manage), or mandated work breaks, or PTO. I receive no benefits, although I am at least permitted to pay to participate in a version of the employee health plan. If I were to lose my position for any reason, I would almost certainly not be eligible for unemployment insurance, since I am not actually an employee... although the fact that I receive W-2s might be enough to disqualify me from other welfare programs. I lack many of the legal protections afforded to state employees because, once again, despite teaching a class and conducting research on behalf of the University of Maryland, I am not an employee. I have no clear relationship with HR, and information on who I should bring concerns to is often murky at best. Although I have been fortunate enough to have established a very supportive and reliable dissertation committee, including a truly exemplary advisor, I would have very limited recourse if I was suddenly less fortunate. While I understand that there is a "meet-and-confer" system in place, I had never even heard of it before researching this legislative package, and I had certainly never been approached to participate in the process. Clearly, then, the existing system is inadequate in at least that regard.

Also, unlike an assistant professor, my non-employment stipend equates to poverty wages. Even after seeking out very low-quality housing in an old building with absent, negligent property managers, I still see almost the entirety of my stipend go toward my rent, necessitating that I take out student loans, despite being here on a "funded" program. Stipend increases, when they do happen, do not sufficiently keep pace with cost of living increases. The most recent stipend increase, for example, worked out to about a 1.5% increase overall, which failed to match even inflation, let alone other external factors. In essence, despite taking on more and more responsibilities each year, I effectively make less now than I did when I first started.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, unlike an assistant professor, I am barred from collective bargaining. Outside of hoping that an administrator who I have no way of holding to account opts to work in my best interest, I have no recourse. Neither do any of my fellow graduate students, including those in situations far more dire than mine. Despite being an essential part of the university workforce, we have no real agency. We are powerless. This must change.

And it will change, one way or another. My first advanced degree came from a different R1 state university, where all graduate students workers were classified as employees and were unionized. It took those students a general university system strike to win those rights, causing significant disruption to university operations across the state in the process, but win them they did. As someone with a lot of grading and research to do, though, I would really rather we skip the "major disruptions to public universities across the state" stage that other university systems are currently or have recently experienced. Instead, I would much prefer that change come here, in the form of these bills.

If not, though? Well, as the labor saying goes, one day more. I have seen a better system in action, and I will work tirelessly toward seeing that reality reach Maryland as well. I know I am far from alone in that regard.

Sincerely,
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