



The Graduate Student Government (GSG) at the University of Maryland-College Park call upon the Maryland General Assembly in support of House Bill 0275 and Senate Bill 0247 that removes the ban on collective bargaining for graduate students across the University System of Maryland. As of December 2022, the graduate student government assembly passed a resolution to support collective bargaining rights for graduate student workers. This is to succeed the past four years of support for collective bargaining by the graduate student government. As a university system, our belief is that the USM has fallen behind in upholding the values of equity, fairness in labor when it comes to the collective work that graduate students perform for the university. Since 2016 when unionization for graduate students was granted for all private universities by the National Labor Review Board, the number of students in graduate unions has markedly increased. In the DMV, American University, Georgetown University, George Washington University, and John Hopkins University all support a graduate student union. Within the Big10 Michigan State, Northwestern University, Rutgers University, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, University of Iowa, University of Michigan, and the University of Wisconsin- Madison all have graduate student unions. At Big 10 institutions that do not have a union, Indiana University Bloomington, Purdue University, and the University of Nebraska have student groups actively pushing for one. Additionally, the entire University of California system has a graduate student union as do all Ivy League institutions. Maryland is falling behind in efforts to protect graduate students from abuse and give them a voice. Due to the current restrictions passed in 2001, it is illegal for graduate students in the University of Maryland systems to even have a vote determining if they want a union or not. This bill offers the first step towards a democratic process that recognizes the work that graduate students perform for the university system.

As the President and Vice President of Legislative Affairs, we have seen situations where students need an advocate but do not know where they can go for one. This is especially true for our international students. One example was brought to us last fall. An international student was working as a graduate assistant as a Teaching Assistant (TA) for a lower level class. The professor for the class required the student to grade 60 problem sets within 24-hours despite the TA having their own classes during that time. That led to the TA not sleeping at night after the class they TA met, seeing this was twice a week it was a significant amount of sleep. This TA also fell behind in one of their own classes. When the TA tried to ask for flexibility the professor threatened to go to the department if the TA was not performing up to standards. The issue is that there are no standards. Graduate assistants do not get contracts. That means our work load, duties, expectations, or grievance procedures are all on a case-by-case basis. There is a Statement of Mutual Expectations that is supposed to be filled out by the graduate assistant and their

supervisor. But that rarely happens. There are also many instances of the supervisor filling it out without any input from the graduate assistant. From there, it is up to the individual graduate student to stand up for themselves and the department to sort it out. In the case above, the student did not know if the department would be on their side or not. It was their first semester at the university. They thought since the professor was requiring it that it would be accepted, that speaking up would cause the department to not support them anymore, and they would lose their assistantship, not be able to afford their education, and possibly be forced to leave the country. This student needed someone to go to while the situation was going on who they knew could advocate for them without putting the individual at risk. The student also needed to know from other students what sorts of requirements were and were not okay. The most efficient way to establish this is by having a union that graduate students know they can go to for questions and advocacy.

In another way a union can greatly benefit graduate students is when negotiating leaves of absences, especially for maternity leave. Currently, the graduate school provides six-weeks of parental leave for new parents. While we must give credit to the university for applying this to new parents who did not give birth, for those that do it is insufficient. For longer maternity leave it is either up to the discretion of the department the graduate student works under or they need to have a medical exemption from a doctor. Department discretion varies greatly across the university. When negotiating with the department it is on the individual graduate student to ask for longer leave. Medical exemptions are good policy, but they have been denied in the past even with a doctor's note. A new mother has to then negotiate her workload, trying to appeal the exemption denial, a new baby, and recovering from child birth by herself. Someone who is authorized to advocate on her behalf, who knows the university systems, and is able to bring up the issue without the fear of retaliation is necessary. The university will say the student can take a leave of absence. Being a graduate assistant means that you give up your assistantship including pay, tuition remission, and your health insurance.

One thing that may have stood out in this testimony is that the word department is coming up a lot. UMD College Park has a very decentralized administrative system, which includes the ways that graduate assistantships are managed and administered. While this brings up obvious issues of different systems of accountability, different interpretations of policy, and overall different experiences, it also increases the inherent risk that a graduate student takes on when coming forward with an issue. Most graduate assistants are working in the department they are getting their academic degree in, often under their PhD advisor. As in the case of the international student, they often live in fear of falling out of favor with their department, inciting implications for their work status, student status, and by extension even their citizenship status. Losing that favor could mean losing your assistantship in the future, being bottom of the list when it comes to department grants, fellowships, and scholarships, not being recommended for academic or professional opportunities, and having an overall hostile work and academic environment. Many students, especially in PhD programs or international students, cannot leave their program without serious repercussions. It is rare for students in PhD programs to leave and

be accepted into another program of a similar caliber. International students would have to leave the country if they stopped their program. What this creates is a situation where graduate assistants who are getting abused are afraid to speak up.

There are efforts being made by the university to change this, but they cannot reverse a structural issue. The Graduate Student Government can help a student with some parts of university administration, but overall do nothing more than bring up an issue to someone higher up on behalf of students and has no way to ensure that issues are resolved. The current substitute program, the meet-and-confer process with the Graduate Assistant Advisory Council, is a poor and ineffective substitute. While there have been concessions made to graduate students, such as one-time stipend increases and some policy changes, this does little to rectify the pervasive culture of oppression across campus, particularly for those students from marginalized identity groups. Without formalized processes such as go-to human resources administrators, a verifiable contract that can be referred to, and a unionized body to back graduate students, the refrain of many graduate students is “head down, don’t rock the boat.”

In conclusion, this bill is about taking the first step towards a right that has been granted in the United States for almost 100 years. In a period of time where democracy seems to vulnerably hang in the balance, we call upon the Maryland General Assembly to recognize the contributions of over 5,000 graduate student workers across the University System of Maryland as true labor - as work that contributes to the research, innovation, and progress forward of the flagship institution of the state of Maryland. By approving House Bill 0275 and Senate Bill 0247, you are recognizing that power and decisions must be afforded to those at all levels of the hierarchy, creating a collaborative foundation of trust between administrations and those that work to uphold them.