

**Written Testimony Submitted to the
Maryland Senate Finance Committee
By Jessica Burstrem, Graduate Assistant, UMBC
SB 247**

**State Personnel – Collective Bargaining – Faculty, Part-Time Faculty, and Graduate
Assistants
February 16, 2023**

FAVORABLE

Good afternoon, Chair Griffith, Vice Chair Klausmeier, and members of the Senate Finance Committee. My name is Jessica Burstrem, and I am a Graduate Assistant (GA) at UMBC, where I have worked for over 2 years. I am also a 42-year-old disabled woman, a married mother of two, and a multiple domestic abuse and sexual assault survivor. I have been a Maryland resident and taxpayer since early 2014.

I call on this committee to issue a favorable report to SB 247. The state already grants this right to nearly every other state employee, as well as the faculty at our community colleges and the non-academic workforce at our 4-year institutions. This right should be extended to the rest of higher education in Maryland.

I also write to you today as a member of the UMBC Graduate Assistant Advisory Committee (GAAC), representing all GAs and their interests and concerns here. I have first-hand experience with the current “Meet and Confer” process and have seen that it does not work to solve graduate workers’ problems. Right now, if the university administration wants to prioritize other needs or ignore our concerns, they can, and they do. Right now, we have no recourse outside of certain individual faculty and staff at this university if we have a grievance. That is not a situation that promotes real accountability and power-sharing. We need the chance to try to make a better situation for ourselves, should we ever need it. That power alone – to unionize if we ever need to – may be a game-changer in terms of achieving the best possible outcomes for UMBC GAs, present and future, and for our fellow GAs throughout Maryland.

Zane Poffenberger, the Legislative Concerns Chair for UMBC’s Graduate Student Association, will be appearing in person to speak on our behalf tomorrow. He and the all-women GAAC have collaborated closely on his testimony. I urge you to hear in his voice the more than 750 UMBC GAs whom we represent.

Here, I will tell you a bit of my personal story. As a GA, I have been given various assignments based primarily on the work and research experience I had before I became a student at UMBC in 2020. As important as all my GA work is and has been to the students, faculty, and reputation of UMBC, as well as to me personally, none of it has been directly relevant to my own dissertation work on the 50-year Native American movement to change the name of the Washington football team.

Before coming to UMBC in 2020, I was a teacher or teaching assistant working directly with classroom students since 2004; for ten of those years, I was the teacher of record for college

writing classes. I taught thousands of students in my previous professional career. I have also worked in editing in various capacities from 2000-2015. Make no mistake: I am doing the equivalent of high-level professional consulting work in exchange for the opportunity to earn a PhD here.

My work at UMBC has drawn on my *twenty years of prior work experience* to enhance the professional work of the faculty here. One semester, I prepared and supplied the writing and research teaching strategies and resources I honed during my ten years teaching college writing courses to one of the departments at UMBC to freely use in their own teaching going forward. I spent two years supporting multiple faculty in that department inside and outside of their own classrooms, including teaching, assignment design, student feedback, and grading. I also edited transcripts of online classes during the first year of the pandemic, and I was the primary voice for the department in their public-facing social media accounts for two years.

For the past year, I have been working as a Book Reviews Editor and Editorial Assistant for the journal *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, where the Dean of my college is co-editor – the first time Black women have ever been at the helm of this journal. I work directly with faculty and graduate students as I seek to extend the opportunity for publication in this prestigious journal – and for review of their books – to the kinds of scholars not frequently historically included in *CSMC*, such as scholars from Africa, Asia, and Latin America; students and early career scholars; Black women and women of Color; LGBTQIA+ scholars; practitioners; faculty at teaching-centered schools; etc. It is paradigm-shifting and rewarding work, and I feel proud and honored to be able to do it. But it is work, and it does not help me finish my dissertation. It just helps me fund it.

The only reason I can afford to finally earn a PhD to properly represent the level of work I am capable of and have, in fact, been performing for decades is because, in 2018, I married a man who works for the Federal government. Even then, I took a pay cut to go back to school – a difficult decision in a family of four in which one of our children is himself a community college student as well. However, we also had little choice. My masters degree and decades of work experience have proven insufficient to enable me to secure a job offering a reliable living wage and benefits including retirement funding. Our household income is in the lowest 25% for our residential area. I need this degree for my own future and for my family.

Of course, I needed it before I was married too, when my now-adult son and I were living just over the poverty line, but I couldn't have afforded to get it then.

GAs in a union make more, on average, than those who cannot unionize, while GAs in Maryland on average make well below a living wage, especially if they have dependent children. It is essential to my personal ideals – which, I believe, are also the ideals of UMBC and of most educators and education advocates – that higher education be equitably accessible to all who want or need it, and right now, here, it isn't, and you can do something about that by passing this bill into law this year.

I request a favorable report to SB 247. Thank you for your attention.