

**Written Testimony Submitted to the
Maryland Senate Finance Committee
By Ashesh Sharma, Graduate Student, 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 Ashesh Sharma and I am a graduate student at UMBC, where I have worked for 3 years. 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. It is clear that this right should be extended to the rest of higher education in Maryland.

I wanted to start by introducing the type of work I do. I am a graduate research assistant in a research laboratory in the chemistry and biochemistry department however, I have spent half of my time here at UMBC as a teaching assistant in various laboratory courses in the Biological Sciences department as well as Chemistry and Biochemistry department. The courses that I helped teach are quite popular among students and in total, we have at least 90-100 students each taking the laboratory courses. My responsibilities as a research assistant currently include not only conducting my own research project for my graduate degree but also mentoring up-and-coming undergraduate and high school researchers in STEM in my own laboratory setting. I am currently mentoring five undergraduates, one high school student, and one post-bachelor student. As our lab focuses on developing independent research skills in our researchers, mentoring the researchers in a way that helps them develop independent research/work skills forms one of the core parts of my work here at UMBC. In short, the time I spend off my own bench is not only dedicated to traditional supervision and mentoring, but a large chunk of time is also dedicated to helping my mentees navigate their classes/own research projects through discussions, meetings, and assisted readings. If I may be permitted to write for my fellow research assistants as well, almost all my fellow graduate research assistants are also working beyond their own research projects in different capacities to contribute to the educational environment here at UMBC.

A lot of my individual difficulties associated with my work are the difficulties arising from the lack of proper channels that regulate the communications between the administration and the graduate student. A lot of challenges I encountered in trying my best to go above and beyond my work requirements are not only the lack of a support system that allows and encourages me to do so but also the lack of legal protection that would protect me to argue for the creation of the said support system. The lack of proper attention in even the basic support system such as mental health care, educational, and training support that allows for the improvement of quality of life and quality of service provided by the graduate students are in themselves challenges

that I need to navigate by myself taking time off my own personal life. I think that the enactment of this bill into law not only would provide the basic protection to work towards changes that are conducive to the health and overall, well-being of myself and other graduate students but would also provide a stepping stone for greater involvement and greater commitments from the graduate student community.

As an institution providing education as a service to the people, the quality of education provided through a university is not only contingent upon the framework of that university, but the majority of it is solely dependent upon the individuals that are directly involved in educating the students. It is only through the individual faculty, part-time faculty, and graduate students going above and beyond the requirements of their work that a student in a university can feel the quality of education they receive. However, the legal framework that encourages and protects the faculty, part-time faculty, and graduate students in going above and beyond their work requirements and bargaining in the service of not only their own quality of life but also in service of their students and mentees has been missing in UMBC and surely in other state campuses in Maryland as well. Without the legal umbrella that shields the employees that are primary to the service that a university provides, a lot of voices go unheard, a lot of suggestions go unanswered, and more importantly, a lot of voices go unspoken. This not only undermines the freedom of speech and expression that the constitution grants but also the freedom afforded to a human being in a community, which is a natural freedom. Hence, the right to collective bargaining is such a legal framework, a legal umbrella that protects and encourages the faculty, part-time faculty, and graduate students in going above and beyond their work requirements ensuring that the quality of education that they provide is as high as possible. Hence the exemption of public institution faculty, part-time faculty, and graduate students from this right no longer holds any meaning. I again, therefore, call for a favorable report to SB 247.