

Delores G. Kelley, Chair, Chair  
Brian J. Feldman, Vice Chair  
3 East Miller Senate Office Building  
Annapolis, MD 21401

SB 658  
Supporting

Dear Chair Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman, and Members of the Finance Committee,

I am writing to express my support for the passage of HB 214 / SB 658, known as the Graduate Assistant Collective Bargaining Fairness Act. I am a 3rd-year biochemistry PhD graduate “student” (specifically a research assistant and teaching assistant) in the Biochemistry and Chemistry Department at the University of Maryland, College Park. In addition, I was an undergraduate here and was the captain of the Varsity Track and Field team during that time. I have lived and breathed UMD for nearly a decade. I put “student” in quotations because I firmly believe it’s a dangerous misnomer that allows the University system to mischaracterize us, our work, and our importance in carrying out the University’s mission in order to exploit our labor with minimal repercussions. To be blunt, there is very little “student” about being a graduate student and having the ability to collectively bargain would be a step in the right direction for our rights. Let me explain.

As an RA and TA, I have several jobs I’m responsible for juggling that are mutually exclusive to one another. For example during this semester I am a TA for an organic chemistry lecture which entails me being responsible for leading discussion for 200 undergraduates. Past semesters, I have never taught the same course twice. In addition, I also have my own thesis research. This all is 50 hours of work a week, I don’t know many that work less, while living in an ever-more expensive area. Both aspects add to the University’s mission - I am doing my part to ensure a quality education for students while pushing the frontiers of human knowledge - with the University principally benefitting from this labor.

Meanwhile, the Graduate School Dean, Steve Fetter, has argued that the University is doing graduates, such as myself, a service by allowing us to learn how to teach and do research. This take is incredibly demeaning. I cannot think of another job where one has a Bachelor’s degree yet must accept student status during their first 5-6 years on the job because they are still learning the ropes. Again, I may be learning the ropes, but I am producing real value that the University is capitalizing on. I, and others, have no recourse to improve this - we are simply at the whims of the powers that be. This is an asymmetric power balance that the ability to collectively bargain will ameliorate.

Graduate “students” are the backbone of the University. We teach the classes, we produce the research, we make the University what it is. I am arguing that we are a stunning bargain that the University has been cashing in on for far too long and that UMD can do better. There is a slogan around campus, “fearless ideas”, that to me represents the ability to try something new in the hope of creating a better world. For the majority of graduates, that fearless idea is the ability to carve out our own future. Please support the passage of this bill and thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

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