

Delores G. Kelley, 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 in support of SB 658 Graduate Assistant Collective Bargaining Fairness Act. As a history PhD student, I look to the past to understand the present, and to understand the situation with graduate student we need to look at its origins. The graduate school model is based upon the apprenticeship/master model of the middle ages. According to this model, an apprentice is assigned to a master craftsman and performs labor in exchange for knowledge of the craft. After a time, the apprentice would graduate to journeyman, still working under the master for a number of years, until he was deemed worthy to become a master himself. Despite the grueling and often unpaid labor required from the apprentice, this system worked because at the end of process apprentices were almost guaranteed to economic security. And so did academia for a time, but that is not the case anymore, and that is one of the main reasons we are currently seeing such a push towards collective bargaining for grad students.

While graduate student labor has become more exploitative in recent decades, the situation has been worsened by the fact that graduate workers no longer can expect to rise to the tops of their professions after their degree completion. In the last few decades, higher education (particularly the arts and humanities) has been decimated. The job prospects for much of academia plummeted as tenured-faculty positions have been slashed. Gone are the days of when an academic job meant security and a high standard of living. For many, even the prospect of a job in their field is increasingly out of their grasp. And that is why we are seeing such a push toward graduate student collective bargaining. The bargain has become unfair and graduate students are no longer willing to put up with the insecurity, mistreatment, poverty, and powerlessness for the majority of their young adult years while training for a career that might never come.

While for many graduate workers this is a deeply personal issue, the exploitation of graduate labor is also part the larger problem affecting colleges and universities. In order to cut tenured positions, more and more labor has been shifted to low-paid and over-worked contingency faculty and graduate workers. The exploitation of graduate workers is not an accident, but an essential part of the neoliberalization of academia. Not only are graduate workers being exploited but universities are making us unwilling participants in our own exploitation and career destruction.

Something needs to be done to reverse the declining trajectory of higher education. The first step in that process is to accurately classify graduate workers as workers and allow us the right to advocate for ourselves through collective bargaining by passing SB 658 Graduate Assistant

Collective Bargaining Fairness Act. Only then will we have the tools necessary to begin to fight for economic justice and security for ourselves and have any hope of stemming the tide of exploitation in higher education.

Sincerely,

Alexander M. Dunphy  
PhD, Department of History, UMCP  
Teaching Assistant  
3114 Francis Scott Key Hall  
4282 Chapel Ln.  
College Park, MD 20742  
adunphy@terpmail.umd.edu