

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 to provide my support for SB 658 and urge your support of the measure to provide graduate assistants in Maryland with the rights granted to other federal and state employees.

Before returning to school to pursue my PhD, I was a successful Naval officer. In that career I witnessed numerous mental health problems due to the stress and demands of military life. It wasn't until I returned to this environment and began to experience that process of graduate studies that I fully appreciated the effect on graduate assistants' mental health. Indeed, graduate school is a time of transition and development for individuals that this state and country will rely on to shape the future. This transition brings with it a shift of expectations to a framework of professionalism. A graduate assistant is expected to work a set amount of hours, but also to accomplish the work required by his or her supervisor, whether it be in the lab or in the classroom, regardless of the time constraints. The graduate assistant is expected to take time for self-development. The graduate assistant is expected to produce a product that is unique and valuable to the scientific community. The graduate student is a professional.

As professionals whose ultimate purpose is to provide a product that pushes our state and country into the future, it is vital that the institutions we serve under provide us with the rights required to enable that productivity. Graduate students have mental health crisis rates at similar rates to veterans. It is easy to say that these should not be similar because being a veteran comes with an inherent explanation for this crisis. However, that is the insidious thing about mental health issues. Mental health issues do not require an instigating event. Instead they are a symptom of support from one's environment. I am writing to tell you that the environment that we are cultivating graduate students in is not one of support, but of intense pressure and competition. If we want to solve the problems of today and tomorrow, then we have to do better. We need to provide my colleagues with the support that they deserve. In this case, this means simply allowing us to have a full, legally significant voice at the table. We can negotiate ways to remedy the mental health crisis for ourselves, we just need a chance.

Lest you believe the mental health of the graduate student is not a significant issue, I would remind you that this is an issue of competition as well. The state of Maryland does not have a monopoly on quality higher education. It competes for the talent of my peers with dozens of institutions around the country. In denying this state's graduate assistants similar rights, Maryland places itself at a severe competitive disadvantage. Case in point, a midwestern university offered myself and a colleague more than 7000 dollars more per year in compensation.

That is coupled with a cost of living that is approximately two thirds of what is required here in the College Park area. That is a yearly differential of approximately 19000 dollars. Over the course of a five year PhD program that is \$96,000. My colleague is likely leaving this state in part due to this disparity. That is a tangible loss for Maryland.

We are not asking for much. Just the same right that is granted to all other public employees.

Sincerely,

Dustin Swanson
PhD Student, Department of Physics
Research Assistant
3404 Tulane Drive, Apt. 32, Hyattsville, MD 20783
dlswanso@umd.edu