

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

SB 521
Supporting

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

I am a third year PhD student in the Neuroscience and Cognitive Science (NACS) program at University of Maryland, College Park, and I am writing to you in support of SB521 – granting collective bargaining rights to graduate students of the University of Maryland system. University of Maryland has an exceptional record in science innovation, and I am very grateful to be part of this scientific community, but it is necessary to acknowledge that the backbone of this exceptionalism comes from the hard work of graduate researchers and teaching assistants. By being denied a seat at the table when it comes to policies impacting graduate students, the state is telling its indispensable graduate students that they are not valued.

During my time at UMD, I have made significant contributions to two different R01 grants from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), which have brought millions of dollars to the university. Through this work, I also provided pilot data that enabled our lab to recently be awarded another R01. Moreover, I have spent countless hours training undergrads in neuroimaging methods, which has served to augment the education they received through their classwork. Despite my contributions to UMD's exceptionalism, my graduate stipend has remained under the NIH standard, which is meager for the cost of living in the area. Giving collective bargaining rights to graduate students would facilitate more equitable solutions for everyone at the university.

On a personal note, I am step-father to two elementary school aged children who are simultaneously in awe of the work that I do, yet negatively impacted by the financial cost that graduate school has had on our family. Little things like mandatory fees due each semester slowly eat away at our ability to live comfortably. While I am not expecting professional level pay, I would like the means to voice my frustrations about such policies that the administration is likely unaware of. Opening up dialogue between the policy makers and the graduate students who are impacted by these policies will only serve to improve the university overall. I truly hope that you take a proactive approach in recognizing graduate student workers as workers, and pass the SB521 collective bargaining bill.

Sincerely,

Junaid S Merchant, MS
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