

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,

As a PhD candidate in history, my goal has been to explore the countless courageous efforts of everyday people banding together to fight for justice, security, and dignity; to learn the collective strategies that lead to victory; and to extract the lessons from failure.

I have tried to use the lessons this history provides to effect change in my community and on my campus. For the past three and a half years, I have devoted myself to organizing my colleagues to fight for justice, security, and improved working conditions for my fellow graduate workers. As the Student Interest Liaison for the history department I am tasked with acting as a representative to the department on behalf of history graduate students concerning their working conditions; as the chair of the Graduate Assistant Advisory Committee, I act as a representative for all graduate workers and communicate our grievances and concerns to the university administration; as a representative to the Graduate Student Government I mobilized graduate students to push for greater protections and services; and as the President of Fearless Student Employees, I help spearhead the continuing legislative effort to pass a state law recognizing our status as employees entitled to national labor protections.

These roles have put me in a unique position to interact with the larger community of graduate students and hear about the struggles they are facing. Graduate workers are overworked, underpaid, and have little legal protections as workers. We lack medical or family leave, we are vulnerability due to our immigration status, we have no assistance for child care, we are at the whims of abusive supervisors, and we face racial, gender, and sexual discrimination. Graduate workers face a massive power imbalance when dealing with their employers and we lack any legal protections or means of redress because in the state of Maryland, graduate workers at public universities lack the rights afforded to other employees.

The situation has become even more dire in the Covid-19 pandemic. Graduate workers have had their workload increase, lost their assistantships, been forced to work in person without proper precautions, while being denied the vaccine because they are not “employees.”

Beyond the immediate concerns of graduate workers, the Covid-19 pandemic has terrifying implications for academia as a whole. In the past, the treatment of graduate workers was justified as a temporary initiation or “apprenticeship” which would guarantee a secure profession within the academy. However, the promise of a faculty position is increasingly becoming out of reach for many graduate students. The majority of those with humanities PhDs do not end up in academia and only a small fraction of those are able to secure a tenured-track position. The situation has become even more dire in the Covid-19 pandemic. Lost revenue, lower enrollments, and new expenditures have led to state budget cuts which have forced many universities to reduce the number of teaching assistantships, cancel grants and fellowships, and

impose hiring freezes. The full ramifications of this health crisis are still unknown but unless action is taken the result will be an ever-decreasing number of people choosing to pursue graduate degrees and jobs in academia.

The good news is that there is an easy step that will help ameliorate many of these problems: grant graduate workers in Maryland the same rights graduate workers at many public and all private universities already enjoy. The right to collective bargaining would allow us to a seat at the table and force the university to take our needs seriously.

I understand some are concerned about the potential budget implications of this act (especially in light of the pandemic), however, these concerns are unfounded. Collective bargaining is just that: *bargaining*. Just because the university is required to bargain in good faith with us, does not automatically translate into higher salaries for graduate workers. While higher salaries would of course be welcomed, there are a myriad of other benefits that graduate workers is the USM would gain from collective bargaining, that would not impact the budget. Clearer guidelines, contracts, improved grievance procedures, access to the Maryland State Higher Education Labor Relations Board – all of these would do wonders in improving the experience of graduate workers and would cost the state nothing.

Graduate workers are essential workers. Essential during the pandemic, essential to the running of the university system, and essential to a well-functioning society. Graduate students have much to contribute to US policy, economy, culture, and efforts to make a more just society. If we do not foster this kind of knowledge, we are doing our world a disservice. Therefore, I implore you to vote in favor of SB521.

Sincerely,

Alexander M. Dunphy  
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President, Fearless Student Employees  
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