

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 writing in support of collective bargaining rights for graduate student employees in the State of Maryland; I urge you to pass SB521

I have been a faculty member at the University of Maryland College Park since 1988. I just stepped down from directing my department's undergraduate Bachelor of Arts program in American Studies for ten years. Our Ph.D. students provide most of the lower level coursework for our degree program. I cannot consider them instructors-in-training or apprentices. Many of our graduate assistants teach every facet of our courses, just as I do as a professor. They create their courses, select the readings, write the syllabus and determine the course calendar. They prepare and teach every class session. They hold office hours to help students succeed in their courses and they do a lot of informal advising. They create all of the assignments and do all the grading, work out the grading scale, and turn in the grades at the end of the semester. They have persevered through this awful pandemic where online teaching increases their workload dramatically and where they have extended care and concern and resourcefulness to help their students learn. Their work to teach their classes is identical to what I do as a tenured professor, so they are clearly employees, like I am.

While graduate assistants function as employees, they are treated like second class citizens. This starts with their low stipend. In a humanities department like mine, students teach 1-2 courses a semester and they often can't teach during the summer. Their stipend for the year is \$17,980, below poverty level for our region. In the humanities, students are not working as part of a grant-funded team so their stipend is not supplemented by monies from a grant. \$17,980 is their total income and they are not expected to take on any additional employment to make ends meet. The average rent in our area is upwards of \$1000/month, so the stipend doesn't stretch to maintain students adequately with a healthy diet and enough money to cover their books and expenses. A UMD Dining Services survey completed in 2018-19 found that 25% of our graduate students are food insecure. We suspect the percentage has gone up since the pandemic took hold in our region.

In addition, graduate assistants are often put in the situation where they have no workplace rights at all. They can be asked or manipulated into working more than their maximum (for fulltime GAs) 20 hours a week. They often have no recourse to protest this kind of exploitation because their work supervisors also have control over their progress toward the degree and toward the kinds of opportunities that help them build successful credentials. They often choose to suffer in silence rather than risk losing their GAs or angering professors or administrators who have control over their graduate student careers.

In most departments on campus, graduate assistants perform crucial work that enables students to get the courses they need to graduate on time. Our grad assistants teach excellent courses and provide important mentorship to undergraduates. I know this because my administrative position for the past ten years was the complaint department for dissatisfied students and I hear the praise and testimonials that our undergraduate majors pass along to me...and very little criticism.

Graduate assistants—whether they are teaching, administrative, or research assistants, enable our universities to move students through to completion of their degrees, assist units to manage their workload, and professors to supervise life-changing research programs. The university could not meet its obligations to the State of Maryland without these crucial employees.

Permit me a last anecdote. Last March, one of my students looked to be in ill health and fainted while walking across the campus. It turned out that her pallid demeanor and fainting spell (not the only one) was caused by extreme hunger. Her family had had extra expenses—a car repair and a required expense for a child in public school--and she did not have enough money for food, once the expenses were paid out of her meager stipend. It is important to remember the sacrifices our students are making for their educations. Our grad students are human beings: daughters, sons, mothers, sisters, fathers, brothers who work hard at their jobs and hard at their studies. For all these reasons, graduate employees need and must have collective bargaining rights. They are critical workers on our campuses and they deserve a stipend they can live on, dignity, and the means to report and remedy exploitation. I urge you to please support SB 658.

Sincerely,

Mary Corbin Sies

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