

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,

My name is Sai Kanth, I am a Ph.D. Candidate in Physics at the University of Maryland. Nearly four and a half years ago, I graduated from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras, and I accepted an admission offer from the University of Maryland's highly reputed Department of Physics.

I came here knowing that I was far from being the first student from the best university in India to come to UMD for graduate school, and I will leave from here knowing that I am far from being the last one. At UMD, I have interacted with some of the best talent from across the globe. Although most of us are incredibly grateful for the research opportunities that UMD has provided us, we cannot help but be concerned about the lack of sufficient financial support for graduate students, and thereby a general disregard for our mental health and wellbeing.

Among all of the Big 10 schools, UMD pays its graduate assistants the least, relative to local cost of living. Given the incredibly expensive area that the DC Metro Area is, it is very difficult to manage a healthy living on our current stipend levels. Unless one lives right next to campus and doesn't need a car, has no medical expenses, has no student or other loans, spends very little on food, has plenty of family financial support, and has no other financial obligations or difficulties whatsoever, it is extremely difficult for one to not let financial distress affect one's mental health, on top of the stress that a Ph.D. already puts on one.

The lack of a sufficiently good public transportation system that works during the winter and summer, and beyond 5/6 PM each day (this is highly relevant given the long hours many of us have to spend in our labs), as well as the lack of affordable food options, puts on many of us an unhealthy amount of stress on a day-to-day basis. Unless one is willing to eat unhealthy fast food, it is essentially impossible to find a place around College Park where one can find a meal at a restaurant for under \$10. For comparison, many Big 10 schools that I've visited are located in lesser expensive areas, and food is relatively much more inexpensive. Not to mention the better pay in comparison to cost of living.

In essence, there is little to no room for error even in the best possible scenario, even with the best personal financial management skills. We are well aware of the fact that we are gaining access to education through this Ph.D., but we strongly believe that we shouldn't have to choose

between paying the bills and putting food on the table every single day.

Every graduate student friend that I have made here at UMD -- Americans and internationals alike -- struggle with this. Many of my American friends have student loans from their undergraduate to clear, and some even have families and kids to tend to. Among my fellow international students, many of us come from countries and families where we do not have much financial support. Doing a Ph.D. in today's fast-changing environment is incredibly difficult as it is, and the last thing that we as graduate students want to deal with is yet another source of stress and difficulty.

As many of my colleagues have said in their excellent testimonials, all that the graduate student body at UMD seeks is the right to bargain for a fair wage. It is a right that other employees of the State of Maryland deservedly possess, and it is one that we believe we deserve too, as the work that we do is incredibly important for the functioning and continuing success of the University System of Maryland.

Although we are paid for 20 hrs/wk during the semester and 40 hrs/wk during the summer, most of us work for far longer than that throughout the year. Last month, for example, my work averaged at around 55 hrs/wk. The fact of the matter is that we put in so much work not just for our own learning and success, but also so that our advisors can secure grants, and so that our department can continue to attract the best students and faculty.

It is my strong belief that a graduate student body that has its concerns truly heard and addressed can produce much better results for the University overall. It is my sincere hope that upon reading these testimonials, you will consider our reasonable request.

Sincerely,

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