

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 PhD candidate in University of Maryland, doing research in Quantum Optics, and also an international student from Greece.

First of all, the proposed bill will allow graduate students to collectively bargain if they choose to do so, possibly starting by forming a union. This is not an end-goals in itself; it is the suggestions it will put forward that justify its existence. And talking about suggestions and needs...

I've heard previously that I should primarily think of myself as a student working towards their dissertation, instead of as a worker meriting compensation for all hours of work. Our labs receive millions of funding to develop solutions and prototypes by doing very real work. Commonly, our professors rely on graduate students and post-docs to operate these labs. Yet, our love for science and the fact that we DO acquire a lot of knowledge during our PhDs have been distorted into a "students-and-not-workers" label by the Dean of the Graduate School in a previous hearing for the bill. This label allows the university to pay stipends averaging \$20k/year.

In any case, I get paid "like a student", but I cannot pay rent or eat "like a student". We also heard that a certain survey showed that the living cost in Maryland does not exceed roughly \$20k/year. I AGREE with this statement. In fact, it's hard to miss how literal it is. One will live with \$20k/year; they will not die – excluding emergencies. If the assumption here is that graduate students do not deserve to satisfy every single one of a list of needs like a healthy diet AND decent housing AND leisure activities AND financial protection from medical emergencies – and all of this in one of the most expensive areas in the United States – then I am unpleasantly surprised by this assumption.

Moving on, to working conditions and advisor-advisee relationships, UMD does have grievance mechanisms in place. Grievance mechanisms that can really only address isolated incidents of guideline violation. When it comes to issues like work hours, vacation days, or even participation to science outreach events, then University guidelines are overlooked widely and wildly. Especially international students feel pressured to follow all of their advisor professor's requirements, since their legal status in the country is tied to their degree. An advisor professor holds an enormous amount of power over the student and their relationship determines the student's later career. A certain professor was as respectful as to say, "I tend to ignore emails about these statements of mutual expectations" (which is a recently earned right for graduate students. Who will risk pushing back? By the way, I believe that this answers another one of Dean Fetter's concerns, that a union could be an intermediary complicating the mentor-mentee

relationship: it is an advisor not tending to the needs and realities of their advisees that complicates this relationship.

Let me conclude by saying: UMD graduate assistants are facing issues that are known and unaddressed. This means that the only ones who can advocate for them are themselves, and the right to collective bargaining serves exactly that necessity. We are not asking for the right to advocate for unfairly high salaries, laziness or disruption – we are just stating that not having collective bargaining rights undermines the work we are doing, challenges any reasonable line of thought and compromises our dignity. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Antonios Kyprianidis
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