

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,

Graduate students are essential workers. Over the past year, we have lionized the essential workers that make our society function: the grocery store clerks, the delivery people, the frontline health care workers. Although graduate students may not be as essential as these workers during a pandemic, they are essential to the enterprise of the contemporary research university. Indeed, if we see the educational opportunities provided by the University of Maryland as essential to the future success of the state, then we must see the success of graduate students as integral to that success. Graduate students teach tens of thousands of students each semester. They support the research endeavors of faculty, often while pursuing independent research projects of their own. They are both “essential” and “workers,” and thus should have collective bargaining rights like any other worker.

In an ideal world, no worker would need the right to collective bargaining. Everyone who labored on behalf of an institution would be fairly compensated for their work. It goes without saying that we are not living in an ideal world. The University of Maryland, like institutions of higher education across the United States, has been steadily starved of state resources, making it difficult to keep compensation commensurate with our peers and our location, which has seen an obscene surge in rent over the last 20 years. In the absence of adequate stipends and cost of living increases, graduate students are seeking the right to have collective bargaining rights so that they might collectively organize to improve their working conditions. Like most other workers, they should have that right.

It is simply untenable to categorize graduate student workers as workers sometimes, and students other times. They are graduate student workers. We must acknowledge their identities as students, learning a craft, but also as workers, doing the craft. While graduate studies have long been seen as a kind of apprenticeship, we ought not be asking students to live the life of a medieval apprentice. We ought to be thinking of ways to improve their working and living conditions. A good start would be to give them the collective bargaining rights that so many other workers in other industries have.

Sincerely,

Damien Smith Pfister

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