

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 SB 521. I believe graduate students should have the legal right to collective bargaining, should we vote to unionize.

At the beginning of Fall Semester, 2020, the department of physics assigned teaching assistantships to us. Several lab courses were run in person, meaning that a significant proportion of our graduate students would have to be teaching in person during a pandemic, else lose their funding for the semester. In-person teaching positions had no additional hazard pay, nor were the safety protocols in labs clearly communicated to us. The exception to this was students with pre existing medical conditions, which students could use to ask the department to assign them to a fully online teaching position. For students to be forced into the uncomfortable position of either revealing their medical history, or choose between unemployment and personal endangerment was an extremely stressful situation. I myself am on immunosuppressants, and as a vulnerable member of the population it was especially disturbing that other graduate students in my department could be forced into a dangerous position. As many physics graduate students also rent rooms together in the same house, it is not enough to only allow vulnerable students to teach online, when in fact housemates could become direct vectors of transmission. Fortunately, the department was receptive to our negotiations, and with our feedback was able to allow students to teach only in positions they felt comfortable with. However, this could easily have gone another direction—our wellbeing was in the hands of the goodwill of the physics department heads. If they had simply chosen not to prioritize our voices, we would have had no legal recourse. If HB 214/SB 658 passes, university administrators will be legally required to at least consider our thoughts, and we will no longer be in such a vulnerable position.

An argument often put forward is that graduate students are simply students, not workers—every aspect of the PhD program is engineered for our own education, including teaching. This is patently false. My teaching assistantship last semester consisted of grading problem sets for around 60 students every week, which took up a significant amount of time. To those who consider graduate students not to be workers, I ask—how does grading the same introductory problem again and again 60 times a week contribute to my education? It takes time away from my own classes and research, and certainly does not make me a better teacher or instructor—I have very limited interaction with the students. Graduate students perform these essential functions simply because they must be done, and not because they become better instructors by

grading. Anyone with romantic notions of PhD students preparing for professorship by doing teaching assistantships has never held one of these grading positions. As an aspiring theoretical physicist, as opposed to an experimental physicist, I will continue to grade throughout my PhD. If the logic that all our duties as PhD students are for our own education holds, then it follows that theorists are preparing for a heavier teaching career as professors, which is patently false. The reality is that theory students continue to teach beyond their first few years due to lack of funding for research assistants, not because we will be teaching more than our experimental colleagues as professors. Students with external funding are also not required to take on teaching assistantships—if these positions were designed for our own benefit, why would they not be required for students with funding? What are these teaching assistantships then, if not jobs to support us financially? As workers, we deserve bargaining rights—or at least the legal option to vote for it.

Thank you for your consideration, and I hope to have made a clear argument in favor of SB 521.

Sincerely,

Emily Kaiyin Jiang
PhD, Department of Physics, MCFP
Teaching Assistant
8805 38th Ave
College Park, MD 20740
ejiang@umd.edu