



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

Office of the Dean

2125 Lee Building
College Park, MD 20742-5121
Tel (301) 405-0358 Fax (301) 314-9305
www.gradschool.umd.edu

SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE

Senate Bill 521

State Personnel — Collective Bargaining

February 18, 2021

Urging an Unfavorable Report

Chair Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for allowing me to testify on Senate Bill 521, which would authorize graduate assistants to collectively bargain.

Graduate assistants are students first and foremost. Nearly all Ph.D. students are GAs, and their duties as graduate teaching and research assistants are part of their education. Many doctoral programs expect or require all students to teach as part of their education, not only to prepare them as future faculty but to gain experience explaining complex subjects and to understand the subject more deeply by learning to explain it to others. Research assistantships allow students to learn to do original research and scholarship under the guidance of a faculty mentor—research that often is identical to the dissertation research that is required for their degree.

The university's "Meet and Confer" process—where an elected group of GAs meets with the Provost, the Vice President for Finance and Administration, and me at least once each semester to discuss concerns and solutions—has been a productive avenue to address student concerns and solutions for the past ten years.

In response to concerns about stipend levels, the minimum stipend has increased 20% since July 2018. The minimum stipend is now above the cost of attendance, including living expenses. The average stipend of \$22,000 for a 20 hours per week GA appointment during the 9-month academic year is equivalent to \$58,600 per year for full-time work. GAs receive free tuition and subsidized health insurance, bringing average GA compensation to about \$50,000 per year—for 20 hours per week over the 9-month academic year. Our average stipend is in the middle of the Big Ten peers that have collective bargaining for GAs.

Meet and Confer outcomes include new policies for parental leave, time away from duties, and a grievance process. A Counselor position was created last year to help students access university services and support. Expectation-setting meetings between GAs and their supervisors are now required, and statements of mutual expectation developed to guide them. In response to concerns that GAs were working more than 20 hours per week, we commissioned an independent study which showed GAs spend an average of 18 hours per week on their duties—including 6 hours that contribute to a student's own research required for the degree.

The “Meet and Confer” process provides GAs with many of the perceived benefits that collective bargaining offers, including the right to engage a labor organization to assist them in this process. In the 11 years that the “Meet and Confer” process has been in place, GAs have declined to engage a labor organization.

In addition to the “Meet and Confer” process, graduate students serve on the Graduate Council, which sets policy for graduate education, including graduate assistantships. I also meet regularly with leadership of the Graduate Student Government.

The Graduate School encourages students to report violations of Graduate School and University policy, including excessive hours, harassment, unacceptable behavior, or unsafe conditions. The Graduate Student Ombudsman provides confidential and informal assistance in resolving conflicts and promotes fair and equitable treatment. The Graduate School can take formal action to investigate and resolve problems as needed. Collective bargaining would limit the University’s ability to address graduate student problems as they arise and reduce the current flexibility to tailor solutions to the situation of a particular student.

The financial impact of collective bargaining would depend on the details of whatever contract is negotiated, but it could be substantial. Advocates of collective bargaining have argued for stipend levels of more than \$36,000 per year. Raising stipends to that level would cause a 70 percent increase in GA expenditures and a \$60 million per year increase in instructional expenditure, requiring more than a 10 percent increase in State appropriation or a 10 percent increase in tuition. If State appropriations and tuition did not rise to cover this increase, the result would be a 40 percent decrease in the number of GA appointments—and a corresponding decrease in the size of doctoral programs, the production of PhDs, and the contribution of our PhD programs to the Maryland economy.

In addition to increased stipends, collective bargaining could lead to additional benefits. GAs already have access to the same health plans as faculty and staff. Their student status exempts them from Social Security and Medicare tax, but adding additional benefits could result in GAs being reclassified as “professional employees,” subject to additional taxes. The University may need to withhold 7.65% from a GA’s taxable compensation and pay an equal employer’s share. Unemployment insurance and union dues are an additional cost. Expenditures for a GA could increase by more than 17% with no increase in student take-home pay. Moreover, students whose duties are not related to teaching or research could be excluded from GA appointments, or much of their tuition benefit could be subject to income tax.

Research assistantships, which are included in SB 521, are particularly difficult to adapt to collective bargaining. There often is a large overlap between the research a student does for a faculty member as part of the faculty member’s research grant or contract, and the research a student does for his or her dissertation and degree. The former is essential training for the latter, and it is often impossible to determine where one ends and the other begins. Completing a dissertation—a piece of original research and scholarship—requires long hours of effort regardless of whether the student has a research assistantship, and the amount of effort

required for the dissertation cannot be affected by collective bargaining. For this reason, most institutions that have collective bargaining for teaching assistants do not extend it to research assistants. Of the five Big Ten institutions with collective bargaining for GAs, only Rutgers includes research assistants, and the contract specifies that it has no impact on the research work needed to satisfy degree requirements.

Finally, collective bargaining takes a long time and stable relationships are inherently impossible when the union representation is inexperienced and turns over every few years as students graduate. If collective bargaining is permitted, students who might support union membership will leave campus soon after any election is held. A union will already be in place, and students who come after will have no say in whether it should exist. It will be difficult to adjust or dislodge, which would be unfair to future generations of students.

The Graduate School is an advocate for all graduate students, including GAs. We want all graduate students to succeed and we want to help resolve any problems that arise. Collective Bargaining is not a path to this outcome that is in the best interests of UMD graduate students or the University.

Steve Fetter
Associate Provost and Dean, The Graduate School
University of Maryland, College Park

Minimum Graduate Assistant Stipends and Collective Bargaining Status
Big Ten Public Universities, Spring 2021, 20 hour/week appointment

Institution	Minimum Stipend		Collective Bargaining?		
	Academic Year	Full Year	TA	AA	RA
Rutgers ¹	30,162	33,999	Y	Y	Y
Michigan ²	22,433		Y	Y	
Penn State	20,790	27,720			
Wisconsin ³	20,402	24,816			
Iowa	20,041	24,486	Y	Y	
Maryland⁴	19,359	24,452			
Ohio State	19,280	25,707			
Illinois	17,788	23,717	Y	Y	
Michigan St ⁵	17,004	22,672	Y		
Purdue	15,448	18,538			
Minnesota	15,343	20,456			
Nebraska	10,610	14,147			
Indiana	9,914	11,892			

¹Standard appointment is 15 hours per week.

²No minimum full-year stipend.

³Academic-year stipend is the average of minimum TA (\$20,500) and RA (\$20,304) stipends.

⁴For 9.5-month appointments as of 1/1/20. All TAs, and 68% of all academic-year GA appointments, are 9.5-month appointments. The minimum stipend for 9-month appointments is \$17,980.

⁵For TA. The minimum academic-year stipend for non-union AAs and RAs is \$14,118.

Average Cost of Attendance and Average Stipend, AY20-21 (9 months)

Cost	Graduate Student	Graduate Assistant
Tuition (10 credits/semester)	\$32,500	—
Mandatory fees	\$1,635	\$1,635
Off-campus rent and utilities	\$9,314	\$9,314
Food and meals	\$5,120	\$5,120
Personal expenses	\$1,144	\$1,144
Books and supplies	\$624	\$624
Health insurance	\$1,555	\$572
Transportation	\$522	\$522
Average cost of attendance	\$52,414	\$18,931
Average academic-year stipend	—	\$21,989

Tuition is the maximum covered for graduate assistants at the non-resident rate; average graduate tuition is \$23,584. Transportation cost is from the Bureau of Labor Statistic's Consumer Expenditure Survey for public transportation in the Northeast region. (Mandatory fees cover shuttle bus service to most areas where graduate assistants live.) Other costs are estimated by the Office of Student Financial Aid according to federal guidelines; see <https://financialaid.umd.edu/resources-policies/cost-attendance>.