

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 support legalizing collective bargaining rights for graduate employees within Maryland so that we can be recognized and have the potential to negotiate as full employees. Without this recognition, without any formal seat at the table, policies about graduate student employment are vague.

Vague policies such as, for example, leaving parental accommodation decisions up to “department culture” are not policies at all. At best, these “policies” leave students to negotiate their status themselves with those who control their academic and early professional career; at worst, they leave students open to discrimination because of precedent set by “department culture” that is not rooted in equality and inclusion. When pregnant with my first child, for example, I received derogatory comments (fortunately, not from my advisor!). As the first woman graduate Teaching Assistant to give birth during the semester, my department had no “department culture,” and--especially after hearing these insulting and utterly degrading questions--I battled extreme anxiety as I worked with my department to shape my accommodation plan on my own. Fortunately, my individual advisor was kind and understanding, but he was at a loss of how to accommodate the many unknowns of birth and infant care within the bureaucratic layers of the undergraduate courses that graduate students in my department teach. When I contacted the University’s ombudsman, his lack of empathy and lack of knowledge about what employment options were available in my department quickly revealed that rather than a helpful resource, conversations with him were a further emotional drain and, more practically, a waste of precious time.

Like so many other systemic problems, the current COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the inequity present in vague policies for graduate students--these vague policies create and perpetuate a culture in which graduate student workers are not provided essential resources to complete their work and their own studies/research, our two primary functions at universities. For my Teaching Assistant position during Fall 2020, I was the sole TA for an upper-level

undergraduate course. I have two children: one was 2 at the start of Fall 2020, one was 6 months old. My baby's sitter unfortunately tested positive for COVID-19 in the second week of the semester; this news and the need to immediately begin quarantine meant we had to pull our eldest from her daycare center, which subsequently closed when my children and I tested positive. My husband and I, then, faced battling this disease within our family and caring for two young children who need constant supervision for at least two weeks while also both trying to sustain our work.

We quickly realized that in reality, the FFCRA was not so helpful; it would have allowed my husband (who had just begun a new job 1 week earlier) up to a maximum 80 hours of PTO, and myself a maximum of 40 hours. These finite numbers are not helpful because (1) your quarantine may be extended, as ours was, due to the onset date and nature of your symptoms, (2) it does not consider the continued closure of any child care center--our eldest's daycare center remained closed even after our quarantine ended, because of the different dates of exposure. As we began our quarantine, we were hesitant to use these finite hours too quickly, lest we run out and still be sick and/or without childcare.

As a graduate employee, I am afforded "time away," per the [Graduate Handbook](#). I take seriously my responsibility as a teacher--the job for which I am paid--and I am devoted to my students. As the sole TA for this course, I knew that taking formal "time away" would have a severe, negative impact on their learning, in an already tumultuous semester of online learning. As the sole TA for this course, what did "time away" mean? How was my work to be distributed? Who would do it? Who was allowed to do it? (In my department, not all are eligible to be the TA for upper-level/major-required courses.) The lead professor of the course, an adjunct, did not know...but neither did the division chair, nor members of my department's administration. On my end, as I was thrown into quarantine, battled COVID, and sought to provide my family and myself with healthful, immune-boosting meals (something that takes time and great coordination with helpful friends and family), I frankly did not have the hours, mental stability, or emotional capacity to figure out what even my department's administration did not know: the "red tape" of what "time away" meant for me, my students, and the course in this situation. I tried to stay on top of email, be available on Zoom for the required sessions, and

simply survive. The result was that I got behind on other teaching responsibilities and was not “caught up” until mid-December; for my students, my COVID quarantine and diagnosis meant delayed and reduced feedback the entire semester. Furthermore, this experience prevented me from completing my own research and making progress on my dissertation for the remainder of the calendar year.

While COVID19 is a new--and I hope unique--situation, the phenomena of graduate student employees contracting an illness certainly is not. And yet, there are no guidelines provided to professors or departmental administrators for examples, regulations, etc. of how to handle graduate employee “time away.” My lead professor was provided with no resources, and those above her were also totally unprepared for how to provide assistance to a course without multiple TAs assigned to it. As with so many things, the pandemic has served to highlight a crucial structural flaw: not having clear policies of how “time away” may be handled for different funding situations creates impossible situations not just for students, but also for faculty and administrators.

Having the right to collective bargaining will *in itself* help to amplify and strengthen graduate student voices. University administrations will be more encouraged to make real, meaningful adjustments for graduate student employees when we have this right, even before a union is created (if one ever is). I hope you join our efforts to make possible a brighter, more equitable education system and future for us and our children.

Sincerely,

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