

Esteemed Maryland Representatives,

Thank you for hearing us today. I am honored to be able to share my experience with you, as a representative of my university and as a Graduate Assistant (GA). I've been a GA for three semesters so far, with 2 remaining before I graduate.

When I applied to be a GA, I was drawn by the promises of a "free education" and doing meaningful work in my department to gain skills towards my studies in Counseling Psychology. The advertised 20 hour workload seemed manageable with my academic schedule and the benefits seemed great. When I started working, I found that this was not the case and it was clear that we either accept the terms or be replaced.

I have experienced late contracts and being reassigned without consultation. My supervisor had to directly intervene when my position and pay rate were changed to being an on campus teaching assistant for freshman, a unilateral decision that was only reversed with solidarity of student workers. The Office of Graduate Studies didn't get enough people to volunteer to teach on campus in the Fall, so they chose GAs to fill those roles without consulting us. Collective bargaining would have given us a voice and protected us from decisions like this.

At my university, we are paid minimum wage and strongly encouraged not to have employment outside of our GA positions. The strain that a full time class load, a part time position, and the requirements of campus involvement are enough to balance, but does not take into account Maryland's high living cost. This financial burden we face is met with suggestions of taking out student loans to cover basic necessities. A single dollar doesn't stretch as far as it used to, but it can mean the difference between a snack to get through the day and an overdraft fee. We aren't asking for a handout, but a fair wage for fair work.

Without collective bargaining, our contracts and rates are decided by persons who look at the bottom line while increasing our fees and tuition each year. While my tuition is covered, it currently takes me over 90 hours of work each semester just to pay for the fees. With a cap of 20 hours a week, this becomes almost 5 weeks of work. If I am sick and unable to work, then I am simply not paid for those hours. Without benefits that cover sick time, leave and bereavement the small stipend we get continues to shrink, furthering our feelings of being expendable.

In a meeting recently, we were scolded for not submitting time cards correctly, although most of the issues were with HR, not anything we have control over. Additionally, we were reminded that we cannot submit more than 20 hours, but if we

want to be “helpful” to our supervisors who “need more help” then we can’t be paid for it. This imbalance of power between us and our supervisors is compounded, as most of our supervisors are our advisors and professors. These are the people who have control over students, grades and how they progress in their respective programs. How much negotiation power do we have without collective bargaining? Even though I gratefully assist someone who respects me and considers my needs, I regularly work more than 20 hours per week, feeling pressure to help my peers succeed at the institution and assist my supervisor throughout their day. These small moments add up quickly, and I now spend most of my time at my computer, attempting to complete my schoolwork and job tasks.

In March 2020, higher learning rushed to adopt virtual learning. This simply could not have happened without the skills of GAs. My work has directly ensured that several classes were able to transition to the online format, with course material being available to students. Professors rely on us to make sure classes run smoothly and sometimes at all. Administrators rely on us to maintain records and keep them informed for meetings. Students rely on us for campus information, program requirements and institution policies. Because of COVID, I now find myself perpetually on call, tracking at least 15 hours per week on meetings alone. Each week, another task outside the scope of my job description is added, including personal technical support and advising students. A person who wears as many hats as we do surely deserves the right to advocate for themselves.

We are asking you to give us the opportunity to collectively bargain, not provide it for us. Supporting this legislation doesn’t even guarantee that each institution will use collective bargaining, but please understand and appreciate our desire to be as independent as possible. We want to be educated citizens, contributing to society with higher education and more stable careers. Please help us achieve these goals by allowing us to properly advocate for ourselves. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Liberty Deffenbaugh', written in a cursive style.

Liberty Deffenbaugh  
Bowie State University  
Graduate Student Association Vice President and Graduate Assistant