

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 SB521 Graduate Assistant Collective Bargaining Fairness Act. I am a PhD candidate in History at the University of Maryland, College Park. During my time here at the university, there have been numerous efforts at trying to try to gain collective bargaining rights for graduate students. I have supported each of these efforts because it is my fundamental belief that workers have the right to organize their workplace to improve their conditions. Graduate students, in addition to being students, are workers. We teach classes, run labs, grade assignments, staff administrative positions, and maintain our library and archival services. Graduate student-workers are often the most forward-facing contacts that students, staff, professors, and visitors have when they are at UMD. Because of the vital role played by graduate student workers, we should have the right to organize and collectively bargain as workers.

When discussing collective bargaining and potential unionization, the focus is often on wages and compensation, but for many, the issue is less with pay than with our working conditions. Collective bargaining would provide an opportunity to create a more equitable and open work environment. For graduate student workers, often their conditions are the product of a vague and ad-hoc set of traditions determined by individual professors or administrators. Even with the introduction of statements of mutual expectations, there are still unresolved problems with respect to their enforcement or if the student-worker has a dispute. Graduate student workers are often placed in a delicate situation where their boss is often an adviser or committee member. This means in a dispute they run the risk of damaging their academic career prospects. They would further have to rely on the broader academic department which may or not choose to advocate for a student over a colleague. Collective bargaining would not end disputes, but it would allow for more formalized means of redress.

In addition to providing a more equitable means of resolving work disputes, collective bargaining would also offer an opportunity to create a more coherent system of compensation. Even beyond disparities between different colleges and fields, within departments there is a lot of opacity and inconsistency regarding compensation for performing the same jobs.

Collective bargaining would also offer other opportunities for graduate student workers to be classified as workers, and not students. Though this shift would feature some drawbacks, overall, the benefits would outweigh the costs. One obvious benefit is that as employees, students would have access to the protections offered through law for workers who become pregnant and need access to family leave. Right now, they are left out of such protections. There are other benefits that would come through being classified as workers, even things like payroll taxes which would incorporate graduate student workers into the welfare system.

Collective bargaining is the right of every worker. It is a practice that exists at our peer institutions in the Big Ten as well as other universities in neighboring states. In a climate in

which all workers are being subjected to greater pressure to perform in difficult circumstances, collective bargaining is a necessary tool to ensure that we are protected from exploitation.

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