



HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE

House Bill 0751

State Personnel — Collective Bargaining

February 15, 2022

SUPPORT

Dr. Karin Roseblatt

Professor, History, University of Maryland, College Park

Vice President of the University of Maryland Chapter of the American Association of University Professors (UMD AAUP)

I write as a professor to urge a positive committee report on SB 0118. I have been teaching and advising graduate students for over twenty-five years and have worked with and advised dozens of MA and PhD students. Below I address, first, the conditions under which graduate assistants live and work, conditions that in fact detract from their learning. Second, I speak to how collective bargaining rights will improve not just the lives of graduate assistants but also the relation between graduate assistants and their faculty mentors.

You will likely hear or have heard from the USM administrators that the System has improved stipends for graduate assistants who work at its institutions. But graduate assistants in the USM still remain *vastly underpaid*. Take my campus, UMD, College Park, as an example. Our campus leadership will claim that our graduate stipends are comparable to those of peer institutions in the Big Ten. However, they leave out the inconvenient fact that almost all Big Ten schools are located in the midwest—an area whose cost of living is dramatically lower than the D.C.-Maryland region. When you adjust for the differences in cost of living between the other midwest Big Ten schools and UMD-College Park, UMD plummets to the *very bottom of the Big Ten* in levels of graduate student stipends. Indeed, the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Living Wage calculator](#) estimates that a living-wage for a single adult in Prince

George's County, where our campus is located, amounts to a yearly gross salary of at least \$41,222. The minimum 9-month stipend received by graduate assistants on our campus is currently set at \$21,000. This makes for a stunning discrepancy of \$20,000. Among Big Ten schools, this is the largest gap between graduate stipends and the actual cost of living. Our graduate students must live *below the poverty line* in order to get an education at our flagship Maryland institution of higher education. Students have a hard time paying rent and decent internet service and buying groceries. I have personally supervised graduate assistants who worked as bartenders on the weekends. One of my advisees taught a course at Prince George's Community College to make ends meet. I routinely sign papers that allow my students to take on work above and beyond the twenty hours a week that graduate assistants are normally permitted to work. I do so reluctantly, because this is time that they should be devoting to their studies. But I sign nevertheless because the students cannot survive without a supplement to their income. I note that this no doubt makes it more difficult for graduate assistants to complete their degrees in a timely manner, and this is an important metric against which our university is measured. It is exceedingly difficult to recruit top graduate students when stipends are low.

The international graduate students who powerfully contribute to augmenting the prestige and finances of our campus are particularly vulnerable. They are by law prohibited from working outside the universities where they study. They have additional travel costs. And many come to the United States with their families. US immigration legislation prohibits the spouses of these students from working. Can you imagine trying to support a spouse—or a spouse and child—with \$21,000 while paying for books and other research expenses? I personally know a student in that situation. He is, unsurprisingly, food insecure.

Along with stipends, workload is a critical concern that a graduate assistant union would address. Many graduate assistants are asked to work more than the required twenty hours a week. I have seen this more than once in my own department. During the current COVID19

crisis, one of my own advisees had to in essence take over a course when the instructor of record disappeared. He had minimal support, and he was not teaching in his area of expertise. This kind of experience obviously slows a student's progress toward their degree. Many departments are not good at informing graduate assistants about their rights and obligations. Nor are many faculty members aware of what is appropriate. A graduate assistant union would help clarify and publicize the rights and obligations of graduate assistants.

I know this first hand. When I was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin, I was represented by the Teaching Assistant Association (TAA), the first recognized graduate student union in the United States, formed in 1966. The TAA helped set the general terms of employment for employment for graduate assistants. It made and distributed leaflets to faculty and students outlining expectations of assistants and their supervisors. It helped publicize the terms of employment in meetings and through a system of departmental shop stewards. Graduate assistants were asked to keep records of their hours worked and the contract stipulated when and how assistants should inform their supervisors if hours worked were exceeded. In those situations, faculty supervisors were required to pick up the slack. This system worked exceedingly well, as faculty learned what could be accomplished as part of a twenty-hour a week assistantship.

You will hear or will have heard from the USM administrators that graduate students are "students first and foremost"--Dean Steven Fetter testified to that effect last year--and that granting them the ability to collectively bargain would somehow spoil their special "student status" or their relations with professors who mentor them. I can assure you that this argument is not a principal concern of the professors who mentor these students. We, as professors, are often dismayed at our graduate students' financial situations and the meager stipends we are able to offer them. We see the mental health issues that arise when students are concerned with making ends meet or when they are overworked. We see administrators taking only slow

halting steps to address some student concerns and ignoring others. We see administrators misrepresent the factors shaping faculty-student relations.

We see administrators purporting to address faculty concern when in fact they have not consulted with us. It bears noting that the objections raised by the USM administrators are not objections to the *right* to bargain collectively. If this bill is passed, graduate students will still need to take steps to create a graduate student union and have it legally recognized. At that point, administrators, faculty, students—anyone and everyone—would have the ability to make arguments about the benefits of unionization. But administrators want to shortcut that debate within our universities by taking the decision out of the hands of those most directly affected, the students.

As a faculty member, I am particularly dismayed when administrators claim to be upholding the faculty-student relationship. To be clear, many faculty members would be delighted to see graduate assistants bargain collectively for higher stipends and better working conditions. Far from damaging our relationship with the graduate students, it would improve that relation because graduate students would be far less stressed and more able to concentrate on their graduate studies. They would not need to take on additional jobs to pay their bills and eat. As faculty members, we ask: If our university pays stipends so small that graduate students need to take on other outside jobs to eat and feed their families, is the university concerned about assistants' special "student status." Or is their main concern the bottom line of the university and its need for cheap labor?

Indeed, it is actually a misnomer to refer to our graduate students as *just* "graduate students." Administrators argue that graduate assistantships are part of the training students receive. In reality, all workers receive training from their supervisors and acquire skills on the job. Our graduate assistants make the university run. They function on our campuses as junior professors and researchers. If they were to strike, as the graduate student workers at Columbia University did recently for over 2.5 months, the university would shut down. Research would

grind to a halt. Classes would have to be canceled and grades would not be submitted. Why? Because the graduate workers perform much of the *labor* that makes these central university functions happen on a day to day basis. Graduate students are workers too, and they deserve the same rights afforded to other public employees in this state. They deserve the right to collectively bargain with their employer for better working conditions and compensation.

We urge you in the strongest possible terms to report favorably on SB 0118.