

Delores G. Kelley, Chair
Brian J. Feldman, Vice Chair
3 East Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

SB 118
Supporting

Dear Chair Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman, and Members of the Finance Committee,

Hello, I would like to begin by saying I enjoy working for the university but did not know when I began that I would not be considered an employee. I moved from another state after finishing my Masters degree, where I worked for the institution while being a student; I was considered an employee at my previous institution. Upon accepting the offer at the University of Maryland to earn my PhD and work for the university while I attended, I was very excited. I assumed that since I was able to get health insurance and received weekly paychecks that I was an employee. I found out the hard way I was not.

Last summer, (2020) I accepted a seasonal position but unfortunately, due to COVID-19, I lost my job. I did not have summer funding from the university or a back-up job and was relying on my summer job to earn one fourth of my income for the year. After losing my job, I applied for unemployment but encountered issue after issue. First off, the Department of Labor and Unemployment was IMPOSSIBLE to reach and when I did speak with someone they had no idea what was wrong or told me something different every time. I applied May 31st, when my role at the university ended, and to this day I have not received a penny from the state.

First, I was told it had to do with my last job in North Carolina and quickly applied for unemployment there but found out I was ineligible for unemployment as I hadn't worked in NC for a year. Then I was told I did not have sufficient work history. I had no idea why they would say that--I worked for the University of Maryland! It was not until contacting a Maryland State Delegate that I found out I was not considered an employee. I had no idea this was even possible and proceeded to speak to unemployment and the university about the issue. They led me in circles until I was able to speak with someone (through email, no one was willing to tell me in person) and they told me I was a student who received a stipend. I found this out in September, 4 months after applying for unemployment. Administrators and faculty do not tell students they are not considered employees and I believe this should be illegal.

Under the CARES Act I should have received Unemployment from the State of Maryland. Individuals with insufficient work history legally qualify for unemployment due to this act but to this day the State has been unresponsive and refuses to pay me a cent. I spent countless hours calling people, waiting on hold this summer, working part time jobs, stressing out about finances, and trying to figure out the situation. No one at the university (except other grad students) seems to care or want to help students in my situation. To say I am furious about this situation would be

an understatement. I am lucky to split my bills and housing with my partner (who also lost his job during the pandemic) but if I lived alone during the pandemic I would have been unable to afford rent and basic necessities. As someone who came straight from completing their Masters and has never worked a full time job before, I do not have substantial savings to live off of. However, I no longer have the energy or time to debate with unemployment about my situation and aside from getting a lawyer, I have no other option but to accept defeat. This means I will not receive back pay or the \$600 of weekly unemployment I deserve.

I design and teach my own class at the university yet I'm not considered an employee. I am called "professor" by my students who look up to me and expect their instructor to be a legal employee. Over the past 6 months, I have debated leaving the university due to the stress and agony I experienced this past year. Unfortunately, it is difficult to find a job in the economy right now and I do enjoy my role but I often question if it's worth it. When prospective students ask me about my experience at the university the first thing I mention is this issue. I discourage individuals from attending full-time and working for the university, especially if they are relying on it as their sole source of income. We are not undergrads who can rely on our parents for money (even many undergrads do not have this privilege), we are adults trying to earn a living while working towards a degree that we will use to better the world. Even if we could rely on external sources for income, that adds to our stress levels and is no excuse for denying us the right to Collective Bargaining.

It is time for the university to improve working conditions for graduate students and prove that our hard work is valued. Without graduate students, the university would not be able to provide several classes and operate at the standard it does. As a graduate student who teaches and works for the University of Maryland, I am in full support of Collective Bargaining Rights.

Sincerely,

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