

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,

I notice that institutional discourse has dispensed with the illusion that our choice about how we feel safe holding our classes matters, and it is revealed that instructors are expected to be ever prepared to absorb the fallout from the fundamental negligence, abandonment, and individualism that have organized our experience of this pandemic. I had multiple students at the end of last semester who got covid, and had to navigate finding safe places to isolate, while moving out of the dorm for the winter, while either taking finals or making accommodation arrangements, and somehow tend to their own health and wellbeing (and the health/wellbeing of anyone with whom they share space and responsibilities of care) at the same time. A cruel and preventable situation.

As a Graduate Assistant, and therefore — by University of Maryland’s definition — not a UMD employee, my student status and attendant provisions (such as affordable health insurance, tuition remission, student loan deferment) depend on my ability to make progress towards degree completion. Even though my GA position requires fulfilling responsibilities that are critical to the operations of DCC as a program and UMD as an institution, my officially recognized relationship with the university is as a student. As students and not employees, GAs are not granted sick leave or paid time off, and cannot take a leave of absence without forfeiting health insurance, tuition remission, and student loan deferment. In the event that I, an immediate family member, or other person for whom I provide direct care receives a positive COVID-19 diagnosis, that requires attention beyond the permitted 30 hours “Time Away From Duty”, UMD's policies state that I must rely on the goodwill, advocacy, and creativity of my supervisors and colleagues (who are being left to manage their own vulnerabilities and responsibilities of care as well) to fulfill my duties. My duties include teaching core curricular classes with syllabi that I have designed, and for which there aren't other people available to step in and take over if I am unable to continue. So I have to absorb the pressure of choosing between my own wellbeing and the ongoing functioning of my program/my students learning experience. If an undergraduate student has a health challenge or disability, they can get university sanctioned accommodations, such as extra time or space for taking tests or note-takers. The system of administering accommodations is deeply flawed, but it does provide a protocol for students to advocate for their needs in the classroom. What accommodations could possibly exist to support graduate student instructors who need extra support or different qualities of time/space to learn, when our learning is conditioned by labor that is determined by the university calendar and departmental needs? Functionally, graduate student instructors do not have access to accommodations to protect ourselves as students, nor do we have any benefits or workplace protections as

non-employees.

Right now we are facing so many different layers of uncertainty, and we are also hailed by the moral certainty of centering, supporting and empowering the self-determined wellbeing of those who are most endangered by this pandemic. We are in the midst of a mass disabling event and I feel unassured that the University's priorities are organized to protect the most vulnerable people. If that were the case, the initial public-facing conversation on the table wouldn't be about how the university has decided to email everyone a survey every day, develop an experimental advance warning system, have us report bio-monitoring to an unknown authority in the school, and take a responsibility pledge that requires you to buy into the University's partnership with LinkedInLearning in order to see it. We would not be receiving messages from the administration about our resilience as a community with no functional accountability in place to ensure that people are complying proactively with public safety protocols. Universities should be asking the their communities who are the students and faculty who would not be able to continue their education elsewhere, what support they require, and how to protect the livelihood of the people whose work requires them to be on campus as well as all the workers who depend on the university for their livelihood. How can the campus be a resource for those most in need? How can the university protect the economic security of the maintenance/facilities/res life/staff and faculty whose work would need to change with fewer people on campus? What is being done to protect the health and safety of maintenance, food, and emergency service workers who have to work on campus? How can Res Life and Student Services support off-campus students to have access to the tools they need to learn, and on-campus students to self-organize community for their own collective wellbeing, rather than determining it for them? I am most concerned about these questions. I haven't seen them addressed in the statements from the administration, and so I don't believe their bottom line is really about creating a safe learning environment for everyone. I am unsupportive of any measure that would ask any of us to take on that risk framed as some sort of personal choice, when we are all being coerced in various ways through the climate of unsafety produced by institutional policy.

Sincerely,

Eva Peskin
Graduate Assistant, Design Culture & Creativity Honors College
University of Maryland, College Park
4302 Chapel Lane, College Park, MD 20742
epeskin@umd.edu