

**SB 118**  
**State Personnel – Collective Bargaining**  
**Senate Finance Committee**  
**Favorable**

To Chair Kelley and Members of the Senate Finance Committee:

I am an Associate Professor in the School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at the University of Maryland, College Park. **I write in strong support of the right of graduate student workers to collectively bargain, and I urge a favorable report on Senate Bill 118.** Graduate student employees are an essential part of the university. Without their labor as teachers, researchers, and members of the administrative staff, the University of Maryland would be unable to perform its central functions. Collective bargaining is a well-established right that should be available to all workers, including graduate students working on our campuses.

The arguments presented by University System of Maryland administrators against previous iterations of this bill (and undoubtedly the current one as well) can be divided into two groups. The first consists of claims that the universities already provide mechanisms for graduate student workers to voice their concerns and address their labor conditions (e.g. “Meet and Confer”). The problem with this line of thought is that it hides the fact graduate student employees have no actual right to negotiate their compensation and working conditions through the current process, the results of which remain at the mercy of university administrators and top-down decision-making. The reality of the system currently in place is a situation of extreme economic precarity for graduate student workers. As an example, the minimum 9-month stipend received by graduate assistants at UMD College Park falls an incredible \$20,000 short of the living wage in Prince George’s County, where the campus is located. All that the current mechanism ensures is the condition of poverty for our graduate student workers.

The second group of claims advanced by university administrators consists of denying graduate student employees their status as workers, asserting that their role as students should somehow prevent us from also recognizing them as people who provide valuable labor for the university. Graduate students *are* workers, and any attempt to separate these two roles in this case is a purely artificial exercise that has little to do with how contemporary universities function. To see how little sense there is in separating the student from the worker, one only needs to imagine a scenario in which graduate student workers would suddenly withdraw their labor from the university. In that moment, the university would no longer be able to function in its current form. Precisely because they are both students *and* workers, the conditions they work in directly influence their ability to exist and develop as students (as future researchers and teachers). Any university that claims to take the education of its graduate students seriously also has a duty to ensure the dignity of their working conditions and fair compensation for their labor.

**The only way to ensure this is to recognize the right of graduate student workers to negotiate the compensation they receive and the conditions in which they work.**

As someone who studied and worked in the U.S. university system as an international graduate student, I am particularly aware of the discrepancy between the aspirations my campus claims

toward a global reputation and the situation it actually creates for international students here on foreign student visas. Unable to work off-campus and fearful of potentially losing their visa status without much legal recourse, the position of international graduate students is especially precarious. Being part of a collective bargaining unit would allow them to establish a sense of economic security and address their concerns transparently, without fear of retaliation.

Finally, it is worth point out that granting graduate student workers collective bargaining rights would benefit UMD and the other institutions in the University System of Maryland. At UMD, many of the schools we compete with for talented graduate students are unionized R1 universities. These universities have a competitive advantage over UMD because they offer prospective graduate students the ability to negotiate their working conditions, giving them the sense of security that comes with the right to collectively bargain. Members of the Senate now have the opportunity to look further ahead than university administrators and support a policy that will benefit Maryland universities *and* the State of Maryland by allowing us to compete with the best public and private universities in this country.

I respectfully ask that you support the passage of SB 118.

Yours Sincerely,

Luka Arsenjuk  
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University of Maryland, College Park