



Office of Graduate Studies

8000 York Road
Towson, MD 21252-0001

January 27, 2022

**The Honorable Dolores G. Kelley
Chair, Senate Finance Committee
Miller Senate Office Building 3 East
Annapolis, MD 21401**

RE: Senate Bill 118 State Personnel-Collective Bargaining

Chair Kelley and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Senate Bill 118, which would authorize graduate assistants to collectively bargain. Towson University respectfully opposes this legislation and urges the Senate Finance Committee for an unfavorable report.

Towson University is the largest public university in the Baltimore Region with a current enrollment of 23,000 students. We take pride in compensating our faculty, staff, and students fairly and to date these groups have had little interest in pursuing unionization.

Of the 3,000 graduate students at TU, about 10% are currently graduate assistants of some type (10 or 20 h position, as general, teaching, or research assistants) with less than 70 of them as teaching assistants. Due to the relatively small number of assistants on campus, all are invited to the university's "Meet and Confer" meetings.

The university's "Meet and Confer" process, is an open invitation to all assistants to attend a meeting with the Provost, Vice President for Administration and Finance, and the Dean of Graduate Studies. These meetings occur once each semester for them to discuss their concerns and solutions. It is a learning opportunity for both administration and students and many individual problems identified over the years have been quickly addressed by directing students to resources already available. It has been a productive avenue to address student concerns and develop pathways to solutions for the past ten years.

Graduate students have a valued role in shared governance at TU. They are included as members of multiple university committees including those addressing university budget, curriculum, and student appeals. I meet weekly with the leadership of the Graduate Student Association.

In response to student and faculty concerns about stipend levels (stipend levels affect faculty ability to recruit high quality students to their programs), the 9 month stipend has been increased by \$1,000 for all categories of assistantship in each of the last three years or an increase of 60% since July 2018 for the lowest paid masters assistants and an increase of 30% for the highest paid doctoral assistants. Between the increase in stipend levels, adding additional assistantship positions and higher tuition waiver costs, TU has increased its investment in our graduate assistantships by >\$650,000 since July 2018.

The Office of Graduate Studies encourages and supports students in reporting violations of Graduate and University policies. Through shared governance processes and other resources available on campus, graduate students have the support networks (Counseling Center, Student Affairs, Advising, Title IX, and Graduate Studies) that they need to resolve problems. Collective bargaining would limit our collective ability to respond to individual cases and to develop personalized solutions for students in need.

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The impact of collective bargaining would depend on the details of the contract negotiated, and as Dean Fetter has testified, these could have a substantial downside for our students. The ones most likely to impact TU students would be a decrease in take home pay and a smaller number of positions available without state appropriation support to cover increased stipend and benefit costs. The decrease in positions would impact the number of financially struggling students able to complete their graduate degrees and become valuable members of the Maryland workforce with minimal graduate student loan burden.

Collective bargaining for research assistants would also impact faculty and student research productivity, changing the mentor/mentee relationship to one of employer/employee and by increasing the proportion of grants dedicated to student salary and benefits, therefore reducing the amount available for doing the proposed project.

The Office of Graduate Studies is an active advocate for graduate student success both in and out of the classroom. We support graduate student success and provide problem solving when issues arise. Collective bargaining is not a pathway that has been actively explored by TU graduate students, and would not be in their best interests. Our students' concerns are being heard and addressed within the current procedures in place.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David R. Ownby". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

David R. Ownby, PhD
Interim Dean of Graduate Studies

