

Melony G. Griffith, Chair  
Katherine A. Klausmeier, Vice Chair  
Miller Senate Office Building, 3 East Wing  
11 Bladen St., Annapolis, MD 21401-1991

SB0247  
Supporting

Dear Chair Griffith, Vice Chair Klausmeier, and Members of the Finance Committee,

Members of the legislature, I am writing to ask that you vote in support of SB0247. Having studied at the University of Maryland-College Park for five years, I would like to share my experience as a doctoral graduate research assistant. The standard agreement for all graduate assistantships is that the student will assist their supervisor's research tasks for an average of 20 hours per week. In Fall 2018, my first semester, I learned that this agreement was not enforceable. When I expressed my concern over regularly being made to work 40-60 hours per week, my supervisor casually chided me, saying "20 hours per week is unreasonable. It just doesn't happen for doctoral students." I was subsequently shamed in public meetings and accused of being uncommitted to the "very important work" of the lab. By late 2019, I had already written 12 grant applications, drafted 3 manuscripts, managed 6 projects, mentored 15 undergraduate students, and given dozens of presentations at conferences and meetings—all in addition to taking regular academic courseloads. Nevertheless, I was consistently told that I was not working hard enough. That *I* was not enough.

When I brought these concerns to my department chair and unit director, I was informed that "it is known" that my supervisor regularly overworks their students and that I should come up with my own plan for moving forward. My supervisor would later reprimand me for "going over [his] head." Fearing retribution, I made no further public complaints. However, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic made this situation virtually untenable. Like many, I lost several family members to the disease; many of them older adults who had been in my life since childhood. Citing the ever-increasing workload, my supervisor discouraged me from taking time to heal from these losses. Several of the women working in the lab, who were also worn-down, opted to transfer to other supervisors, significantly extending their time to degree completion, and, in one case, being forced to give up on a doctoral degree altogether. Those of us who remained were met with thinly veiled threats of retaliation from our supervisor who proudly exclaimed that he "can really hold a grudge." I note the gender of my former colleagues because I observed women being disproportionately bullied, harassed, ridiculed, gaslit, and criticized compared to men in the lab. Witnessing this misconduct continue—even after several complaints to the campus's ombudsperson had been made—I felt voiceless, isolated; trapped.

By 2021, my emotional and physical health had degraded so much in this toxic work environment that I seriously contemplated committing suicide—fearing that there was no way to continue working like this, but no way to escape without a career-ending black mark from my scorned supervisor. It was not until I participated in group therapy and heard from other graduate workers about their similar experiences, that I was empowered to leave my former lab. In doing so, I lost access and ownership to more than three years of collected data. Additionally, with no other assistantships available in my department, I now spend 20 hours per week as a graduate administrative assistant—working on tasks that have nothing to do with my research. What should have been a five-year degree will take no less than six. Still, I am grateful. This is a small price to pay for my life.

Members of the legislature, the University System of Maryland's belief that graduate workers do not need collective bargaining rights is not only mistaken. It is dangerous. What does it say about the current state of affairs when I must bring a workplace complaint all the way to Annapolis in order to be heard? This is not a one-off grievance between a mentor and mentee, nor is it a single hiccup in an otherwise well-functioning system. In the last three years, graduate assistants and their allies have submitted more than 300 articles of written testimony describing a range of abuses. Collective bargaining rights will not rid our workplaces of bad supervisors. But these basic democratic rights will give strength to many of the most vulnerable and exploited workers in our state.

Your vote in favor of passing SB0247 speaks truth to power: All Maryland workers deserve dignity, sanity, and to have their voices heard.

Sincerely,

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