

Witness Testimony in Response to HB0493

“State Personnel - Collective Bargaining - Faculty, Part-Time Faculty, Post-Doctoral Associates, and Graduate Assistants”

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Disposition: Favorable

Comments:

I write in support for allowing collective bargaining rights for Maryland's universities. I have worked at Salisbury University on the Eastern Shore of Maryland for 16 years, am a fully promoted faculty member and am active in service across campus and in the community. I have served both in the capacity as faculty and as an administrator as Chair of my department for the past 6 years.

I would like first to say that the reason for my support has to do with my professional understanding of the value of unions for higher education. I came to Maryland's university system from Ontario, where collective bargaining is a regular feature of academic life. The minimum payment for an adjunct (“sessional”) instructor with no seniority would amount to \$6,120USD (~\$8,200 CAD), and a senior instructor would receive approximately \$7500USD (~\$10,000 CAD) per course. This compensation would amount, with a standard full-time 6-course per year load, to approximately \$45000USD or the median income in my area. By comparison, we offer \$4200 per course for an adjunct without seniority and a senior adjunct would make only 10% more for approximately \$4600. Even at the senior level this amounts to \$27,600, which is just twice the federal poverty level for an individual and would be only \$100 over the poverty level for a family of four.

At the same time adjunct instructors often report extreme stress in their work and personal lives, most of which comes from a lack of job security and lack of access to health coverage, or benefits. SU has a relatively low degree of reliance on adjunct instructors, but those who have managed to retain their teaching from year to year find themselves in an impossible professional and financial position. Allowing salaries to be collectively set would add consistency, quality, opportunities for focus on the main task of educating, and increased professional development and quality of outcomes for all our faculty even as it raises the standards for adjunct faculty to a basic level of dignified and sustainable work. It would reduce the degree to which faculty are “at will” in their units and liable to be eliminated during times of financial stress. And our students, who are typically not aware of the employment status of

their instructors when they register for courses, would be the ones who benefit. In my professional experience in both union and non-union campuses, the possibility of unionizing allows all employees, but especially the most vulnerable employees, the chance to be treated fairly and to have their needs communicated in a way that is not subject to reprisal or ambiguity. The result is increased retention, satisfaction, and respect for the educators who have taken on the crucial role of preparing the next generation of professionals, scientists, and leaders in our state.

I have heard testimony in previous sessions that the principal argument against allowing unionization is that unions decrease innovation. In my experience the opposite is the case. When I think about the most difficult transitions on our campus, none looms larger than the almost 12-year General Education reform process, and the first comprehensive curriculum reform to succeed since the 1980s. In my honest assessment, as someone directly and intimately involved in the faculty deliberation process, this painful, time and labor-consuming, and nearly failed process had this negative character only because substantial proportions of the faculty felt that a change in assignment of course requirements would lead directly to increased job insecurity. It was impossible for many to address the reform in good faith simply because it would change the distribution of student credit hours (a primary if imperfect measure of faculty performance) and so would directly impact future support for our exceptionally capable units, and in effect many faculty found themselves in the impossible position of negotiating themselves out of future employment. The effects on faculty morale have been profound and long-lasting.

With the ability to collectively bargain, faculty of all levels would gain the ability to handle crucial employment issues rationally, in negotiation with leadership about institutional needs and priorities, and in support of much needed benefits such as increased access to affordable childcare, salary equity, and the ability to recruit and retain the most talented, diverse, and in-demand faculty. When no such collective process exists, staffing decisions are allowed a large and undue level of influence from ever-changing and unevenly applied performance metrics, personal factors and relationships, bias, or even with a total lack of rationale. This makes the institution significantly less capable of making strategic and beneficial changes like our General Education reform, the planning of new degrees and programs in innovative areas, our ability to recruit top talent in the faculty and to motivate those faculty to dig deep into long-term service and commitment to the institution. The primary benefit of allowing collective agreements is to let faculty decisions flow from expertise, rational discussion, and prudence rather than being forced to view

every possible policy change or innovation as it is refracted through speculated or real impacts it will have on employment-related issues. Those issues should be handled separately, and collectively, so that faculty of all levels can get back to work making their campus desirable for students, achieving national recognition for their work, and, as SU does, increase capacity in supplying the next generation of highly qualified teachers, nurses, social workers, business leaders, and professionals.

Regardless of whether the benefits I have seen flow immediately and directly from collective bargaining, at a bare minimum each USM faculty should be allowed under law to decide on collective bargaining themselves, and so at a minimum this bill would be a welcome removal of an outdated and discriminatory legal burden.