

**Written Testimony Submitted to the
Maryland House Appropriations Committee
By Lilah Drafts-Johnson, Graduate Assistant
HB 493**

**State Personnel - Collective Bargaining - Faculty, Part-Time Faculty, and Graduate Assistants
February 9, 2024**

FAVORABLE

Dear Chair Barnes, Vice Chair Chang, and members of the House Appropriations Committee,

My name is Lilah Drafts-Johnson and I am a graduate assistant at the University of Maryland, College Park, where I have worked for 2 years. I call on this committee to issue a favorable report to this Bill. The state already grants the right of collective bargaining towards nearly every other state employee, as well as the faculty at our community colleges and the non-academic workforce at our four-year institutions. It is clear that this right should be extended to all higher ed workers in Maryland.

I am a graduate assistant who recently completed my MA at UMD and will continue as a PhD student in the fall of 2024. I was offered a Flagship Fellowship to stay to do my PhD, which is the most competitive recruitment offer UMD can offer a prospective student and adds additional funding to the base stipend that my department gives graduate workers. Even with the highest award that UMD can give to a graduate worker, my salary will not meet the cost of living in College Park. Additionally, I am currently in the process of grievance with my department as they terminated my health benefits before the date outlined in my appointment letter. It took over a month for me to learn that my benefits were terminated and I in fact did not have health coverage, and I am now facing thousands of dollars in medical bills with no formal grievance process to guide me.

What a lot of people don't realize is that something like low pay or lack of worker protections isn't just a labor issue, it's a gender equity issue. Academia generally has a lot of steep power dynamics between graduate students just starting out and professors well-established in their fields and careers. My research at UMD focuses on preventing gender-based violence--things like sexual harassment and misconduct--in sport communities. As an advocate, I know that it's very dangerous to mix financial and job insecurity into a context where power differentials are already at play. That's how people get trapped in situations they aren't sure how to navigate and are unable to access the resources they need to get help.

Last fall, two of the students I taught in a core Kinesiology undergraduate course reached out to me and asked if I would participate in an interview for a speech and debate class in which they were enrolled. I agreed and was surprised when they asked me questions about the number of hours I worked and how much the university paid me. It turns out they were arguing for graduate workers to have the right to collectively bargain. Hopefully, this committee as well as the university will see what my freshman undergraduate students do, that investing in the agency of educators at Maryland's public university system is not only the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do.

Sincerely,
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*This testimony has been submitted on behalf of this individual by the University of Maryland Graduate Labor Union (GLU) and the Chapter of the American Association of University Professors (UMD AAUP).
Please contact us at mail@umdgradworkers.org or umdaaup@gmail.com if you have any questions.*