

**Written Testimony Submitted to the
Maryland Senate Finance Committee
By Lasair ni Chochlain, Graduate Assistant
SB0823**

**State Personnel - Collective Bargaining - Faculty, Part-Time Faculty, and Graduate Assistants
March 7, 2024
FAVORABLE**

Dear Chair Beidle, Vice Chair Klausmeier, and members of the Senate Finance Committee,

My name is Lasair ni Chochlain (she/they) and I am a graduate assistant and Masters student, where I have worked for 2 years. I call on this committee to issue a favorable report to this Bill. I work on my research in the Department of Entomology, and I also have provided general lab and campus support. I work with many students, undergraduate and graduate, across the disability spectrum, in a volunteer capacity because the kind of support I had access to as an undergrad doesn't exist at UMD. I had multiple, caring counselors, who checked in with me multiple times a semester. They listened to my problems, provided a much more extensive range of accommodations and services, and even helped me get to doctor's appointments and pick up prescriptions. I was also in a program that organized weekly talks and workshops for underrepresented minorities in STEM that exposed me to minority scientists (grad students, faculty, etc). I try to recreate this type of support for as many students as I can, and make connections across our community so that no one has to go through this alone. I enjoy all of this work greatly, but I am compensated for none of it, which shows that UMD doesn't value it. I want to have more power in my workplace so that I make things better for all of these students that I meet and talk to every day. I am sick of paternalistic meetings and "advisory board" that smother the voices of actual disabled students and employees in favor of what administration wants to here. The famous slogan "NOTHING ABOUT US, WITHOUT US", applies here. I see a lot of decisions being made for and on behalf of disabled students and absolutely zero acknowledgement or respect of the fact that we are autonomous beings capable of reasoning and decision making and that we (no one else!) are the experts on our own situations. Even when they seek or allow us to offer input, the final decision is always up to someone non-disabled. We need collective bargaining to achieve disability access at UMD.

I directly see the impact that the lack of disability representation and disability supports has not only on other disabled employees but also undergrads and general campus culture here at UMD. Accessibility is an afterthought unless the event is hosted by the ADA office or a passionate disabled person is involved. It has prevented me from participating in many campus organizations and efforts, as I would often be the only disabled person reminding everyone about the existence of disabilities and that gets tiring. I am also a research assistant that often does work not related to my project -- either related to my advisors research, my fellow students' research, or just general supervising/lab tasks. This work that goes in from grad students, staff, and faculty to cultivate positive lab spaces and mentor students, especially underrepresented students, is important but I see it fall by the wayside in many labs and departments. The essential staff roles that support this work are not created, or go unfilled. Service as an unpaid effort is an expectation, which sends the message that the needs of underrepresented/disabled groups are not worth supporting with actual resources. Instead, we are supposed to get what we need by everyone else donating their spare time, which they probably don't have any of to begin with. Expectation without compensation is ableist and exploitative, and it needs to end. As someone with limited energy and chronic pain, I can already do less than others. Then I am additionally burdened with ableism, which on a personal basis adds several hours to my week, every week. I am constantly educating people, asking for information that shouldve been public, asking for things to be accessible

that already should've been. Or figuring out how to complete lab/field tasks with my mobility and pain challenges. Then add the advocacy and work I do to support others and maintain community. It makes it almost impossible some days to do the work I came to UMD to do, which is entomology. In many ways, it has turned me away from that work, as I have never felt like a part of scientific community, only a disability community.

These are just some of the difficulties I have encountered as a physically disabled graduate student. UMD doesn't employ enough support staff for the disabled students they have, and even though I am an employee, I am not eligible for HR services or support. Even now that I have a disability counselor, all they can do is approve accommodations for my classes and sometimes help arrange them. Often, I am left to arrange them myself with the professors, since no one on staff has experience with field or lab accommodations. Getting assistive technology is virtually impossible, as the money would have to come out of my PI or my department's budget. Most of my requests have been flat out denied. For example, my request for a left handed microscope stage was denied (even though the department owns probably hundreds of right handed microscopes). Instead, I had to ask someone to remove the stage for me and manually move the slide every time I used a microscope which both costs their and my time and denies me the convenience and comfort of a proper stage. I was able to get some free software from the university and a few office ergonomic items from my lab and that was about it. Any discussions of larger, more expensive tech that would help increase my participation and the participation of those with disabilities like mine is off the table. The fact that I need more physical help with tasks means we have to pay for more hours of labor, which means that research funds deplete quicker. UMD and USM as a whole do not have supports in place for when their student employees are physically disabled and/or when they get sick, and the campus climate is very inhospitable to anyone with physical disabilities. I was literally told to "come back after I get better", which just isn't possible for students with chronic illnesses. I have a right to work and learn on campus just like everyone else, and no one can convince me that what I bring to campus isn't worth the additional costs/work that I may bring. The alternative is the exclusion of people like me from higher education, and I will never believe in that. The graduate labor union (GLU) is committed to supporting ALL students in their ability to live and work in a way that makes them healthier and happier, and that is what I believe in.

Members of the Committee, Maryland has for decades viewed collective bargaining between state employees and management as the best way to promote democracy in our workplaces and public institutions. It is the only way to ensure that employee voices can play a vital role in constructing conditions that govern our workplaces, which makes workplaces better. Many public higher ed institutions in other states, and indeed many private, prestigious institutions in our own state have improved conditions for everyone through collective bargaining. I want to see my university follow this example, so that we can hope to compete with and compare to our peers, not be left behind. For all of these reasons I ask that you give a favorable report to this Bill.

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 info@umdgradworkers.org or umdaaup@gmail.com if you have any questions.