

**Written Testimony Submitted to the  
Maryland Senate Finance Committee**

**By Gregory Isaiah Espinoza**

**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 Isaiah Espinoza and I am a Graduate Student in the Government and Politics Department at the University of Maryland in College Park, where I have worked as a Graduate Assistant for four 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.

My graduate assistant appointments have been for nine and a half months each year since I was accepted into the Government and Politics PhD program in 2020. The type of work I do as a graduate assistant depends on my appointment, for which I may be assigned as an administrative assistant, a research assistant, or a teaching assistant. I have worked in the latter two roles, and my responsibilities between those two positions have varied dramatically. As a research assistant, I have supported on-going research for the Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement by providing insight and expertise, coding, data analysis, producing reports, summary reviews of relevant scholarship, and more. I have attended meetings with faculty, university administrators, various kinds of experts, and have dedicated routine hours to this work whether on or off campus. As a teaching assistant, I have introduced students to the complexities of U.S. government and politics, and I've helped many to understand historic and contemporary civic and social issues therein; I have guided students through the classic philosophical texts of Aristotle, John Stuart Mill, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and more; I have helped students learn about themselves and others by teaching fundamental social psychology and aspects of cognitive neuroscience, with emphasis on how it relates to today's political climate and controversies. I have graded assessments and read long-form essay exams for hundreds upon hundreds of adult students passing through the University of Maryland, from undergraduate freshman just out of high school to career FBI agents getting their Masters degree. Anyone who has ever taught students will be familiar with spending long nights grading under the pressure of tight deadlines. Whether supporting research or teaching students, I have dedicated the time and effort expected of a professional full-time or part-time employee but with the security and compensation of neither.

Those in opposition to collective bargaining rights would like you to believe that I have done all of this while working only 20 hours a week on average. They know, as do I, that supervisors are able to overload and overwork graduate assistants far beyond this 20 hour average without worry. In the past, I have been made to work the hours of an unofficial full-time employee working overtime without recompense for the length of the appointment. If such was my job, there would be no issue, but I am first and foremost a graduate student and the objective of graduate assistantships is education.

During that time I was unable to make any progress toward my advancement in the program nor work on my own research. I have lost valuable time as a consequence, putting my progress and

livelihood at increased risk. The risk being that my appointment as a graduate assistant and enrollment in the PhD program is liable to be terminated for a variety of reasons such as loss of funding, academic delinquency (i.e., unsatisfactory progress in the program), and more. In addition, the time graduate students have to complete requirements is determined by the funding guaranteed upon acceptance into the program, so any time lost imposes increased risk to graduate students whereas faculty and professors are insulated. There is nothing preventing such occurrences from arising in the future for me nor those like me. There are no mechanisms in place to ensure graduate assistants are not overworked, no guardrails to prevent supervisors from passing all of their responsibilities onto graduate assistants, and no forms of accountability in case they do. Collective bargaining rights allow us to ensure that no workers are exploited, and allows graduate assistants to hold supervisors accountable.

Those opposed to collective bargaining rights for graduate assistants would also have you believe that the roles and responsibilities assigned to us provide many intangible benefits which cannot be reflected on a pay stub. Whatever intangible benefits there may be unfortunately do not help me pay bills nor do they advance my progress within the program. Getting a job as a 'Post-doc' requires I have an actual doctorate--not merely the skills of one. What those in opposition will not tell you is that I, and my peers, are vulnerable and easy to exploit. The departments and faculty we are assigned to work for have come to expect, and likely feel entitled to, an endless supply of the highly professional, highly educated, and highly competent graduate students who may be exploited at the lowest prices acceptable by law.

As has been explained to me by university administrators and department faculty, my position as a graduate assistant is precarious. The terms of my graduate assistant position permit my termination for reasons mostly out of my control. Should a conflict arise between myself and a tenured professor, an instructor, or a faculty member, I am the one easiest to get rid of; I am easiest to discipline; my grievances are easiest to ignore. As it stands now, without collective bargaining rights, our complaints are easiest to retaliate against should any one of us complain too loudly. Despite the work I do and the value I add, there are no guardrails in place to prevent graduate assistants like myself from being overworked and exploited. We rely on a community of good faith actors who mouth sympathies while always fully aware that they can cut the lifelines to our future.

Those in opposition may wish for you to believe that we are graciously compensated in more ways than just a meager living stipend. Our benefits include remission of graduate student tuition for up to 10 credits for the length of our appointments, and we have the option to participate in the faculty/staff health benefits program in order to fulfill the mandatory health insurance requirement for graduate students. Yet these benefits are not compensation, and should not be considered on par with wages. More importantly, such benefits are undermined without the protection of collective bargaining rights. Indeed, tuition remission serves only as a tool to coerce graduate student compliance and demoralize we discontents. As an example, there are no more courses necessary for me to enroll in since I have completed course requirements early on. However, I must enroll in a single-credit graduate course each semester under my advisor in order to remain enrolled in the PhD program. The university charges itself tuition and then that tuition is remitted on my behalf. Should my graduate assistant position be terminated, for whatever reason, I will be charged that very same tuition. Not only would I lose my meager stipend, but I would, in fact, owe money for being fired. The reality is that I no longer need to take classes; rather, I work for the university most hours of the day in whatever way I am told, and I make progress towards a prospective dissertation in the unseen hours at home. Not to mention that I am still required to pay mandatory fees separate from tuition, of which I can only pay with from the very stipend the university provides. In effect, I am charged fees to work (and park) at the place that employs me from the money they provide to me as a stipend; and if my appointment should be terminated, I will owe them the money they charged themselves.

Before concluding, I find it necessary to include that undergraduate students are increasingly being recruited and employed in the same way that graduate assistants are, to the extent where both undergraduate and graduate students may assist together in same capacity. This may not be odd or irregular, but it is very much a pernicious trend. Moreover, graduate teaching assistants are now expected to function in managerial roles superior to undergraduate assistants. I was informed by department leadership that the increased use of undergraduate assistants is for the purpose of expanding the pool of graduate assistants to be appointed as research assistants. I am vehemently opposed to being employed as a manager, but more importantly, I am concerned that undergraduate students working as assistants are at greater risk of being exploited than the whole community of graduate assistants alone. I would hope that some consideration is given to the vulnerabilities of undergraduate students being employed as undergraduate assistants.

Members of the Committee, this state has for decades viewed collective bargaining between state employees and management as the best way to promote democracy in our workplaces and public institutions. The right to collective bargaining has long been recognized as not only a fundamental human right, but also as the best method of ensuring that employee voices play a vital role in constructing conditions that govern our workplaces. It is a right granted to many other public higher ed institutions in the nation, and indeed to many private, prestigious institutions in our own state. There is no valid reason to exempt four-year public institutions of higher education from this path. I again, therefore, call for 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).  
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