



Office of Graduate Studies

8000 York Road
Towson, MD 21252-0001

March 7, 2024

The Honorable Senator Pamela Beidle
Chair, Senate Finance Committee
Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

RE: Senate Bill 0823 State Personnel-Collective Bargaining

Chair Beidle and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Senate Bill 823, which would authorize graduate assistants to collectively bargain. Towson University respectfully opposes this legislation and urges the Senate Finance Committee for an **unfavorable report**.

Towson University is the largest public university in the Baltimore Region with a current enrollment of around 19,500 students. We take pride in compensating our faculty, staff, and students fairly, and to date, these groups have had little interest in pursuing unionization.

Of the approximately 3,000 graduate students at TU, about 10% are currently graduate assistants (10 or 20hr positions) with less than 70 of them as teaching assistants. Due to the relatively small number of assistants on campus, all are invited to the university's "Meet and Confer" meetings.

The university's "Meet and Confer" process, is an open invitation to all assistants to attend a meeting with the Provost, Vice President for Administration and Finance, Vice President of Operations and Chief Human Resources Officer, Vice President of Student Affairs, and the Dean and Associate Dean of Graduate Studies. These meetings occur once each semester for them to discuss their concerns and solutions. It is a learning opportunity for both administration and students with many individual problems identified over the years that have been quickly addressed by directing students to resources already available. It has also been a productive avenue to address broader student concerns and develop pathways to solutions for the past eleven years.

Graduate students have a valued role in shared governance at TU. They are included as members of multiple college and university level committees including those addressing university budget, curriculum, and student appeals. The Graduate Student Association President is an ex officio member of the Academic Senate. We meet weekly with the leadership of the Graduate Student Association with representation from all TU colleges.

The stipends of all assistantships have been steadily increased at TU. Increases of 50% since Spring 2022 have occurred for the lowest-base master's level assistants and an increase of 23% for doctoral teaching and research assistants. TU awarded both state COLAs (3.0% July 2022, 4.5% November 2022) that were funded by the state for only for faculty and staff to the graduate assistants as well. All assistantship positions include either a free or reduced tuition benefit. Between the increase in stipend levels, adding additional assistantship positions and higher tuition waiver costs, TU has increased its yearly investment in our graduate assistants by over \$2 million since Spring 2018.

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The Office of Graduate Studies encourages and supports students in reporting violations of Graduate and University policies. Through shared governance processes and other resources available on campus, graduate students have the support networks (Counseling Center, Student Affairs, Advising, Title IX, and Graduate Studies) that they need to resolve problems. Collective bargaining would limit our collective ability to respond to individual cases and to develop personalized solutions for students in need.

The impact of collective bargaining would depend on the details of the contract negotiated and could have a substantial downside for our students. The ones most likely to impact TU students would be a decrease in take-home pay associated with union dues and potentially fewer positions available without state appropriation support to cover any negotiated increases in stipend and benefit costs. The decrease in positions would impact the number of financially struggling students able to complete their graduate degrees and become valuable members of the Maryland workforce with minimal graduate student loan burden.

Collective bargaining for research assistants would also impact faculty and student research productivity, changing the mentor/mentee relationship to one of employer/employee and by increasing the proportion of grants dedicated to student salary and benefits, therefore reducing the amount available for doing the proposed project. Graduate deans and research faculty at universities with unionized graduate students report that the number of doctoral students is decreasing due to costs and faculty choices to fund other position types instead of research assistantships with their limited grant funds.

The Office of Graduate Studies is an active advocate for graduate student success both in and out of the classroom. We support graduate student success and provide problem solving when issues arise. Collective bargaining is not a pathway that has been actively explored by TU graduate students and would not be in their best interests. Our students' concerns are being heard and addressed within the current procedures in place.

Sincerely,



Sidd Kaza, PhD
Associate Provost of Research and Dean of Graduate Studies



David R. Ownby, PhD
Associate Dean of Graduate Studies

