

**Written Testimony Submitted to the
Maryland Senate Finance Committee
By Benjamin Lanham, Discussion TA
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,

I am Benjamin Lanham, a Discussion Teacher Assistant (TA) in the Biochemistry and Chemistry Department at the University of Maryland. I have worked for 5 years. I call on this committee to issue a favorable report on this Bill. The state already grants the right of collective bargaining to nearly every other state employee, the faculty at our community colleges, and the non-academic workforce at our four-year institutions. This right should be extended to all higher education workers in Maryland.

As a Discussion TA, I ensure that over 200 students grasp the Chemistry course material better. My duties entail summarizing and sometimes reteaching material covered in lectures, preparing questions, and answering student emails. Each week, I host six 50-minute in-person discussions where I address students' concerns and play an important role in their academic success. I am contracted to work only 20 hours per week, but as one can expect to ensure my students' needs are met, I often exceed these hours. These hours are definitely exceeded once a month when I have to assist with proctored exams and then turn around and grade over 200 exams, and while I receive help from fellow TA, this is an all-day marathon. Furthermore, like many of my fellow Graduate TAs, I often address students' concerns during the weekend. Due to the time commitment and the nature of research, I often work on the weekend to ensure I progress on my PhD research.

I am from West Virginia, and as such, I grew up in a very strong pro-union family. As a result, I was already sympathetic to collective bargaining and workplace democracy. I also acknowledge that I have been pretty lucky to have professors who try their best to ease the workload that TAs have, but this is not the case for all TAs in my department and the university as a whole. My biggest concern is the lack of communication and input that my department takes from graduate students. As you know, a new wing of the Chemistry department is opening this spring. Many of my fellow researchers do not know the details of the building or the move, nor were we allowed to voice opinions or concerns. This problem existed even when I started, as many department members had a misinformed perception of how much we pay for rent and food, which caused animosity among students and professors. We are told that graduate workers are vital to the department and university because of our dedication and research work, but we cannot voice our perspectives. I believe that collective bargaining would give us that chance.

Another worrying trend I have noticed is that more undergraduate students are becoming TAs now while only doing one lab session, assisting about 20-30 students. The university takes advantage of undergraduates by having them teach this lab for credit. Therefore, I suspect they do this to try to diminish the role of graduate students in campus education. This short-sightedness to save money in the long term will lower the standing of all UMD students to succeed and is disrespectful to our contributions to make the university the best it can be. I trust that collective bargaining will address this problem by limiting when undergraduate students can teach undergraduate students.

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 a fundamental human right and 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 education institutions in the nation and, indeed, to many private, prestigious institutions in our state. The reasons to exempt four-year public higher education institutions from this path make no sense. Therefore, I call for a favorable report on 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.*