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Written Testimony Submitted for the Record to the Maryland Senate Finance Committee
Senate Bill 0750 - State Personnel - Collective Bargaining - Faculty
By Conor J. Donnan

Good afternoon to the Chair Senator Pamela Beidle, Vice Chair Senator Antonio Hayes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in favor of SB0750. My name is Conor Donnan, and I am a non-tenure track faculty member at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). I teach in the American Studies department, where I offer courses, publish articles in scholarly journals, and appear on podcasts as an expert to discuss a myriad of topics, all as a representative of UMBC.

Each year, I teach 200-250 students in courses such as American Nonviolent Social Movements and Indigenous Heritage, dedicating considerable time to lecturing, meeting with students during office hours, advising campus organizations, and grading. My work aligns closely with UMBC's mission to produce compassionate, well-rounded graduates who will positively impact the world. Beyond teaching, I advise multiple campus organizations, mentor graduate students, and serve on the Baltimore County Commission for Arts and Humanities. I proudly engage in this work as a member of the UMBC community to further its reputation, increase enrollment, and generate publicity for the institution.

I also contribute to UMBC's research reputation through my scholarship on Irish and Native American interactions during the rise of settler-colonialism and capitalism in the American West. While this research bolsters UMBC's publication record and institutional reputation, because I am a non-tenure track faculty member, it is not officially recognized as part of my workload. I receive no compensation for any activity I undertake to further the interests of UMBC other than my work in the classroom, which as the members of this committee can see, is simply a fraction of the work required to maintain my status within UMBC and provide the educational experience students of Maryland's public universities deserve.

I am one voice among a dedicated community of faculty in Maryland who, despite our unwavering commitment to our students and the pursuit of academic excellence, are denied the right to unionize and collectively bargain. The right to collective bargaining is not only a fundamental human right but also a proven means of fostering a democratic, transparent, and fair workplace for all employees. At a time when universities increasingly operate like corporations and donors wield disproportionate influence, this denial further marginalizes faculty, undermining our ability to advocate for ourselves and for the integrity of higher education as a whole.

Faculty at Maryland's public universities are among the few state employees without the right to collectively bargain. This is despite evidence from 25 states and the District of Columbia— including neighboring Delaware and Pennsylvania— that empowering faculty with collective bargaining rights enhances workplace democracy, transparency, and educational outcomes. Faculty in states with collective bargaining agreements typically earn significantly more than their non-unionized peers. For example, non-tenure track faculty in Pennsylvania make 12-15% more than faculty in Maryland do, and

in some unionized states, the pay gap is as high as 20%. This presents a very real danger to talent retention upon which UMBC relies for recruitment and educational outcomes.

In fact, talented faculty in the Maryland system are often forced to look for more stable, more robustly compensated opportunities in Pennsylvania and Delaware, which hurts the academic community in Maryland. If the State of Maryland wants to provide the highest quality of education for its students, it needs to join our neighbors in allowing the faculty to collectively bargain, so we can maintain committed, dedicated, and respected experts in their fields. Remaining on unequal footing with the administration prevents faculty from optimizing students' educational experience and advocating for them because of the possibility of reprisal from administrators.

The denial of collective bargaining hinders open and honest discussions about the best interests of the Maryland university system, harming all stakeholders—including Maryland taxpayers, who benefit from strong educational outcomes as students enter the workforce. Research indicates that public universities with unionized faculty allocate a larger share of their budgets to education rather than administration. This emphasis on student learning results in higher academic achievement, improved retention rates, and a better overall student experience. Additionally, greater faculty retention and stability enable UMBC educators to deepen their commitment to the university, its students, and the broader community beyond the classroom. In essence, faculty having the right to collective bargaining is an investment in the future of the state.

The university system often points to “shared governance” as a substitute for collective bargaining. However, shared governance is fundamentally limited. Faculty senates may propose policies, but university administrations retain the power to overturn them without recourse. I am not personally a member of the Faculty Senate at UMBC, but I do serve on the Faculty Affairs Committee. Unfortunately, our ability to enact meaningful change or effectively advocate for ourselves is severely limited. In fact, it is a frequent point of discussion within our committee that we hold little real power within the shared governance system, leaving us unable to address key issues that directly impact UMBC, faculty, and students, and all other stakeholders. My colleagues at UMD have faced multiple issues with the “shared governance” model. For example, UMD Senate created a Budget Committee during the COVID pandemic but it was never able to function because the University Administration failed to provide needed data. The administration at UMD and UMBC also placed interim Policies on Expressive Activity without major input from faculty. In other words, “shared governance” is like being handed a toolbox without the key—you have the appearance of resources but lack the means to use them effectively. Collective bargaining provides the key to unlock those tools and make meaningful progress. Collective bargaining allows the equal footing required to enact positive change and it promotes workplace democracy, transparency, and accountability.

Importantly, Maryland senators and delegates, labor movements and unions built this state. From the founding of the National Labor Union in Baltimore in 1866 to the establishment of teachers' unions over 150 years ago, Maryland has long been at the forefront of labor advocacy. Denying faculty the right to collective bargaining is not only a break from this legacy but also a rejection of the values that have defined the state's labor movements. Faculty members deserve a seat at the table, not just as educators but as active participants in Maryland's ongoing labor history. It is time to uphold the state's tradition of

labor rights by ensuring that faculty are granted the same opportunities for representation and advocacy as other workers who have fought for—and secured—fair working conditions.

In 2025, the current challenges surrounding public university funding, academic freedom, and union rights at the federal level make it more important than ever for Maryland to ensure its faculty—as the direct link with students on a daily basis—have a voice. Without collective bargaining, especially under the current federal administration, faculty are left exposed to a rapidly changing and uncertain landscape where academics risk facing penalties for engaging in critical research. Students also suffer without collective bargaining as the ability of faculty to meaningfully participate in discussions about social, cultural, and political issues is severely limited and controlled by the administration. As a result, it is easy to envision a scenario where students, the faculty, and the administration are in tension, and there is no meaningful mechanism to resolve these conflicts. Without the protections and advocacy that collective bargaining provides, faculty are unable to drive meaningful change or fully support students, leaving them vulnerable and without recourse. In today’s increasingly uncertain cultural, political, and legal landscape—where federal actions threaten university funding for supporting LGBTQ+ students, immigrants, and people of color—it is more urgent than ever for the State of Maryland to codify the right for professors to collectively bargain. This right ensures that faculty can advocate for and act in solidarity with their students and communities without fear of retaliation, creating a more equitable and inclusive environment for all.

Faculty at UMBC and other public universities in Maryland deserve the same rights as almost every other state employee and as faculty in neighboring states. Collective bargaining is a fundamental right that ensures educators can advocate for good working conditions, fair pay, and better outcomes for students. By passing SB0750, you will empower faculty to take an active role in shaping their professional futures, fostering stability that supports both individual growth and broader contributions to the university and community. This legislation will strengthen Maryland’s public universities, ensuring they continue to thrive for the benefit of all stakeholders—including current taxpayers and the students who are being prepared to join the state’s workforce. Investing in faculty through collective bargaining is an investment in the long-term success of Maryland’s higher education system, reinforcing its role in driving economic development, innovation, and opportunity for future generations.

Thank you to the Chair Senator Pamela Beidle, Vice Chair Senator Antonio Hayes, and all members of the Senate Finance Committee. I am confident that the benefits for all stakeholders in codifying a right to collectively bargain will carry the day.

Sincerely,
Conor J. Donnan