

Testimony from Rose Ying

The university frequently argues that the work research assistants and fellows do isn't labor because some of it goes towards our dissertations, but my graduate experience is a prime example of why this is a disingenuous argument. In my program, many of my peers work at labs outside of campus, including at the NIH. Despite fulfilling the exact same academic requirements and doing the same lab work, only some of us have the right to negotiate our working conditions. The NIH recognizes that their graduate fellows are workers, who perform essential labor in collecting, writing up, and presenting research, and that without their labor, they would not be able to produce world-class clinical research, regardless if that work is part of their thesis or not. On the other hand, UMD refuses to recognize graduates as workers despite the fact that UMD's academic status as a premiere research institution in the nation is not possible without the labor of grads who collect the data to both earn and fulfill multi-million dollar research grants. Because I happen to work on UMD's campus, I am paid significantly below my NIH peers, I do not get access to a grievance process overseen by a neutral party, I can't park on campus to do essential experiments during game days, and I do not have a democratic say in the policies that affect my work.

As my program's Graduate Student Government (GSG) representative for three years, I can unequivocally say that the current shared governance system is not designed to solve labor issues for grad workers. We have tried time and time again to move administrators on issues like the lack of parental leave, protections for international students, and lack of transportation to campus, and have been met time and time again with excuses, deflection, or been flat out ignored. Graduate shared governance bodies, which UMD currently claims is an effective way to address graduate labor issues, support collective bargaining. GSG has unanimously approved legislation in multiple years advocating for voluntary recognition of our union, in addition to legislation supporting this collective bargaining rights bill. The Graduate Assistant Advisory Council has also released statements supporting collective bargaining. Yet despite this, and despite the Graduate Labor Union's sustained supermajority support on authorization cards, UMD and USM administrators continue to lobby against collective bargaining for grads, claiming that it's not in our best interest and even that grad workers don't really want this. Unlike administrators, I have spent over 5 years at this campus talking to hundreds of my peers, and in these conversations, nearly every single grad supports having a union contract. Collective bargaining rights for grad workers must be enshrined in state law so that the teachers and researchers who do essential work at our state universities are able to democratically and effectively negotiate for better working conditions.