



SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE

Senate Bill 84

State Personnel - Collective Bargaining - Graduate Assistants

January 29, 2026

Unfavorable

Chair Beidle, Vice Chair Hayes, members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to offer testimony on Senate Bill 84.

Graduate students are fundamentally learners, not traditional employees. Their primary role is to advance their academic development through teaching and research under the guidance of faculty mentors. Collective bargaining could reframe this educational relationship into a transactional labor relationship, which may erode mentorship and impede academic flexibility. Although collective bargaining could possibly grant students legally enforceable contracts to secure stipends and job security, this transforms the student-mentor dynamic into a collective negotiation setting – casting students as workers first and learners second.

Maryland institutions already provide robust “meet and confer” mechanisms, enabling graduate students to regularly engage with university leaders on issues such as compensation, stipends, and working conditions. Proponents of bargaining argue that these forums have “toothless” outcomes, with repeated administrative dismissals. Thus, this past year we worked with elected graduate student government leaders to make the policy requirements on meet and confer more robust. This revised policy passed the USM Board of Regents at the December 2025 meeting. Legislation would displace these flexible channels with rigid bargaining units, undermining a collaborative culture cultivated on each campus. Mandating adversarial bargaining shifts the tone from collegial problem-solving to power-based negotiation.

Maryland’s public universities also maintain established grievance procedures that allow graduate students to escalate concerns about academic or employment matters confidentially. In contrast, collective bargaining introduces potential for public disputes, and union-mediated enforcement, injecting conflict into sensitive educational settings. These adversarial processes risk harming relationships and disrupting research continuity. While students do have legitimate concerns, the solution lies in enhancing existing grievance protocols—not replacing them with a

labor-centric model that could spark confrontations over academic and administrative impact.

Administrative burden and cost are also significant. Our universities would incur additional recurring personnel expenses and fees to dedicate staff to not only bargain any initial contract but to administer the ongoing bargaining relationship. This is separate and apart from expenses and fees related to any necessary use of outside counsel and fees for Public Employee Relations Board oversight. These costs have the potential to increase significantly given that the bill, in its current form, would allow these newly established units to elect to negotiate on a consolidated basis. Consolidated bargaining is a process that adds further complexity, and therefore cost, to the bargaining process, and is something we would argue is not proper for these units given the wide variability of programs and needs across the institutions.

Diverting funds to support bargaining infrastructure reduces resources available for stipends, research, and student services. Instead of allocating funds toward negotiating rather than mentoring, campus leaders should reinvest in existing support services and direct funding toward students.

The imposition of collective bargaining – in concert with the recent substantial disruptions in Federal funding of university research – can lead to a loss in opportunities for graduate students. For example, at Columbia’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences some doctoral candidates were relieved of teaching duties but will continue to receive their full salaries as fellowships. The graduate student union claims this was a union-busting technique. The University of Michigan (U-M), and many other universities, are experiencing PhD program disruptions. At Michigan, they are pausing admissions for the School of Public Health due to cuts to research funding and fellowship support.

Finally, many institutions already facilitate graduate student representation through shared governance bodies like Graduate Student Governments and advisory councils. These democratic forums preserve the academic mission and foster student voice without resorting to unionization. Enhancing and empowering existing student governance better upholds graduate students’ academic identity while addressing their concerns.

For all the foregoing reasons, the USM respectfully urges an unfavorable report on Senate Bill 84.

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