

Dear Chair Beidle and Members of the Finance Committee,

I am Dr. Marjorie Levinstein, and I am writing to express my strong support for legislation that would enable graduate students at the University of Maryland to form a labor union. As a scientist at the National Institutes of Health and a former graduate student, I bring both personal experience with graduate education and current perspective as a unionized federal employee in the scientific workforce.

Graduate students form the backbone of university research operations, conducting critical experiments, advancing scientific knowledge, and teaching undergraduate courses. Yet they face persistent challenges that unionization could help address. As a unionized graduate student at the University of Washington, I experienced firsthand the difference that collective bargaining rights can make. Our union ensured fair stipends that reflected local living costs and protected against overwork. In contrast, many of my colleagues at other institutions were forced to take second jobs despite their already demanding research and teaching responsibilities, ultimately detracting from their academic work and mental wellbeing. From my experience as both a unionized graduate student and now as a unionized federal scientist, I can attest to how crucial these protections are for enabling researchers to focus on their work.

The issues extend beyond compensation. Graduate students often lack comprehensive healthcare coverage, particularly for mental health services and family care. They can face harassment or mistreatment with limited recourse for addressing grievances. Perhaps most pervasively, there is often no clear limit on working hours or scope of responsibilities, leading to systematic overwork that impacts both their wellbeing and the quality of their research.

As a current unionized scientist and member of our bargaining committee at the NIH, I have direct experience with how collective bargaining creates mechanisms to address these exact challenges. My role in negotiations has shown me how unions can effectively fight for workplace improvements while maintaining the highest standards of scientific excellence. My union ensures we have clear workplace protections, standardized grievance procedures, and a real voice in decisions that affect our working conditions. These protections haven't diminished the quality or impact of our research; rather, they've created an environment where scientists can focus more fully on their work.

The University of Maryland's graduate students have already demonstrated their strong desire for these basic workplace protections, with over 60% having signed union authorization cards and large collective actions this past year. Despite this clear majority support, their request for voluntary recognition of their union has not been granted.

Enabling them to unionize would strengthen, not weaken, the university's research enterprise by creating more sustainable working conditions for the next generation of scientists and scholars. It would bring the university in line with peer institutions that have already recognized graduate student unions, including the University of California system, University of Michigan, Harvard University, and, as previously stated, University of Washington.

The success of my own federal research career, built on the foundation of my graduate education, demonstrates that strong worker protections and scientific excellence are fully compatible. I urge you to support this important legislation and give University of Maryland graduate students the opportunity to form a union.