



Office of the President

**Morgan State University Testimony
David K. Wilson, President**

House Bill 141 (Delegate Foley)
Senate Bill 0084 (Senator Kramer, *et al.*)
Introduced during the 2025 Regular Session as SB0166
State Personnel – Collective Bargaining – Graduate Assistants

January 29, 2026

Unfavorable

Senator Pamela Beidle, Chair, Finance Committee and Senator Antonio Hayes, Vice Chair, Finance Committee. We, at Morgan, thank you for the opportunity to share our position on House Bill 118. The summary of the Bill states the following: *Providing collective bargaining rights to certain graduate assistants at a system institution, Morgan State University, or St. Mary's College of Maryland; defining "graduate assistant" as a graduate student at a system institution, Morgan State University, or St. Mary's College of Maryland who is a teaching, administrative, or research assistant or in a comparable position, a fellow, or a postdoctoral intern; and establishing a separate collective bargaining unit for the graduate assistants.*

Morgan State University is the Preeminent Public Urban Research University in Maryland, known for its excellence in teaching, intensive research, effective public service and community engagement. Morgan prepares diverse and competitive graduates for success in a global interdependent society.

Background

Morgan is not opposed to collective bargaining in general. However, HB 141 and Senate Bill 84 will have a negative administrative and fiscal impact on our institution.

HB 141 and Senate Bill 84 [3-102, (b),(9), (iv-vi)] attempt to explicitly separate Graduate Assistants ("GA") from the list of public employment classes eligible for collective bargaining. If this legislation were to pass, GAs at Morgan State University could unionize and, subsequently, collectively bargain with the University. The University has substantial reservations about extending collective bargaining rights to GAs. Including GAs among the public workers eligible for collective bargaining will impose considerable strain on the University's financial resources and scholarly independence.

Morgan State already uses a renowned governance structure, which collective bargaining would only frustrate. Notably, Morgan's University Council provides a participatory system of governance, offering the University community opportunities for involvement, communication,

and accountability. University Council involves the administration, faculty, professional administrative staff, classified employees, and student body in the ongoing operation of the University. Three faculty members come from each of the University’s academic colleges and schools. For academic colleges and schools with graduate programs, at least one of the three representatives shall be a member of the graduate faculty. Two members are from the University’s classified employees. The University Council reviews proposed policies and advises the University’s President concerning those policies, providing insight into the University-wide impact they may have. The University Council may also, on its own initiative, make recommendations for the President and the Board of Regents’ consideration with respect to any matter of University-wide significance and impact.

The University Council serves a valued role in providing all members of the University’s community a part in shared governance. Collective bargaining can lead to slower progress and hinder the implementation of initiatives that effectively address the concerns of multiple stakeholders, as the University Council has already accomplished.

Unique Duties and Funding Sources

Section 3-102 of the State Personnel and Pensions Article of the Maryland Code explicitly provides that contingent, contractual, and temporary employees are ineligible for collective bargaining. This legislation attempts to expand collective bargaining rights to GAs by specifically excluding them from that class of workers. Deliberately excluding GAs from this class is noteworthy because it implies that Graduate Assistants are equivalent to contingent, contractual, and temporary workers. While GAs share many of the same characteristics as contingent, contractual, and temporary employees, they have the unique distinction of working for a fixed term that naturally concludes upon the completion of their appointment or upon graduation.

Further, despite their common title, not all GAs share the same role.¹ In fact, graduate assistant appointments often reflect duties that are unique to specific curricular arrangements. For example, the responsibilities of GAs in the School of Social Work differ from those of their counterparts in the School of Architecture and Planning, which in turn differ from the School of Computer, Mathematical, & Natural Sciences, and so forth. Consequently, few GAs share common responsibilities.

These unique circumstances raise significant concerns about the effects of collective bargaining on the GAs across the University. For instance, it would be impractical for a single representative or small group of GAs to effectively advocate for the wide variety of duties that apply to specific GAs in the University’s twelve schools and colleges, let alone the different professors within each school or college. Moreover, it would be incredibly difficult for a single collective bargaining agreement to accommodate the range of interests, purposes, and programmatic nuances encompassed by different professors, schools, and colleges.

¹ *Morgan State University has two distinct graduate assistantships. Graduate Research Assistants work directly with faculty members on research and grant topics. Graduate Teaching Assistants teach undergraduate courses and assist faculty in the preparation of teaching materials.*

Limitations of Negotiating Future Employment Conditions

Graduate assistantships are typically nine-and-a-half-month appointments. Therefore, some GAs may complete their appointment or graduate before the conclusion of a negotiation period. This scenario raises concerns about the appropriateness of negotiating long-term conditions for roles defined by short-term, temporary engagement. For instance, a GA's participation in the bargaining process may be limited to their term, leading to an abrupt departure and the addition of a new, unfamiliar person to the bargaining table. This can undermine the continuity and consistency of representation during negotiations, hindering the ability to reach consensus on crucial topics and potentially leading to an impasse.

Academic Considerations

Morgan State University is committed to providing students with a world-class education. GAs play an important role in helping the University fulfill this commitment. However, expanding the University's labor obligations may lead to adverse consequences that could potentially jeopardize the University's mission. Professors and their GAs also currently enjoy a mentor-mentee relationship, and the professors at Morgan State University take great pride in serving as mentors for their GAs, particularly given the University's position as Maryland's Preeminent Public Urban Research University. This dynamic is special in our academic setting, as members of our student body often come to this University from unique urban backgrounds. The mentor-mentee relationship allows graduate assistants to learn directly from their professors in a cooperative, tailored manner. But collective bargaining threatens this dynamic. Instead, the relationship between a professor and GAs will morph into a supervisor-subordinate arrangement. The focus shifts from advancing the GA's academic achievements to prioritizing union interests, creating a tense learning environment for students. Further, Union rules for graduate assistants will inevitably restrict the autonomy GAs currently enjoy through course design, pedagogy, and assessment. Such an arrangement also puts the professor's academic freedom at risk. Morgan State University's ability to provide a world-class education is owed, in large part, to our professors' bringing their own styles, personalities, and course design to the classroom. Restrictions on that independence threaten the University's ability to provide that world-class education.

Financial Considerations

Morgan State University is a Carnegie Rank 2 Doctoral Research University. Despite a doubling in graduate student enrollment, the University's resources for graduate assistantships have only seen modest growth.

The University's goal is to provide competitive compensation while increasing the number of supported students. However, the financial impact of collective bargaining introduces uncertainties and additional costs. For student support alone, for every \$100 increase in stipends, the number of available assistantships will be reduced by 1 due to constraints of a fixed budget.

Morgan State University is proud to offer a world-class education at an affordable price. Morgan has managed to accommodate recent changes without significant disruption, but collective bargaining could jeopardize this balance by increasing costs and limiting flexibility. Reduced availability for funding GAs will negatively impact Morgan's efforts to improve its Carnegie status.

While every \$100 increase in stipends requires eliminating 1 assistantship, even if the University tried to maintain its current number of assistantships following this legislation, the University would very likely need to raise tuition to cover its financial obligation—a step the University does not want to take. But each additional financial obligation placed on the University requires funding from somewhere. When there are no more donors, grants, or external funding sources, the University is required to turn to tuition—i.e., students—to raise the funds needed to meet its obligations.

It is also unlikely that collective bargaining's effect on the University's financial obligations would be limited to the cost of the stipend and tuition waiver it pays its GAs (as evidenced by other public universities that have seen enhanced stipend amounts following unionization). Healthcare and other similar benefits are typically a major focus of collective bargaining. It is unclear whether the University's GAs would be classified as state employees and, therefore, covered by state benefits. Currently, the University offers a voluntary student health insurance plan. However, if this legislation were to become law and GAs were not classified as state employees, then the University could face significant financial constraints in establishing a healthcare program and, in turn, paying a portion of each GA's premium.

The University would also need to hire additional personnel to manage relations with this additional bargaining unit. These new employees would entail another significant added expense to the University. Moreover, these new employees, along with incumbent employees, would require substantial training and be tasked with additional responsibilities to remain in compliance with labor relations laws. Diverting focus from core academic functions to complex administrative procedures to comply with union and collective bargaining obligations will only further the strain on already financially burdened administrative departments.

Agency infrastructure and staffing needed to support additional unionization efforts and activities are estimated to be approximately \$2M to 2.5M for Morgan. This estimated additional cost does not include any current benefits or related payments to individuals seeking to unionize. Further, this estimate of costs to support unionization would not include any additional negotiated cost, such as potential wage, benefits and miscellaneous payments, that are typically the subject of negotiation and would be contingent on additional funding provided by the State to meet any such agreed arrangements.

Conclusion

Graduate assistantships at Morgan State University provide professional experience and training tailored to individual goals and the University's funding and operational requirements. The diversity of duties, funding sources, and professional objectives complicates the feasibility of

collective bargaining. Moreover, the financial uncertainties introduced by collective agreements could undermine the University's efforts to expand support for its graduate students.

Morgan's focus on individualized training, programmatic nuance, and sustainable funding underscores the need for a tailored approach to employment terms, distinct from the collective bargaining framework. Morgan State University respectfully urges an unfavorable report on House Bill 0141/Senate Bill 0084.

We appreciate the opportunity to work with the State in reaching a solution to support our students as we continue to grow the future and lead the world.

Sincerely,



David K. Wilson
President, Morgan State University