



**House Government, Labor, & Elections Committee
Senate Bill 84
Collective Bargaining - Graduate Assistants
Opposition
April 7, 2026**

Chair Wells, Vice Chair Kerr, and members of the House Government, Labor, & Elections Committee:

The University of Maryland, College Park — the state's flagship public research university and a member of the Big Ten Conference — respectfully submits this testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 84. We do so with full recognition that graduate students make extraordinary contributions to our institution and that their well-being, financial support, academic development, and working conditions are of genuine importance to us. Our opposition is not a dismissal of their concerns. It is that this legislation, as written, would harm the very students it intends to help — and would do so at a moment when the financial foundation of public research universities in America is under historic stress.

College Park is home to more than 10,000 graduate students, with many who serve as teaching assistants, research assistants, and graduate fellows — approximately 1,100 are funded in whole, and 2,900 are funded in part, through federal research grants from agencies including the NIH, NSF, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Energy. The bill's carve-out, which excludes only GAs whose positions are fully funded through grants, does not protect the University from absorbing negotiated financial support obligations for positions that draw from both restricted and unrestricted sources, which describes many of our graduate assistants.

I. THE TIMING COULD NOT BE WORSE

The General Assembly is considering this legislation at a moment of unprecedented disruption in federal research funding. The Trump administration's fiscal year 2026 budget proposed nearly \$18 billion in NIH funding reductions compared to fiscal year 2025, and more than \$5 billion in NSF reductions since fiscal year 2024. The University of Maryland has already seen federal grant and contract reductions of upwards of \$30 million, and we are still assessing the downstream impacts of these proposed cuts on our graduate student admissions, support, laboratory operations, and research staffing.

Our Big Ten peers are already experiencing the consequences. Michigan State University announced in the summer of 2025 that layoffs are unavoidable, driven in part by federal funding reductions. The University of Michigan has paused doctoral admissions in its School of Public Health, citing cuts to research funding and fellowship support. These are institutions with mature

collective bargaining relationships and decades of experience managing them. Even they are struggling.

Establishing a new, legally binding collective bargaining relationship for graduate assistants at College Park, while federal research funding is being actively dismantled, is terrible timing. A negotiated contract that locks in stipend floors or salary enhancement commitments in year one may become an institutional obligation that cannot be met in year two if a major federal funding stream is cut or eliminated, which is a very realistic concern based on the current federal landscape.

II. THE FINANCIAL OBLIGATIONS WILL FALL ON STUDENTS AND THE INSTITUTION

In testimony this session, the state has made clear that it does not view itself as responsible for funding salary enhancements negotiated via higher education collective bargaining. This is the same policy posture that creates significant financial risk for nontenure-track faculty under Senate Bill 6. It applies with equal force here. Any stipend increases or benefit enhancements negotiated by a graduate assistant union will need to be absorbed by the University — from tuition revenue, indirect cost recoveries, or reallocation from other University priorities — and will result in a reduction in the number of graduate positions available.

Over the past several years, the University has actively collaborated with the Graduate Student Government to address many of the specific and urgent needs of our graduate students, especially our graduate assistants. This includes enhancements in policy, such as the parental leave benefit; programming, including the expansion of the graduate student success team; services, like the restructuring of the Graduate Ombudsman office and the addition of Graduate Student Resolution Officers across all colleges; and the provision of University-sponsored, grad-only housing. The University has also continued to significantly increase minimum stipends, which are up 64% from Fall 2019 to Fall 2025, exceed the calculated cost of attendance, and are higher than the majority of our Big 10 peers. Meanwhile, graduate assistant collective bargaining at our Big 10 peer institutions and other research universities has resulted in a reduction in the number of their graduate students.

At George Washington University, the Columbian College of Arts & Sciences cut doctoral packages by approximately 7%, shrank cohorts in 13 programs, and paused admissions in five programs — moves that faculty attributed directly to the costs of a [looming](#) graduate student union contract combined with federal fiscal pressures.

III. THE EDUCATIONAL RELATIONSHIP IS GENUINELY DIFFERENT FROM AN EMPLOYMENT RELATIONSHIP

Graduate assistants at College Park are enrolled students pursuing advanced degrees. Students (not employees) receiving financial support (i.e., stipends, tuition assistance) for temporary, short-term roles designed to support their academic training and provide expertise in their fields

of study. Their teaching and research assignments are not incidental jobs — they are central to their academic training. A doctoral student who serves as a teaching assistant is developing pedagogical skills under faculty supervision. A research assistant working in a laboratory is advancing toward their dissertation under a faculty mentor's guidance. These relationships are educational in nature and essential to graduate students' academic development, and the bill's treatment of them as straightforwardly analogous to public employee labor relationships risks distorting something that is genuinely not analogous.

The University System of Maryland recognized this concern and, at the December 2025 Board of Regents meeting, strengthened the existing "meet and confer" policy requirements for graduate students. This reform was developed in collaboration with elected graduate student government leaders and represents exactly the kind of flexible, campus-specific, collaborative response to student concerns that collective bargaining would foreclose.

IV. ADMINISTRATIVE AND LEGAL COSTS WILL DIVERT RESOURCES FROM GRADUATE STUDENTS

Establishing and administering a collective bargaining relationship for graduate assistants will require dedicated HR and labor relations staff, outside legal counsel, and Public Employee Relations Board oversight — all of which carry recurring costs. These are not one-time expenses. They are permanent additions to the University's operating cost structure. Every dollar spent on bargaining infrastructure is a dollar not available for graduate student stipends, research support, or mentorship programs. The irony is that this legislation, in its effort to improve graduate student conditions, will divert resources currently available to graduate students toward administrative oversight of labor relations.

CONCLUSION

The University takes its responsibility of supporting our graduate student population seriously, as shown through improved stipends, expanded benefits, and the meet-and-confer process. However, Senate Bill 84 presents structural risks to both the University and its graduate students. Amidst declining federal research support and financial pressures, the bill creates unfunded obligations that will reduce flexibility, strain resources, and, based on all known peer cases, cause a reduction in graduate assistant positions. Therefore, the University of Maryland, College Park, urges the House Government, Labor, and Elections Committee to issue an unfavorable report on Senate Bill 84.

jmlewis@umd.edu