

The following favorable testimonies from UMD and UMBC graduate workers have been provided to UMD Graduate Labor Union / UAW. Graduate workers ask you to pass HB 141

Yunhui Bai

As an international student, I rely solely on my salary as a graduate assistant at UMD to survive. The whole area is extremely expensive. Most of the rentals require that I make 2.5x the rent. Since I'm only receiving less than \$2500 per month (for 9.5 months!), I can't rent anywhere more expensive than \$1000/month. However, given this area is so expensive, it is extremely difficult to find a rental under that price even when I am willing to have one or two roommates. The student apartments around campus are also very expensive. A room in a 4-bedroom apartment is easily more than \$1000/month. I think the cost of living expectations the university have on us don't align with the reality of this area. It is true that TA is a part time job, but I live my life full time on that salary.

Carly

As a grad student, I am lucky to live with family that supports me while I'm in school, but from talking with my cohort and other grad students the graduate assistant stipend that we receive is just not enough to survive in the suburbs of DC, especially with the high cost of living that is continuing to climb. Additionally the salary makes it hard to take part in conferences and other professional development opportunities when we are unable to get funding from are GAships or Departments. With a union, a better stipend can be negotiated that can help GAs better support themselves, their families (if applicable), and their professional journeys.

Riley Lankes

My name is Riley Lankes, I'm a graduate worker and PhD student in UMD's College of Information.

Graduate workers at UMD need a union, plain and simple. I could choose from any number of reasons why. The extra hours many of us grad workers put in outside of what we're paid for are one reason – this is the work keeps classes and research at this university running, yet so much of it goes uncompensated. The “guaranteed funding” which makes up the shoestring budget I live on, poised to evaporate at any time in the face of federal cuts, is another reason. Critical as these are, these are not the primary reason I wrote this testimony.

I'm wrote this because many of my peers are afraid to do so themselves. They fear having their visas canceled, their funding cut, their lives upended for the crime of speaking up. This climate of fear is un-American, and it disgusts me. It is the right of the people to speak freely, to peaceably to assemble, and to petition for a redress of grievances. The fact that so many are afraid to exercise these rights is exactly why we need a union. A legally enforceable contract gives protections we desperately need right now.

United we stand. Stand with us. Pass MD SB84.

Bakican Ayna

Living cost has started to become unbearable. I can't even travel back home due to financial constraints.

Jenna Russell

I transferred with my advisor part-way through my PhD. At our old institution, health care was completely covered, and wages were higher due to the union negotiating for fair pay as the cost of living dramatically increases. UMD would create a much better work environment for their students if we didn't have to worry about things like the rising costs of healthcare and having enough take home pay to do more than scrape by. It's embarrassing that UMD does not care about nor recognize their graduate students. It shows that UMD sees graduate students not as the cornerstone of the university but as cheap labor to exploit as much as possible. This summer, pay was withheld for over a month due to errors and miscommunication from UMD, which for some of my peers would be devastating. How are students expected to continue research when they cannot even pay rent? When asked, I tell all potential students not to come to UMD, as the university offers terrible benefits and salary as compared to peer institutions. All of the other 6 PhD programs I was accepted to have and recognize their graduate unions. JHU, just up the road, offers a salary over 50k per year as well as healthcare and other benefits. While most of my fellow PhD students haven't known differently, I can speak first hand about the lack of community and support at UMD in comparison to peer universities. The state and university need to stop embarrassing themselves and recognize the graduate union,.

Peymaan Motevalli-Aliabadi

Discrepancy in TA workload within the ARCH department dependent on instructor. Low living wage leaves little room outside of rent expenses. Rent is over 60% of my 9.5 month contract stipend. Tuition remission not used in winter of 9.5 months contract should be able to be used in summer. A union could help to negotiate these conditions with the school and level the TA/GA experience. Within and across departments.

Sam Christenson

The recipients of UMCES awards received an email on 1/8/26 titled "Award recipient expectations" that stated that students receiving UMCES financial support are now expected to "contribute to building our educational program." The email says this workload should be "equivalent or less than that of a typical graduate or teaching assistantship" and lists several options for students: TAing a MEES course, working for the education office, supporting the CGC, developing digital content, or assisting with workshops.

This will be a manageable commitment for me, but it isn't great that I am now expected to do additional work to receive the funds I was promised from the fellowship I started the program with.

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.

Lixin Zheng

Sometimes, I look around and think about what my undergraduate math friends are up to. The competitive and driven ones have gone to do quantitative finance or consulting. The analytic ones - data science or actuarial work. So few of them are pursuing a graduate degree.

Then I look around in my department, at the various 5th, 6th, and even 7th years around me. Many of them are frantically applying for jobs, worrying that they won't be funded for the next year, even though their projects are unfinished. Some of them have children, yet they don't get parental leave or time off. Others have to use their low stipend to support their family back home in a different country. Why would people want to go into academia, if these are the conditions we get for six years?

Giving collective bargaining rights for graduate students is not only essential for us, it's necessary for the future of academia. Graduate students are the future of math and the sciences, and a union ensures that students actually want to pursue these subjects in the future.

Alina Urena

The people who make my experience on campus truly memorable and enjoyable have been the multiple graduate student employees on campus. Every interaction I've had with them has been nothing short of amazing and It saddens me to see that the rights and benefits they receive are nowhere near at the level of service that they provide to the UMD community. I along with many others believe that UMD would be better if grad students had a union to help advocate for themselves.

kinan bazzi

Many graduate students find themselves navigating a difficult balance between academic responsibilities and real labor. They often teach classes, grade assignments, and conduct university research, yet lack the same rights and protections as other employees. Without the ability to collectively bargain, they have little say over their pay, work hours, or conditions. Unionizing offers a pathway for grad workers to stand together and advocate for fair treatment, livable wages, and a stronger voice in shaping the academic institutions they help power

Yun Zeng

A union can provide legal guidance and representation related to graduate student employment changes, and centralized communication can help us understand and respond to policy shifts affecting funding, visas, or employment rules.

For example, my department changed our contracts from 12 months to 9.5 months last year due to a lack of funding. If we had a graduate student union, it could help assess the legitimacy of this action, clarify whether proper procedures were followed, and represent students in challenging or negotiating such changes collectively.

Kennedy Davis

I look for additional work opportunities to try to make ends meet. Recognizing that my department's stipend is considered one of the higher ones, I am deeply concerned for the financial stability and well-being of my colleagues in departments with even lower funding. A union would ensure that my fellow graduate students won't go hungry.

Claire McDonald

Having a union and bargaining rights would help improve the pay equity for UMBC graduate student workers! Our current pay is not commensurate with the rising cost of living, especially regarding rent and groceries.

Pavan Raj Ravi

"Between rising rents and mandatory fees, it's becoming harder for graduate students to focus on their degrees without constant financial stress. I believe organizing is the best way to ensure our stipends keep pace with the actual cost of living in Maryland, making graduate education at UMBC more equitable and sustainable."

Anjali Verma

I am a third year graduate worker in the Biophysics program at UMD College Park. In the three years since I've been at Maryland, it's never been more clear that grads need collective bargaining rights. This year, more than ever, we need our bill to pass.

Since Trump took office, grads have had to grapple with an extremely uncertain funding landscape, attacks on immigrants, democratic backsliding, and a university administration that will not listen to us. And why would they? Without collective bargaining, UMD has complete power to determine our working conditions.

This past summer, hundreds of grads missed paychecks and some were not paid for 2+ months. It was Graduate Labor Union (GLU) grads who marched on admin buildings and informed Dean of the Graduate School Steven Roth that far more than the "two students" he heard about were not being paid. Collectivizing our concerns is the only way we can see real progress from UMD in addressing our workplace issues. As individuals, we are ignored or sent from office to office with no real recourse.

In departments across campus, we've also seen UMD roll back the flimsy "promises" that grads receive in our offer letters. Grads in physics watched this year as their contracts were changed from 12 months to 9 months overnight. Not one graduate worker was consulted about this decision, instead they learned about it via email in June about a contract change that would take effect within weeks. Grads across campus are also being told that promises of "X years of guaranteed funding" are no longer valid, and being pressured to graduate as soon as possible due to funding issues.

It's been a tough year at Maryland since Trump took office. As graduate workers, we know that collective bargaining won't fix all our problems, but a legally enforceable contract would give us protections we desperately need right now.

Henry Hausmann

I am a graduate of the University of Maryland with a PhD in Atmospheric and Oceanic Science, working on solutions to sea level rise and climate change. It's work that I love and work that is critical for the future of our state. It's work that I'd like to be fairly treated while doing. And I am not alone. A supermajority of my colleagues at UMD College Park have signed union authorization cards with the United Auto Workers. We've held rallies and called on the USM Board of Regions to recognize our Union. Now, we're turning to the legislature, to give us the same rights Graduate Assistants across the country already enjoy, including at peer Big 10 institutions, like Rutgers. Here in our own state private Universities, like Johns Hopkins already have a graduate union and continue to achieve excellence in research and teaching. I even fear that the lack of collective bargaining rights for graduate assistants at UMD could have a deleterious brain drain effect on our state. I've heard from highly qualified prospective graduates that the lack of a union at UMD is a serious concern when deciding where to attend graduate school. There's a simple solution: pass this bill. Grant us collective bargaining rights. And then watch the University of Maryland prosper.

Charles Reisner

I am a second year graduate student in the Astronomy department at UMD. In that time, one thing has become blatantly clear to me— despite what the UMS lobbyists or the administration claims about the university not being able to afford to recognize the graduate labor union, the opposite is true. The university system, and by extension, the state of Maryland, can't afford not to recognize us. As graduate workers at UMD, we bring in around \$748 million dollars for the university annually in research alone. This isn't counting the revenue generated by teaching assistants, many of whom are balancing teaching, classes, and research. If graduate students can afford food and rent, the quality of their research will increase, the quality of their teaching will increase, and by extension the quality of the university will increase. Over the past several months, I've represented my department in our efforts to unionize. In that time, I've talked to hundreds of graduate students in person and over the phone. The main source of apprehension I get is always the same. International students are scared. The statement usually goes, "I am completely supportive of the union's efforts, but I just can't put my name or face out there right now". These aren't just 'students' and these aren't kids— these are employees who do most of the heavy lifting for the university, and they don't feel safe. How will this look to a prospective graduate student deciding between a university in the USM system and somewhere else? That's why we don't see the ratification of this bill as a cost to the state, but an investment. We love our jobs and the research we do. What we're asking is that we can continue to do them here.

Rohit Premlal

Finding funding has been a difficult thing for a while. I'm working as a TA in case something happens to my PI's funding, which would in turn affect mine. An increasing number of students in the department are therefore trying to get a TAship, making it difficult for everyone to get funding.

My old roommate who was in the biology department, couldn't find a PI since a good portion of the professors there lost funding, and the dept itself told them funding couldn't be guaranteed. They were fortunate enough to get an offer from another university, so they moved there.

Another friend of mine in physics is now in a situation where they have to complete their thesis, without being able to complete their research and get enough publications, since their lab has run out of funding.

Right now, we don't have a forum/space to talk about this or ask for help. We just have to accept whatever falls on us, since we don't have a voice to fight for our issues. A graduate labour union, would be the first step in this direction, so that our rights are protected.

Chelsea Hook

Unions can help combat issues like unfair scheduling, discrimination, harassment, and inadequate compensation independently of management who's priority could lie outside of the employee in question.

In addition to better wages and health benefits. A union could also advocate for a healthy work by combating a committed work-life balance.

Unionizing can also give another safety of protection against the current administration against sudden termination and a unified front to combat injustices with the institution as a collective student body.

Jenan El-Hifanwi

Hi everyone, I'm Jenan, and I'm a 3rd year masters student and NSF graduate research fellow in entomology. As a research fellow, I conduct research full time, with the only class I attend being a 1 hour weekly department seminar. My tuition remission and salary come from NSF, so while UMD benefits from the research I conduct and the grants it contributes to, they aren't responsible for paying me. Instead, to conduct research here and attend my weekly seminar, NSF pays UMD \$12,000 annually for my tuition.

When I began my grad studies at UMD, I believed that if admin just knew what we needed, they would make it happen. I eagerly got involved as an ENTM representative in the CMNS graduate student council, and then as a CMNS representative in the Provost Graduate Advisory Committee.

It was during these meetings that our own administrators convinced me that we need a union. The councils exist because they want us to feel like we have a voice, but admin doesn't actually have to act on any of the issues we bring up, and we did advocate for many different changes to help make UMD liveable for all grads.

When we asked for improved financial support, citing many grads' inability to afford university subsidized housing, the Provost responded that "it's hard to define 'affordable' in CP, when some students are having their parents pay their rent". Let me clarify what we mean by affordable - we mean housing that we don't have to spend 50+% of our stipends on. No grads should be food or housing insecure, yet UMD's own survey showed over 60% of grad workers worry about paying rent, and over a third worry about buying food.

When we proposed a centralized accommodation fund so that the school, not departments, pays for grad worker disability accommodations, which can be expensive and dissuade departments from hiring disabled grads... multiple Deans agreed that the current system incentivises ableist hiring! We were so excited when we were told that the centralized fund was in the works, and they'll take care of it from here. This excitement didn't last long - when we followed up with the Accessibility and Disability Services coordinator, she told us "not to get our hopes up" - the fund was unlikely to come to fruition.

We brought up international student fees. A fee that admin implemented by skipping the "required" student approval process, and despite the multiple student government resolutions objecting to it which went ignored. We told them the fees are an inequitable burden, they said "we hear you, but there's no money". We asked to work together to find the money - maybe we could talk to the development office to find donors to support international grads? We were told "the development office is more concerned with things like putting names on buildings". When we met with a development officer, their lack of interest was obvious. They suggested creating a UMD-branded gofundme, and advised us to "think of who we know with deep pockets". An entire office dedicated to getting donations told us - a handful of volunteer grads on a council - to do the job of that office. Admin knows that we can't and shouldn't be expected to find donors ourselves - it's their "polite" way of telling us to drop the issue.

Grads deserve a collective, democratic, and legally enforceable voice - we will never see meaningful change without it. The only way that happens is with a recognized union.