



HOUSE GOVERNMENT, LABOR, AND ELECTIONS COMMITTEE

Senate Bill 84

State Personnel - Collective Bargaining - Graduate Assistants

April 7, 2026

Unfavorable

Chair Wells, Vice Chair Kerr, members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to offer testimony on Senate Bill 84 as amended. Despite the revisions, the University System of Maryland (USM) must continue to respectfully oppose SB 84.

The USM continues to maintain that 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 – casting students as workers first and learners second. Even in public jurisdictions where graduate assistant bargaining is permitted, how this group is defined varies greatly from the definition proposed, with many excluding research assistants and postdocs.

Graduate assistants across the USM are often paid with soft money, funded through grants with terms over which the USM has limited or no control. Diverting funds from support services or direct student funding to support bargaining infrastructure reduces resources available for stipends, research, and student services. 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 as has been seen in other jurisdictions (e.g., Columbia’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and the University of Michigan). Expanding collective bargaining rights to public sector higher education students has real-world implications.

Additionally, the temporary nature of the student population is not conducive to collective bargaining. The process to elect an exclusive representative under existing law (the Public Employee Relations Act) does not seem to contemplate application to graduate assistants, where a signature could be valid long after a student has moved on into their career. Further, the terms negotiated by one group of students will apply to incoming groups of students not involved in negotiating the MOU terms by which they will be bound, lacking

any continuity and making identification and resolution of systemic or substantial issues challenging.

State law already includes important protections against retaliation and discrimination, and the USM institutions have established policies to ensure the protection and fair treatment of students. Maryland institutions provide robust “meet and confer” mechanisms, enabling graduate students to regularly engage with university leaders on issues such as compensation, stipends, and working conditions. Maryland’s public universities also maintain established grievance procedures that allow graduate students to escalate concerns about academic or employment matters confidentially.

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, even as amended, 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 such units given.

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

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