

Delores G. Kelley, Chair
Brian J. Feldman, Vice Chair
3 East Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, MD 21401

SB 658
Supporting

Dear Chair Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman, and Members of the Finance Committee,

I am writing in support of collective bargaining rights for graduate employees, and I strongly urge you to pass SB 658. The right to collectively bargain is a well-established right, and one that should be available to all workers. In the case of graduate workers, however, this right has been denied by the University of Maryland on the grounds that graduate workers are not employees, but rather students in an apprenticeship system. There are a number of problems with this argument.

First, just because someone is an apprentice doesn't mean they can't be paid a living wage.

Second, working conditions are learning conditions: if the people conducting research and teaching courses are unable to make a living, then the university's ability to produce new research and educate students is severely compromised. Since universities are engines of economic growth, we are effectively wasting our own money if we don't allow universities to operate at their full potential. And yet, this is exactly what we do when we deny labor rights to graduate employees.

Third, the basic facts of graduate work contradict the notion that graduate employees are apprentices. Many graduate employees do not work in academic departments, but instead work as administrative assistants in non-academic departments in the university; they are not apprenticing in their own academic disciplines, but rather working at low-paying jobs to make ends meet while they take courses and conduct research. Furthermore, because universities are no longer hiring many tenure-track faculty, the jobs for which graduate students are "apprenticing" are now largely non-existent. Indeed, 75% of university faculty nationwide (and 66% at the University of Maryland) are now "adjunct" labor: part-time teaching faculty who do not receive a regular income or benefits. As a result, the majority of graduate employees will not be able to find work in a university system upon earning an advanced degree, and hence cannot be considered apprentices. They are, in fact, employees who frequently do not work in their chosen fields when they are students, and are unlikely to work in their chosen fields upon earning their degrees.

Fourth, many graduate students feel that they have no workplace rights at all without the right to collectively bargain. This is because, in many cases, the person who supervises their employment also supervises their scholarship. Hence, graduate workers often feel they must agree to unreasonable employment demands simply to earn a degree. This is not apprenticeship; it is exploitation.

For these reasons, I ask you to end our unjust system of labor exploitation by supporting SB 658. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Asim A. Ali, Ph.D.