

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,

Higher education is under assault. From the slashing of state support for public colleges and universities, to the errant but widespread belief that professors inculcate a liberal ideology into their students, to the rapid replacement of full-time positions with adjunct labor, the position of institutions of higher education is no longer a given in the United States. Indeed, the pressures to professionalize, to instrumentalize, and to monetize all educational activities are making universities miserable places to work. If institutions of higher education are to have a future beyond offering a playground for the elite and vocational training for the masses, we must start to improve the conditions of some of the most vulnerable workers in higher education, graduate students. In many ways, graduate students are the very core of the contemporary university landscape: their energy and shared cultural frame of reference helps connect them to the undergraduate teaching mission while their insight and work ethic develops a university's research profile and prestige.

Graduate students recognize that graduate education is an apprenticeship: in exchange for roles as research or teaching assistants, graduate students learn the craft of their discipline in order to teach the next generation of students and develop new knowledge in the humanities and sciences. As apprentices, graduate students don't get rich—they take monklike vows of poverty with the hopes that a brighter future will make spending 5-7 years of their life as an apprentice a worthwhile endeavor. As more privileged members of the higher education landscape, we have a responsibility to make sure that these apprenticeships are not exploitative; that graduate students are fairly compensated financially; that they have routes to have grievances fairly addressed; that they are not worked excessively. We ought not replicate the medieval model of apprenticeship in how we situate graduate students in our community. We can do better.

If we improve the financial security of the most vulnerable members in our community, then we will all benefit. Right now, at the University of Maryland, current graduate students have to take on extra jobs just to make ends meet, which trades off with their studies, increases their time to degree, and diminishes the amount of time they can devote to the students they teach. Given the increased academic competition accompanying Maryland's entry into the Big 10, these are sacrifices that we cannot afford. Of course, the inadequacy of graduate student stipends deters many people, especially those not from privileged backgrounds, from pursuing graduate school. The math simply doesn't work out, so our applicant pools are thinner, whiter, richer, and more male than they otherwise might be. Without adequate compensation, the best and brightest go straight to industry jobs, which, over time, will weaken the foundations of higher education.

Collective bargaining is no panacea, but it seems the only alternative given the lack of movement

on issues related to graduate employment over the last decade. The growth in the stipend has simply not kept up with rising rents in the D.C. Metro area and the increasing demands of graduate students exceeds their contractual obligations. There's a saying in democratic theory that captures the current state: "when systems face crisis, they must reform or face revolution." A prior reform—increasing graduate student stipends—would probably have headed off the revolutionary demand for collective bargaining; now, the reform of collective bargaining is needed to head off an even more revolutionary demand. If the University of Maryland is to maintain and strengthen its position as a top public university, something simply must be done about the situation of graduate students and HB 214/SB 658 seems like a step in the right direction.

Sincerely,
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