



SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
Senate Bill 658
Higher Education – Collective Bargaining – Graduate Assistants
February 21, 2020
Urging an Unfavorable Report

Chair Kelley, Vice Chair Feldman and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to share our thoughts on Senate Bill 658. The bill authorizes graduate assistants at the University System of Maryland (USM) to collectively bargain.

Since 2009, the USM has worked to improve the status of the USM’s approximately 6000 graduate assistants (based on a recent survey of all institutions), including the establishment of a “Meet and Confer” process that gives these students (and adjunct faculty) the opportunity to engage a labor representative to represent them in discussions with campus administrators. The USM adopted a Policy on Graduate Assistantships, which addressed the following issues:

- Due process protection and grievance rights;
- Participation in the shared governance process;
- Stipends comparable to those at peer institutions; and
- Clarification of the university’s expectations re duties and time commitments; for example, a full-time assistantship requires the student to work an average of 20 hours per week.

Maryland collective bargaining law includes University System of Maryland (USM) employees generally. The statute expressly excludes from collective bargaining “a student employee, including a teaching assistant or a comparable position, fellow, or post-doctoral intern.” The University System of Maryland remains comfortable with the existing law because:

- Currently, in addition to a monetary stipend, most USM graduate assistants receive a tuition-free education, fully subsidized state health care, and stipend increases in each year of a contract.
- The “Meet and Confer” process provides graduate assistants with many of the perceived benefits that collective bargaining offers, including the right to engage a labor organization to assist them in this process.
- Repealing the law would create a confusing maze of litigation and legal expense over which “groups” or “class” of graduate students may be allowed to organize.

- The cost of negotiation, and potential for productivity slowdowns for students, outweighs any perceived benefit.
- Unionization neglects the disparity in the needs of graduate assistants and the diversity and cultures of fellow graduate students.
- USM graduate assistants enjoy rights concerning workload, grievance procedure, personal leave, professional evaluation, and discipline.

There is a concept and ongoing process within the USM known as “shared governance.” This is a very important process that has served the USM higher education community well for many years. USM employs a Council of University System Students, a Council of University System Faculty and a Council of University System Staff and even a Council of University System Presidents.

Each council is empowered to continually raise issues of concern to the Chancellor and the USM Board of Regents. Shared governance is a collaborative working relationship which provides the necessary follow through to address issues and concerns. USM is a diverse system with 12 degree-granting institutions and 2 Regional Higher Education Centers located throughout the State of Maryland. Issues ranging from salaries, stipends, housing, cost of living, and recruiting competition vary in a system this large.

Thank you for allowing the USM to share these concerns regarding Senate Bill 658.