



THE
GRADUATE SCHOOL

Office of the Dean

2125 Lee Building
College Park, MD 20742-5121
Tel (301) 405-0358 Fax (301) 314-9305
www.gradschool.umd.edu

SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE

Senate Bill 658

Higher Education - Collective Bargaining - Graduate Assistants
(Graduate Assistant Collective Bargaining Fairness Act)

February 21, 2020

Urging an Unfavorable Report

I write to share my concerns regarding Senate Bill 658, which would authorize graduate assistants to collectively bargain. Collective bargaining is not in the overall interests of graduate students and graduate programs.

Graduate assistants are students first, and their duties as graduate assistants are part of their education. Some graduate programs expect or require all students to teach. Most teaching assistants lead discussion or lab sections under the guidance of a faculty member, gaining valuable teaching experience and learning the subject more deeply by learning to explain it to others. Research assistantships allow students to learn to do original research under the guidance of a faculty mentor—research that often is identical to their doctoral dissertation research.

The university's "Meet and Confer" process—where an elected group of GAs meets with the Provost, the Vice President for Finance and Administration, and me at least once each semester to discuss concerns and solutions—has been a useful avenue to address student concerns and solutions for the past ten years.

Meet and Confer outcomes include an 18% increase in minimum stipends since July 2018. As shown in the attached table, stipends are now above the cost of attendance and the Big Ten median. Newly developed policies include parental leave, time away from duties, and a grievance process. A Graduate Academic Counselor position was created and filled this semester, to help students access university services and support. Expectation-setting meetings between GAs and their supervisors are now required, and statements of mutual expectation developed to guide them. We commissioned a study to examine concerns that GAs were working much more than 20 hours per week; the study showed GAs spend an average of 18 hours per week on their duties, with 6 of those hours contributing to a student's own research.

The "Meet and Confer" process provides GAs with many of the perceived benefits that collective bargaining offers, including the right to engage a labor organization to assist them in this process. In the ten years that the "Meet and Confer" process has been in place, GAs have declined to engage a labor organization.

In addition to the “Meet and Confer” process, graduate students serve on the Graduate Council, which sets policy for graduate education, including graduate assistantships. I also meet regularly with leadership of the Graduate Student Government.

The Graduate School encourages students to report violations of Graduate School and University policy, including excessive hours, harassment, unacceptable behavior, or unsafe conditions. The Graduate Student Ombudsman provides confidential and informal assistance in resolving conflicts and promotes fair and equitable treatment. The Graduate School can take formal action to investigate and resolve problematic situations as needed. Collective bargaining would limit the University’s ability to address problems for all graduate students as they arise and reduce the current flexibility to tailor solutions to the situation of a particular student.

Advocates of collective bargaining argue that it will lead to higher stipends. They have suggested more than \$36,000 per year as the appropriate stipend level. Raising stipends to that level would cause a 73 percent increase in GA expenditures and a \$60 million per year increase in instructional expenditure, requiring more than a 10 percent increase in State appropriation or a 10 percent increase in tuition. If State appropriations and tuition did not rise to cover this increase, the result would be a 40 percent decrease in the number of GA appointments—and a corresponding decrease in the size of doctoral programs, the production of PhDs, and the contribution of our PhD programs to the regional economy.

Advocates also claim collective bargaining will lead to additional benefits. GAs already have access to the same health plans as faculty and staff. Their student status exempts them from Social Security and Medicare tax, but employee benefits could lead to additional taxes. The University would need to withhold 7.65% from a GA’s taxable compensation and pay an equal employer’s share. Unemployment insurance and union dues are an additional cost. Expenditure for a GA could increase by more than 17%, with no increase in student take-home pay. Moreover, students whose duties are not related to teaching or research could be excluded from GA appointments, or much of their tuition benefit could be subject to income tax.

Research assistantships, which are included in SB 658, are particularly difficult to adapt to collective bargaining. There often is a large overlap between the research a student does for a faculty member as part of the faculty member’s research grant or contract, and the research the student does for his or her dissertation. The former is essential training for the latter, and it is often impossible to determine where one ends and the other begins. Completing a dissertation—a piece of original research and scholarship—requires long hours of effort regardless of whether the student has a research assistantship, and the amount of effort required for the dissertation cannot be affected by collective bargaining. For this reason, most institutions that have collective bargaining for teaching assistants do not extend collective bargaining to research assistants. Of the five Big Ten institutions with collective bargaining for GAs, only Rutgers includes research assistants, and the contract specifies that it has no impact on the work needed to satisfy degree requirements.

Finally, collective bargaining takes a long time, and stable relationships are inherently impossible when the union representation is inexperienced and entirely turns over every few years, as students graduate. If collective bargaining is permitted, students who might support union membership will leave campus soon after any election is held. A union will already be in place, and students who come after will have no say in whether it should exist. It will be difficult to adjust or dislodge, which would be unfair to future generations of students.

The Graduate School is an advocate for all graduate students, including GAs. We want all graduate students to succeed and we want to help resolve any problems that arise. Collective Bargaining is not a path to this outcome that is in the best interests of UMD graduate students, or the University.

Thank you for the opportunity to express my concerns about Senate Bill 658.

Steve Fetter
Associate Provost and Dean, The Graduate School
University of Maryland, College Park

Minimum Graduate Assistant Stipends and Collective Bargaining Status
Big Ten Public Universities, Spring 2020, 20 hour/week appointment

Institution	Minimum Stipend		Collective Bargaining?		
	Academic Year	Full Year	TA	AA	RA
Rutgers ¹	28,569	32,204	Y	Y	Y
Michigan ²	21,779		Y	Y	
Penn State	20,790	27,720			
Wisconsin	20,000	24,443			
Iowa	19,629	23,982	Y	Y	
Maryland³	18,979	23,973			
Illinois	17,788	23,717	Y	Y	
Ohio State	17,280	23,040			
Michigan St ⁴	16,185	21,580	Y		
Purdue	15,448	18,538			
Minnesota	15,343	20,456			
Nebraska	10,000	13,333			
Indiana	9,910	11,892			

¹Standard appointment is 15 hours per week.

²No minimum full-year stipend.

³For 9.5-month appointments as of 1/1/20. All TAs, and 68% of all academic-year GA appointments, are 9.5-month appointments. The minimum stipend for 9-month appointments is \$17,980.

⁴For TA. The minimum academic-year stipend for non-union AAs and RAs is \$13,895.

Average Cost of Attendance and Average Stipend, AY19-20 (9 months)

Cost	Graduate Student	Graduate Assistant
Tuition (10 credits/semester)	\$32,500	—
Mandatory fees	\$1,635	\$1,635
Off-campus rent and utilities	\$9,314	\$9,314
Food and meals	\$5,120	\$5,120
Personal expenses	\$1,144	\$1,144
Books and supplies	\$624	\$624
Health insurance	\$1,298	\$572
Transportation	\$522	\$522
Average cost of attendance	\$52,157	\$18,931
Average academic-year stipend	—	\$21,135

Tuition is the maximum covered for graduate assistants at the non-resident rate. Transportation cost is from the Bureau of Labor Statistic's Consumer Expenditure Survey for public transportation in the Northeast region. (Mandatory fees cover shuttle bus service to most areas where graduate assistants live.) Other costs are estimated by the Office of Student Financial Aid according to federal guidelines; see <https://financialaid.umd.edu/resources-policies/cost-attendance>.