

Testimony for SB895

Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee, Tuesday, March 9, 2021

USM - Student Fees - Review and Retention

POSITION: FAVORABLE

Good afternoon, my name is Ireland Lesley and I am the former Student Body President at the University of Maryland. I want to start by thanking Chair Pinsky and the committee for having a hearing on this legislation, which is the result of over two years of work by the UMD Student Government Association. The opinions and experiences stated in this testimony are my own and do not in any way reflect the views of my employer.

Throughout the student fee approval process, students are told time and time again that our role, which is supposed to contribute to shared governance, is only advisory. We are told that our work to best represent the student body is only as valuable as administrators decide. However, what is most frustrating is the total lack of information, clarity, and transparency regarding what exactly the student fee committees are supposed to be advising and approving.

When I found out about the reversion, as explained by Ben Baitman, it was not through notice by campus leadership before they took \$61,000 from the SGA and student organizations or a total of \$3 million from student fee sustained departments. I found out in private meetings with department heads who shared what had taken place months before and how it was going to detrimentally impact their budgets and ultimately, students by having to dramatically increase their fees to continue to provide services.

Only when confronted did campus leadership offer any information about the reversion. I then spent months gaining clarity on who had made the decision and why. I had countless meetings with administrators, where they pointed fingers at each other and in some meetings it emerged that perhaps they should not have taken money from student fees, but that it was too late now. We had meetings with department heads, some who didn't even know the reversion happened, or who shared with us how negatively this would impact their departments.

It was striking to discover that there had not been a comprehensive look or even any questions asked about whether this would ultimately negatively impact student services and raise student fees. It was even more striking that the decision-maker, former-Provost Rankin refused to meet with me or other students on this issue or offer any further explanation about how she had come to this decision.

We still don't know a lot of things about the reversion. We don't know if or when it will happen again, whether student fees and affordability will be taken into account, who makes the decision on which projects will be funded and which will be cut, and a whole list of other questions that further prevent student leaders from being able to make informed decisions during the student fee process.

Ultimately this bill is about transparency. About giving the student fee review committees at each institution full information about where these fees go and how they are used. It's about creating a model of shared governance. Real shared governance. And it's about ensuring students understand the fees and services that they are paying for.

Despite there being plenty of questions around the student fee process and the reversion, there is one thing we do know: this method of budgeting, through a lack of transparency, can only continue to hurt students. That is why this bill is so important and I urge each of you to vote yes.

Sincerely,

Ireland Lesley

University of Maryland, College Park Student Body President 2019-2020