**HOUSE APPROPRIATION COMMITTEE**

**House Bill 199**

**Higher Education – Collective Bargaining – Graduate Assistants**

**February 6, 2018**

**Letter of Information**

I write to share my concerns regarding House Bill 199, which authorizes graduate assistants to collectively bargain.

Graduate assistants are first and foremost students. Most are doctoral students. The goal of the University is to ensure their success by training and equipping them to be the next generation of researchers and scholars—the producers of new knowledge that provides the foundation for Maryland’s leadership in the knowledge economy.

Most doctoral students complete one or more graduate assistantships while they work toward their degree. These assistantships an important part of the educational experience. Graduate research assistants learn how do to original research under the guidance of a faculty mentor. Most teaching assistants lead discussion sections and provide help to undergraduate students under the guidance of the faculty member who is responsible for the course. In doing so, they learn the subject more deeply by learning to explain it to others. It is often said that you do not really know something until you can teach it to someone else.

In addition to this valuable faculty mentoring, graduate assistants receive a stipend and tuition remission that makes graduate education affordable and allows students to support themselves while working toward their degree, without outside work or going deep in debt.

Graduate assistantships are not inexpensive for the University. Indeed, it often would be less expensive to hire a postdoctoral fellow for a research project or a lecturer to teach a class if that were the only goal, but it is not. Doctoral education is central to the mission of a research university, and the research and teaching experiences that graduate assistantships provide are an important part of their education, so that they can become the next generation of researchers and teachers.

The University of Maryland, College Park, has 83 doctoral programs. Every program is different, and they compete with similar programs at the very best institutions across the country. Collective bargaining could create a one-size-fits-all approach that would limit the flexibility of programs to tailor graduate assistantships in order to attract the best and brightest students from across the United States and around the world.

Research assistantships in particular are not easily adapted to collective bargaining. There often is a large overlap between the research a student does for a faculty member as part of a 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 difficult and sometimes 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, in a lab or in front of a computer, regardless of whether the student has an assistantship.

Collective bargaining would fundamentally change the relationship between faculty and students from mentor and mentee to employer and employee. It also would also change the University’s relationship with graduate assistants. We have a robust system of shared governance. Graduate students serve on the Graduate Council, which helps make policy for graduate education, and on the University Senate, which advises the President on all campus policy issues, including those relating to graduate assistants.

The Graduate School is an advocate for graduate students and graduate assistants. We actively work to address their concerns, collectively and individually. In response to concerns expressed as part of the “Meet and Confer” process that graduate assistants were working too many hours, we developed a statement of mutual expectations to facilitate communication between faculty and students about duties and responsibilities and work hours. We also are in the process of establishing a grievance procedure that graduate students can use if they believe they are being treated unfairly by faculty or staff. These examples illustrate that collective bargaining is not necessary to address student concerns.

Collective bargaining would foster an adversarial relationship between University administration and graduate students. It almost certainly would increase costs to the University, both directly and indirectly. Without increased State funding (or increased undergraduate tuition), increases in teaching assistant stipends and benefits would lead to a decrease in the number of teaching assistantships, resulting in fewer graduate students with teaching assistantships—and more students forced to support their education in other ways. Undergraduate education also would suffer as a result of having fewer teaching assistants in the classroom.

Thank you for the opportunity to express my concerns about House Bill 199.

Steve Fetter

Interim Dean of the Graduate School

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