

Dear members of the House Finance Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my testimony regarding the education budget. My name is Orianna Carvalho. I live in Warwick and work as a Graduate Assistant at the University of Rhode Island in the Psychology Department. I'm also a member of URI Graduate Assistants United and NEARI.

My fellow graduate students and I love what we do, and our work is vital to keeping URI running. We each work 20-30 hours a week working to teach and conduct research that contributes massively to the Rhode Island economy, as well as to science and public education. Well, I say 20-30 hours a week, but that's just on paper. In practice, we put in so many more hours than can be counted. With my 700+ colleagues, we provide URI with over 15,000 countable hours of expertise and labor each week. Put simply, the university could not run without us. My department, the Psychology Department, is one of the largest, if not the largest major at the university, and it could not exist without the graduate students that run its courses. The teaching assistants who instruct the undergraduates and grade their assignments, who connect with these students and teach them the skills they need to succeed in the job market, they are the ones who make a difference in these students' lives.

Graduate students are also the ones who help the state itself receive funding from the federal government. For the last three years, I have been working with the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals to conduct their Substance Use and Mental Health Needs Assessment, which is required by the SAMHSA to receive federal funds to offer substance use and mental health services. URI graduate students have been responsible for conducting vital research that fills requirements to receive federal funding for behavioral healthcare services.

Though our work as graduate assistants is vital to Rhode Island, we earn so little that we can't afford to live here sustainably, and we have to pay our own student fees which take up 5% of our income.

The base salary for a graduate assistant at URI is just \$21,000 a year. We have to find our own housing, which is incredibly expensive and sparse in South Kingstown. Hence, it's no wonder a recent survey we've conducted tells us a third of us are experiencing housing insecurity. We don't have a meal plan, and make just slightly over the eligibility limit to qualify for SNAP. Yet, that same survey tells us that over 45% of graduate assistants are experiencing food insecurity.

As a basic needs researcher, I'm alarmed. As a member of Graduate Assistants United, I'm despondent. As a Rhode Islander, I'm heartbroken that such a pillar of our community isn't taking better care of its caretakers. Meanwhile, our colleagues at UCONN and UMASS, where the cost of living is comparable, earn over 30% more than we do. If Rhode Island wants to attract top talent, we need to make it possible for grad assistants to survive. We are negotiating our contract with URI this year, and we need your support to help raise wages for our Graduate Assistants.

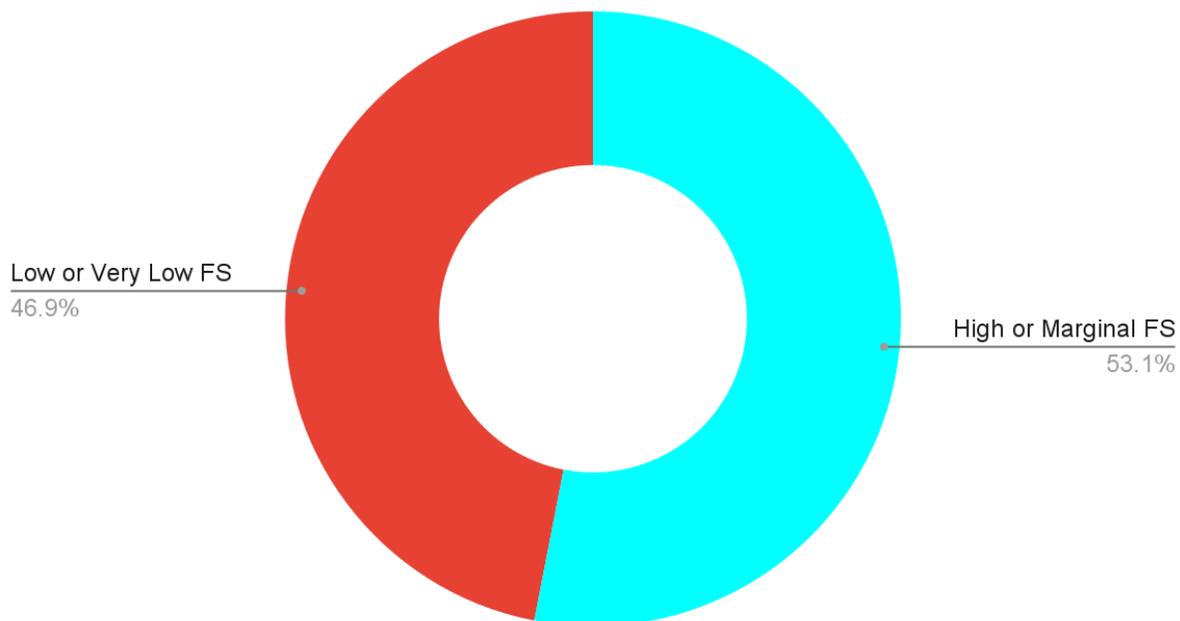
We truly love URI. We love our students and our research. We deserve some economic stability. We're asking you to please increase funding to URI to help raise wages for Graduate Assistants so URI can be the best university possible.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to submit my testimony today.

Sincerely,

Orianna D. Carvalho

## Food Security Among Graduate Assistants



## Housing Security Among Graduate Assistants

