

University of Nebraska Lincoln



Rights, Privileges and Responsibilities of Graduate Assistants and Fellowship Recipients¹

Graduate Assistantships

The purpose of a graduate assistantship is to provide financial support for a graduate student for a set period of time during which the student is expected to pursue activities towards the advanced degree. To hold a graduate assistantship, a student must be admitted to a department or area with a specific graduate degree objective and must be enrolled during the period of the assistantship. Each department or unit shall establish its own documented procedures for recruitment, selection, retention and dismissal of graduate assistants in accordance with UNL graduate policy and Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity guidelines. These procedures shall be made available to each graduate student and posted in the department. Individual departments may establish a required minimum course load for funded students. Consideration should be given to the Certification for Benefits Table in the *Graduate Studies Bulletin*. Departments should provide students with an official signed letter of award, informing them of assistantship expectations, responsibilities, and compensation.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln is a signatory to the Council of Graduate Schools policy regarding the offering and acceptance of financial aid. Specifically, students are under no obligation to respond to offers of financial support prior to April 15. In those instances in which a student accepts an offer before April 15, and subsequently desires to withdraw that acceptance, the student may submit in writing a resignation of the appointment at any time through April 15. However, an acceptance given or left in force after April 15 commits the student not to accept another offer without first obtaining a written release from the institution to which a commitment has been made.

Duties of Graduate Assistants:

Duties of the graduate assistant are assigned by the departmental chair/head, graduate committee chair, administrative supervisor, or others. Graduate assistants are expected to be assigned relevant professional work that may include, among other tasks, teaching or assisting in a course (under the supervision of a director or mentor), grading for a course, working in a department-sponsored laboratory or instructional center, assisting a professor on a research project, professional conference development, tutoring, or development of administrative skills. All projects must be supervised by a member of the graduate faculty or administrative staff. No graduate assistant should be assigned to a project which is primarily clerical or housekeeping. A portion of any project may have clerical elements, but all projects should incorporate decision-making, judgment, analysis and evaluation skills. Although students on graduate assistantships may not have employment exceeding 20 hours per week from all sources both on and off campus during the period of the assistantship, there is no limit to time spent on studies and research relating to the advanced degree. Recipients of graduate assistantships may qualify for additional funding through competitive fellowship awards. No additional service or work requirement is associated with fellowship awards (see section on fellowships).

Types of Graduate Assistantships:

A **teaching assistantship** in an academic department provides a stipend to a student who is typically required to spend 13-20 hours per week (.33-.49 FTE) during the academic year assisting in the teaching program of a department. The teaching assistant is expected to continue working towards the advanced degree while being a teaching assistant. The university requires all graduate teaching assistants who do not have English as their native language to participate in the Institute for International Teaching Assistants, be evaluated by the institute panel and be recommended as ready for teaching. The Graduate Council recommends that all departments require graduate teaching assistants to participate in workshops for teaching assistants conducted by the Teaching and Learning Center. Graduate assistants may be expected to provide their academic advisor with a written report of their academic progress at the conclusion of the period for which the teaching assistantship is awarded.

Because of the potential for the exploitation of graduate students, any assignment of responsibilities, such as teaching a course, must be associated with a fair and reasonable compensation. This principle precludes a graduate student from "volunteering" for any significant service to the department without an appropriate stipend. Departments may differentiate graduate teaching assistantship stipends by graduate student status (master's or doctoral-level, first year or experienced) or by number of hours of work required by the assistantship. Within departments and within each level of differentiation, stipends should generally be equivalent. Guidelines used to determine stipend levels should be available to students through the department or graduate committee chair.

A **research assistantship** in an academic department is provided to a student from an external grant or departmental or university funds to enable a student to work towards the advanced degree. Students receiving research assistantships may be expected to provide their academic advisor with a written report of their academic progress at the conclusion of the period for which the research assistantship is awarded. Work required by the graduate research assistantship that is not directly related to the student's own program shall not exceed 13-20 hours per week (.33-.49 FTE).

Other graduate assistantships in an academic or non-academic department provide a stipend to a student who is typically required to spend 13-20 hours per week (.33-.49 FTE) assisting in departmental activities. Non-academic graduate assistantships occur across campus and may involve diverse duties covering a wide variety of functions. Students receiving assistantships in non-academic departments may be expected to provide their academic advisor with a written report of their academic progress at the conclusion of the period for which the graduate assistantship is awarded.

The responsibilities of the graduate assistant and the method by which the student will be evaluated should be provided in writing to the student by the immediate supervisor at the beginning of the assistantship.

Benefits for Graduate Assistants:

A graduate assistant qualifies for tuition benefits if the appointment meets the minimum FTE, stipend level requirements, appropriate duration and the student is currently enrolled in academic coursework. To receive resident tuition remission, an appointment must be: (1) continuous for full semester or academic year; (2) at least .33 FTE and; (3) at a minimum stipend level established in the *Guidelines for Graduate Assistantship Eligibility for Tuition Benefits* published early in the spring semester for the next academic year. The non-resident portion of tuition is remitted if appointment stipend meets the minimum level, as published in the above Guidelines.

Tuition for summer sessions may be waived if certain conditions are met. For details, see *Guidelines for Graduate Assistantship Eligibility for Tuition Benefits* published early in the spring semester by the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies.

Criteria for the Evaluation of Assistants' Performance:

Assistantships without a fixed term specified in the initial letter of offer may, at the discretion of the department, be renewed if the following criteria are met: (1) funding is available; (2) departmental guidelines for funding duration of a student are met; (3) the student is making satisfactory academic progress; and (4) the student's assistantship performance is judged to be satisfactory by his or her supervisor. Where the number of years of funding is within those specified in the initial letter of offer, an assistantship must be renewed if these four criteria are met.

The faculty member or staff person who supervises the assistant's work should conduct a timely written evaluation of the student's performance and provide a copy of that evaluation to the student and to the Chair/Director for placement in the student's file. This evaluation should take the following criteria into account: (1) prompt, efficient, and accurate completion of assigned tasks; (2) ability to work independently once tasks are explained; (3) ability to analyze problems and find solutions; (4) good student evaluations for instructional and tutoring assignments in courses, laboratory and clinical settings; (5) cooperation with mentor, director, and other assistants; and (6) professional and ethical behavior in all assigned tasks and duties including course studies and research.

Evaluations of performance shall not be influenced on the basis of sex, age, disability, race, color, religion, marital status, veteran's status, national or ethnic origin, or sexual orientation, nor shall they be influenced by students' exercise of their First Amendment freedoms of expression and association.

Appeals:

Students who believe their evaluation or dismissal in an assistantship has been prejudiced or capricious or who believe that their stipend is not commensurate with that of other graduate students having the same status in their department must first attempt to resolve the matter with the faculty/staff responsible for the assistantship.

If unsuccessful, the student may then file a written appeal to the graduate chair for consideration by the appropriate graduate committee. This appeal must be filed within sixty days of the evaluation or dismissal. A written determination of the appeal shall be presented to the student and supervisor. If the assistantship is not in an academic program, the UNL Dean of Graduate Studies would consider the appeal.

If no action is taken on the appeal within 30 days of its filing or if the matter is not resolved to the student's satisfaction, the student may present the original appeal and documentation to the UNL Dean of Graduate Studies. If the dean determines that the appeal may have merit, the dean will request a review by a subcommittee of the Graduate Council. Upon subcommittee recommendation, the full Graduate Council will meet and serve as the final level of appeal.

During the appeal process, if an evaluation or assistantship renewal or dismissal is overturned, the supervisor or graduate committee has the right of appeal, in writing, to the next level of review.

Academic Freedom of Graduate Teaching Assistants:

The academic freedom of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) is not necessarily coextensive with that of faculty. All GTAs are engaged in supervised teaching or instruction. Supervisors are responsible for defining the nature, scope and manner of instruction to be used for each course. Supervisors should communicate the extent to which GTAs have discretion to introduce additional material. GTAs should follow the instructions of the supervisor. GTAs may not be penalized for expressing their own views on matters within the scope of the course, provided they adequately represent these views as their own.

In interpreting teaching evaluations, supervisors shall make every effort to distinguish legitimate critiques of the course from negative evaluations due to (a) prejudice against the GTA on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, religion or other protected status, or (b) disagreement with viewpoints expressed by the GTA or by students in the class.

Fellowships²

Fellowships are awarded on a competitive basis in recognition of a student's demonstrated scholarship, scholastic and creative promise, and/or financial need. **There is no service or work requirement associated with fellowship awards.** To be eligible for consideration, a student must be admitted to a graduate program with a specific graduate degree objective or approved post-baccalaureate or post-masters certification program (all courses at the graduate level) and must be enrolled in academic course work. Teaching endorsement programs are not graduate level. International students must have completed one year of study at a U.S. institution of higher education to be eligible for any of the fellowships.

Fellowships are awarded in two categories - Tuition Fellowships and Fellowship Stipend Awards. Qualifying students may hold both types of fellowships simultaneously.

Tuition Fellowships - These fellowships remit tuition for the full or partial cost of graduate courses up to the maximum enrollment limit for the term of appointment. Recipients of tuition fellowships are responsible for university program and facilities fees unless specifically included in the award announcement. Although recipients must be admitted to a graduate program with a specific graduate degree objective, they are not required to be enrolled for any minimum number or credit hours. Employees of the University of Nebraska who do not qualify for the Employee Tuition Program are eligible for consideration for Tuition Fellowships.

Fellowship Stipend Awards - These fellowships provide stipend payments for recipients of these awards. Fellowship recipients are required to be full-time students (at least nine credit hours or have an approved full-time graduate status form) during the period of appointment and may hold another major fellowship or engage in remunerative employment, including a graduate assistantship, with the permission of the Dean of Graduate Studies; the fellowship award should not in any way affect the amount of a graduate assistantship stipend unless there is an accompanying real decrease in the teaching or research assignment and the corresponding FTE. Because of the potential appearance of a possible conflict of interest, employees of the University of Nebraska (other than graduate assistants) are ineligible for fellowship stipend awards.

Continuation of graduate fellowships may be denied to recipients under the following conditions: (a) failure to satisfy Scholastic Grade Requirements as specified in the UNL *Graduate Studies Bulletin*, (b) violations of the Code of Conduct as specified in the UNL *Graduate Studies Bulletin*, or (c) failure in qualifying examinations, preliminary examinations, comprehensive examinations or failure to make satisfactory progress in a graduate program.

¹ Approved by the UNL Graduate Council November 10, 1994.

² Approved by the UNL Graduate Council February 12, 1992.