

# Policy Statement for Teaching Assistants, Teaching Fellows, and Graduate Student Assistants

University of Pittsburgh  
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## Definitions

TAs, TFs and GSAs at the University of Pittsburgh are graduate students who are receiving support in return for specified duties while gaining teaching and teaching-related experience under the guidance of faculty mentors. Their primary objective, from the standpoint of the University and the individual, is to make steady progress toward an advanced degree. TA/TF/GSA employment status is dependent upon graduate student status. The primary responsibility for all courses taught at the University rests with the faculty.

The titles of Teaching Assistant, Teaching Fellow, and Graduate Student Assistant are reserved for University-wide use exclusively.

Teaching Assistant (TA): a graduate student who holds a teaching or teaching-related appointment made in accord with the University regulations pertaining to Teaching Assistants. No Teaching Assistant shall be employed to teach postbaccalaureate courses.

Teaching Fellow (TF): the same as a Teaching Assistant except that the Teaching Fellow is more educationally advanced or experienced, typically holding the equivalent of a master's degree. TFs should not be assigned to teach graduate courses. Exceptions may be made only in rare cases where the individual shows clear evidence of outstanding skills in specialized areas and when the individual is directly supervised by a member of the graduate faculty.

Graduate Student Assistant (GSA): a graduate student who performs duties to assist in the educational or research mission of the University, but does not teach a class, recitation or laboratory.

## **Appointment Guidelines**

The TA, TF, or GSA must receive a letter that states the general conditions of the appointment and that specifies the salary, general duties, duration, fringe benefits, and other pertinent terms of appointment. A copy of the complete TA/TF/GSA Policy Statement should be included with the appointment letter. The letter of appointment should be sent in duplicate to the student. If the student accepts the appointment, he or she must sign one copy and return it to the designated authority. The original should be retained by the student.

When a student accepts an appointment in writing, that appointment shall be binding on both the student and the University provided the student is authorized to be employed in the United States. In accordance with the policy of the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, however, a student, after accepting a regular two-term appointment beginning in September, may resign in writing before April 15 of that year. A department may, during the year, transfer a student, after consultation with the student, from a teaching assignment to another appointment as a Graduate Student Researcher or to another appropriate assignment which provides for essentially equal financial benefits and professional responsibilities.

Duration of appointment ordinarily is for two terms (fall and spring). Students may receive an appointment for the summer term or any official summer session. Under special circumstances, one-term appointments or fractional appointments (three-fourths, one-half, or one-fourth) may also be made in order to meet the requirements of individual departments. The duties and compensations for appointment that are less than full-time will be in proportion to the fraction of a full-time appointment.

The normal work-week for a TA/TF/GSA with a full appointment should not exceed 20 hours. Fractional appointments should not exceed the corresponding fraction of the 20-hour standard.

TAs, TFs, and GSAs who receive full-time appointments in the fall and/or spring terms are expected to complete at least 9 credits or the Full-Time Dissertation Study option in the terms of appointment; those with fractional appointments are expected to register for at least the following number of credits or the Full-Time Dissertation Study option: 3/4 appointment, 9 credits; 1/2 appointment, 6 credits; 1/4 appointment, 3 credits. TA/TF/GSAs who receive appointments in the summer term or in a summer session must register for at least 3 credits or for the Full-Time Dissertation Study option in the term or session.

## **Appointment Requirements:**

The Immigration Reform and Control Act requires employers to verify that a job applicant is authorized to be employed in the United States. Each new TA/TF/GSA is required to verify that he/she is either a U.S. citizen or authorized to be employed in this country.

The University is required by the English Fluency in Higher Education Act of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to determine that all individuals who teach possess adequate English language fluency for effective communication with students. TAs/TFs who are non-native speakers of English must be evaluated through the English Comprehensibility Test, to assess spoken English, administered by the English Language Institute (ELI). Schools or departments may require higher scores than the established University minimums. All TAs/TFs obtaining unsatisfactory scores must complete an enhancement program. If a TA/TF does not obtain a satisfactory score by the time of reappointment, it is sufficient cause for nonrenewal.

## **Reappointment Guidelines**

Although TA/TF/GSA appointments may not be made for more than one year, a student may be reappointed. While it is impossible to guarantee reappointments, most students who are making satisfactory progress toward a graduate degree and whose teaching or other service performance is satisfactory will receive at least one renewal of their appointment or an offer of other financial assistance. If it is impossible to offer renewals or other appointments to all qualified TAs, TFs, or GSAs, priority must be given to those with superior academic and teaching qualifications. An unsatisfactory score on the English Comprehensibility Test is sufficient cause for nonrenewal.

The same regulations which pertain to original appointments apply to reappointments, with the following amplification: A reappointment should be made at the same level or be a promotion. Written notice of reappointment for the fall term or of non-reappointment, including an explanation of the circumstances, should be given to the graduate student by April 15, or as soon thereafter as possible. Extended delay should only be with the mutual agreement of the department and the student for specific reasons made clear to the student.

The criteria for reappointment are the quality of assigned work performed by the TA/TF/GSA and academic achievement. Examples of unsatisfactory academic performance would be a QPA below 3.0, completion of fewer than six credits of graduate work per term, or failure to pass preliminary or comprehensive examinations as specified.

As a basis for reappointment, TAs, TFs, and GSAs will be evaluated for teaching or other services and academic progress at least once each term by departmental faculty, and records of performance maintained in the student's file. Responsibilities

## **Responsibilities**

### **University: Schools, Departments, Provost**

*For all appointees:*

The department should make application and appointment procedures available to all graduate students.

Each term, every department is expected to provide all appointees with timely notification of specific assignments clearly outlining their duties and responsibilities during the term. A reasonable effort should be made to take into consideration the competencies and preferences of

the graduate assistant as well as his/her graduate course schedule when assignments are being determined.

Departmental assignments, with consideration for adequate preparation time, should not exceed an average of 20 hours per week for any full appointment.

Each term an appropriate summary of the specific assignments for each appointee should be available in the dean's office and posted by the department so it will be available to all students and faculty members.

Each department is expected to carry out a performance evaluation of each appointee at least once each term.

Each department is expected to provide all appointees with working space and a place for receiving mail.

In the event of serious illness or physical incapacitation, the graduate student appointee involved shall receive salary and health benefits for the remainder of the academic term.

*For students with teaching appointments:*

Each department is responsible for providing orientation, training, supervision and evaluation of its graduate student appointees, and for assigning one or more faculty members to work closely with the individual graduate student to assist him or her in carrying out assignments and to facilitate professional development. There should be a departmental orientation for new TAs and TFs prior to the beginning of classes each term. All new TAs/TFs should also attend the orientation program sponsored by the Center for Instructional Development and Distance Education.

Departments will develop appropriate training programs for TAs/TFs. The Office of Faculty Development will offer a variety of courses or workshops for TAs/TFs and will assist departments in developing training programs

The department-appointed supervisor should meet with each TA/TF at least three times each term.

If the TA/TF is instructing a laboratory, recitation section, or course for the first time, the supervisor should arrange to observe the instruction, either directly or by means of video recording, several times. Experienced TAs/TFs should be observed at least once. Each individual will be informed in writing of the conclusions resulting from the evaluation, and he or she should be given appropriate suggestions for improvement. Student surveys should be distributed at least once during an appointment period to the undergraduates in the TA's/TF's class for the purpose of improving his or her teaching. These survey results must be made available to the TA/TF and his or her supervisor.

The University is responsible for testing the English comprehensibility of TAs/TFs; it is the school's responsibility to give teaching assignments only to those whose English has been judged

acceptable and ensure that students complete an enhancement program if deficiencies are identified.

In the event of a TA's/TF's serious illness or physical incapacitation, the department chair and supervising professor will arrange for completion of teaching assignments.

A brief written description of each department's orientation and training and evaluation and supervision plans should be available in the department and in the dean's office.

It is the responsibility of the dean's office to assure that specific efforts in training, supervision, evaluation, and orientation of TAs, TFs, and GSAs are accomplished in the department each year.

The Office of the Provost will arrange for periodic reviews of practices in various schools as part of their responsibility for the TA/TF/GSA policy.

## **Students**

Graduate students holding appointments are obliged to carry out their assigned duties. They are expected to register as described in this policy statement and to maintain satisfactory academic performance.

TAs/TFs must participate in departmental orientation and training programs, and in departmental deliberations concerning their courses.

Graduate students are not permitted to hold more than the equivalent of one full appointment within the University at a time. Normally, graduate students will find this to be a full-time demand, but in rare exceptions, additional appointments must be approved by the department chair and the dean. Due to immigration regulations, graduate students on J-1 or F-1 visas may be employed to work no more than 20 hours per week on campus when school is in session during the fall and spring terms, and thus those on full-time appointments are not eligible for overload appointments during these terms.

## **Grievance Situations**

*Unfair Treatment:* A TA/TF/GSA who believes that he or she has been treated unfairly according to these guidelines should first discuss the problem with the supervisor or department chair. If a resolution cannot be reached at the departmental level, the TA/TF/GSA should present the grievance to the dean for informal evaluation, adjudication, and, if necessary, advice on additional, formal grievance procedures.

*Termination of Appointment:* Termination proceedings may be initiated only if the TA/TF/GSA has been evaluated on a regular basis and has received an appropriate written warning with respect to his or her performance, or has violated one or more of the major canons of institutional responsibility or University policy. The TA/TF/GSA must be informed in writing by the dean of the reasons for termination, and the appeals procedure (see below) must be included.

Termination may result from unsatisfactory academic performance or from unsatisfactory professional conduct or performance. Examples of the latter include failure to meet classes regularly or failure to carry out departmental assignments.

*Appeals procedure:* (1) The TA/TF/GSA may appeal, in writing, within one week of notice of termination, to the Provost, who will convene an appeals committee; (2) The Provost or Provost's designee will serve as chair of an appeals committee and will appoint to the committee two faculty members from the University Council on Graduate Study and two graduate students, who must be TAs, TFs, or GSAs and who are recommended by the Graduate and Professional Student Association. No one from the involved academic department shall be on the appeals committee, and involved parties shall represent themselves before the committee; (3) Within 21 days from notice of termination, the appealing TA/TF/GSA shall be provided an appeals hearing, and he/she shall be notified of the appeals committee decision as soon as is possible.

## **Salaries**

The base salaries for GSAs, TAs, and TFs are standard throughout the University. Each year the level of compensation will be considered and adjustments made when possible by the Office of the Provost. Salary levels progress from GSA to TA to TF.

Students with two-term appointments may elect to have their monthly wages paid in 12 equal payments. This selection must be exercised by August 15.

In the fall and spring terms, the FICA (Social Security) tax will be withheld from the salaries of TA/TF/GSAs registered for fewer than six credits, excluding those registered for full time dissertation study. In the summer, FICA will be withheld from those who have not registered for at least three credits or for full time dissertation study. The period of enrollment must overlap the period of employment.

## **Health Insurance Coverage**

TAs, TFs, and GSAs who receive full-time or fractional appointments are eligible to participate in the graduate student health insurance plan. The University will provide individual coverage at no cost to the TA/TF/GSA. Family coverage through the graduate student plan (for student, spouse, and dependent children) is available by paying the difference between the premium cost for individual coverage and the family coverage. To enroll in the individual or family plan, the TA/TF/GSA must complete an enrollment form and return it to the *address indicated on the form*, within 10 days after the effective date of the appointment. Students who participate in the graduate student health insurance plan may elect to purchase optional dental and vision coverage; premium costs for this coverage are withdrawn from students' monthly salary.

In the event of serious illness or physical incapacitation, the graduate student appointee involved shall receive salary and health benefits for the remainder of the academic term.

## Tuition Scholarships

In recognition of academic merit, the University offers TAs, TFs, and GSAs a tuition scholarship. For the fall and spring terms, the maximum tuition scholarship that will be provided is as follows:

Full-time appointment	12 credits*
3/4 appointment	9 credits*
1/2 appointment	6 credits
1/4 appointment	3credits

\* Students registered for 9 or more credits are billed at the flat full-time rate; therefore, scholarships for students with  $\frac{3}{4}$  or full appointments in the fall and/or spring terms could cover up to 15 credits.

TAs/TFs/GSAs who receive full-time or fractional appointment in the summer term or in the summer sessions must be registered for at least 3 credits or for the Full-Time Dissertation Study option in the term or session. A graduate student who registers for more will be provided a tuition scholarship proportionate to the appointment, but in no case more than 12 credits.

The prevailing student health fee for use of the Student Health Service will be included in the merit scholarship for TAs, TFs, or GSAs who receive a full-time appointment in the fall and/or spring terms and are registered for at least 9 credits or the Full-Time Dissertation Study option. If registration is for fewer than 9 credits, the student has the option of signing up for the Student Health Service and paying the fee. The University will pay the student health fee for any TA, TF, or GSA who receives a full appointment in the summer and who is registered.

The prevailing computing and network services fee and the security, safety and transportation fee will be included in this merit scholarship. The fee assessed full-time students will be included with the full tuition scholarship to a TA/TF/GSA holding an appointment in the fall, spring, or summer terms or in the summer sessions; the fee assessed part-time students will be included with the scholarship awarded to students holding fractional appointments.

The student is responsible for his or her registration and for payment of all charges appearing on the student invoice not covered by the tuition scholarship. The tuition scholarship does not cover course-related fees and the student activity fee. In some schools, arrangements have been made for the tuition scholarship to appear on the student invoice. If a tuition scholarship is not on the invoice, the student must report to the office of the dean, where a scholarship will be issued.

The University of Pittsburgh, as an educational institution and as an employer, values equality of opportunity, human dignity, and racial/ethnic and cultural diversity. Accordingly, the University prohibits and will not engage in discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, marital status, familial status, sexual orientation, disability, or status as a disabled veteran or a veteran of the Vietnam era. Further, the University will continue to take affirmative steps to support and advance these values consistent with the University's mission. This policy applies to admissions, employment, access to and treatment in University programs and activities. This is a commitment made by the University and is in accordance with federal, state, and/or local laws and regulations.

For further information on University equal opportunity and affirmative action programs and complaint/grievance procedures. Please contact the Office of Affirmative Action, Diversity, and Inclusion, 412 Bellefield Hall, 315 South Bellefield Avenue, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260; (412) 648-7860.