

III – 7.11 Policy on Graduate Assistantships

(Approved by the Board of Regents, December 3, 2010; amended, June 22, 2012)

I. Purpose and Scope

- A. Graduate Assistantships in the USM: The purpose of graduate assistantships in the institutions of the University System of Maryland (USM) is to support graduate students who are appointed to assistantships by:
 - 1. Advancing the student’s graduate education through practicum-based experiences, including the development and application of teaching, research and other skills, while also advancing the mission of the institution.
 - 2. Providing financial support, including stipends and tuition assistance, to aid degree-seeking students enrolled in USM masters or doctoral programs and appointed as graduate assistants in the pursuit of their graduate degrees.
- B. Policy Goal: This policy is intended to establish baseline standards for the administration of graduate assistantships, with a commitment to continuous improvement in the status of graduate assistants.
- C. Institution Policies and Procedures: Each institution will develop a graduate assistant handbook that includes policies and procedures that include this policy, as supplemented by institution-specific policies, procedures and guidance, with recognition for differences in the nature of the specific graduate education programs at the institution, and the roles and responsibilities of the institution’s graduate assistants.

II. Appointments

- A. Length: Appointments may be made for appropriate periods of time, as determined by the institution, ranging from a term, an academic year, 12 months, or a multi-year basis.
- B. Time Commitment: A graduate assistant may serve on a full-time, half-time or other basis. For the purposes of this policy, such time commitments are as follows:
 - 1. Full-time Assistantship: A graduate assistantship in which the graduate assistant’s responsibilities will require an average of 20 hours per week.
 - 2. Half-time Assistantship: A graduate assistantship in which the graduate assistant’s responsibilities will require an average of 10 hours per week.
- C. Renewal of Appointments: Students may be re-appointed to assistantships for successive terms, but renewal is not automatic or guaranteed. Factors entering into a decision to reappoint a graduate assistant may include:
 - 1. Satisfactory academic performance and progress toward degree;
 - 2. Satisfactory performance of assigned assistantship responsibilities and duties;

3. Availability of funds;
 4. Departmental or institutional limits on the number of years for which an assistantship may be held; and
 5. Specific departmental needs, constraints and policies, including efforts to allow a large number of qualified students to benefit from assistantships.
- D. Notice of Appointments: Except under justifiable circumstances, graduate assistants whose appointments are for more than one term will be notified of their appointments, and of decisions not to renew appointments, at least 60 days before the date upon which the appointment is to begin.
1. If a decision to renew an appointment cannot be made within that time line, the graduate assistant will be informed at least 60 days in advance of the assistantship's start date of an estimated date for the renewal decision.
 2. Circumstances which may justify fewer than 60 days notice include, but are not limited to, uncertainty in departmental funding and course enrollments.
 3. Nothing in this section shall prevent a department or unit from making an appointment to a graduate assistant on short notice based on changed circumstances in class enrollments, the availability of resources, or other factors.
- E. Appointment Letters: Upon appointment, each graduate assistant will receive an appointment letter that contains detailed information concerning the terms and expectations of the assistantship. The appointment letter shall include, at a minimum:
1. The length of the appointment;
 2. The starting and ending dates of the appointment, including the dates during which the graduate assistant is expected to be on campus to perform the duties of the assistantship;
 3. The average weekly time commitment of the assistantship;
 4. The basic responsibilities of the assistantship;
 5. The economic benefits of the assistantship, including stipend and tuition assistance amounts, and any access to health and other benefits;
 6. The department or office to which the student will report, including the name of the faculty member or other individual who will supervise the assistantship, when feasible;
 7. An affirmation that the provisions of the institution's graduate assistant handbook apply to the assistantship;
 8. Any special requirements of the assistantship related to leave, scheduling, or other terms (e.g., coverage over breaks and weather emergencies) that may vary from the provisions of the institution's graduate assistant handbook; and
 9. Contact information where the graduate assistant may obtain additional information and advice concerning the appointment, the provisions of the handbook, and graduate assistant grievance rights and processes.
- F. Assignments: To the extent feasible, graduate assistants shall be given a written description of their teaching, research or other assignments, duties, and responsibilities at least two weeks before the beginning of the semester. However, departments retain the flexibility to

- adjust assignments as necessary due to loss of funding, course enrollment fluctuations, or other unanticipated events, even after the semester has begun.
- G. Termination of Assistantships: An assistantship may be terminated within the term of the appointment under unusual and compelling conditions, for causes specified in institution's graduate assistant handbook.
- H. Best Practices for Research Institutions: To the extent feasible, given the nature of the graduate programs in the departments of a research institution, departments are encouraged to:
1. Provide information to newly admitted graduate students who will receive assistantships, upon admission into a graduate program, or as soon thereafter as is feasible, regarding:
 - a. An estimate of the potential additional length of time that the graduate student may be re-appointed, if the student remains in good standing and financial or other exigencies do not arise;
 - b. The financial benefits of the assistantship, including tuition assistance, stipends and other benefits;
 - c. An estimate of fees to be paid to the institution by the student that are not part of the benefits of the assistantship.
 2. Develop protocols and provide graduate assistants with feedback concerning their performance in the assistantship.
 3. For teaching assistants, identify specific class assignments two weeks before the beginning of the semester, or as soon thereafter as is feasible.
 4. Seek to identify alternative employment opportunities for graduate students whose assistantships are rescinded after the appointment has been made due to financial or other exigencies.
- III. Due Process Protections
- A. Informal Resolution of Concerns: Graduate assistants are strongly encouraged to attempt to resolve grievances informally with their mentor(s) and/or supervisor(s). An institution may also establish a mediation process or an ombudsperson function to facilitate informal resolution of graduate assistant grievances.
- B. Grievance Policy: To address concerns that cannot be resolved informally, each institution must have a formal, written graduate assistant grievance policy that provides the graduate assistant with the opportunity to present grievances to either:
1. The student's department chair, unit head, or other institution officer designated by the President; or
 2. At the institution's discretion, a panel selected by the appropriate dean or the institution's senior academic officer:

- a. The panel will consist of a graduate student, as well as faculty members or administrators, who have no direct relationship with the department at issue or the individual parties to the grievance.
 - b. Either party to the grievance may request that a panel member be substituted on the grounds that the panel member has a conflict of interest.
- C. Content of Policy: Each institution's grievance policy must include fundamental due process protections and other minimum elements, including:
 - 1. The opportunity for graduate assistants to provide the facts and evidence that support their grievances and to explain their positions to the grievance decision makers;
 - 2. Any minimum information requirements and formats for presenting grievances, established by the institution, which shall not require adherence to complex procedures or evidentiary standards;
 - 3. A clear statement that reprisals against graduate assistants for filing a grievance are prohibited;
 - 4. Specific timelines for the phases of the grievance process;
 - 5. The right to appeal any departmental or unit head decision to an appropriate dean, which may include the dean of the institution's graduate school or of the school where the student is enrolled.
- D. Application:
 - 1. The grievance policy will apply to disputes concerning:
 - a. Workload volume and scheduling;
 - b. Inappropriate work assignments;
 - c. Termination of a graduate assistantship within the term of appointment; and
 - d. Non-renewal of an assistantship for arbitrary or capricious reasons including reprisal for filing a grievance.
 - 2. The decision whether to renew an assistantship, except for the reason listed above, remains within the discretion of the department chair and is not subject to the grievance process. However, if a graduate assistant believes that an assistantship was not renewed because of unlawful discrimination or other unlawful grounds, the graduate assistant may pursue available institution processes, such as access to the campus Fair Practices Office.
 - 3. Graduate assistants may raise concerns regarding suspected on-campus fraud or fiscal irregularities through the confidential University System of Maryland hot-line mechanisms established in USM Policy VIII-7.10, "Policy on Reporting Suspected or Known Fiscal Irregularities," institution fraud reporting policies, and any relevant state or federal "whistleblower" laws.
- E. Access to Policy: The institution's graduate assistant grievance policy shall be published on the campus website and included in its graduate assistant handbook.

IV. Professional Development

- A. Orientation and Information: Each institution must provide graduate assistants with initial graduate assistant orientation and access to a graduate assistant handbook that contains all relevant policies and procedures applicable to graduate assistants.
- B. Professional Development Opportunities: Each institution shall support professional development opportunities for graduate assistants, which may include special events for graduate assistants, and invitations to departmental, institutional, and other faculty development events.
- C. Information for Graduate Assistant Supervisors: Faculty and staff who supervise graduate assistants must be familiar with the institution's policies and procedures for graduate assistants.
 - 1. Each department chair, faculty member or unit head who supervises a graduate assistant shall have access to the institution's graduate assistant handbook and shall receive a copy of the graduate assistant's appointment letter.
 - 2. Institutions shall hold faculty members and unit heads who supervise graduate assistants accountable for adherence to the terms of the student's appointment letter and the requirements of the graduate assistant handbook.
- D. Changes to Policies and Procedures: Graduate assistants shall be apprised of any changes to relevant policies and procedures on a timely and ongoing basis.

V. Financial Assistance and Benefits

- A. Stipends: Each institution shall establish stipend levels for graduate assistants as follows:
 - 1. Institutions shall seek to set stipends at levels that are competitive with peer institutions, to the extent allowed by available fiscal resources.
 - 2. Each institution shall establish minimum stipend amounts annually, with discretion to award stipends above the minimum level.
- B. Time Away from Duty: Each institution shall provide paid "time away from duty" for graduate assistants as follows:
 - 1. The minimum paid time away from duty for a full-time, 12-month graduate assistant is 20 hours per year. Such leave:
 - a. Is in addition to institution holidays and other days that the institution is closed; and
 - b. May be scheduled, with the permission of the graduate assistant's supervisor, at times that do not conflict with the duties of the assistantship.

2. For graduate assistants with appointments of less than 12 months or 20 hours per week, the institution shall establish policies for time away from duty that may include breaks and holidays in the academic year, any specified total hour commitments in the graduate assistant's appointment letter, and other campus-specific factors.
 3. Requests for paid time away from duty must be approved by the graduate assistant's supervisor and department chair or unit head, with consideration given to the personal needs of the graduate assistant for such leave.
- C. Leave for Illness and Emergencies: Each institution's graduate assistant policies shall provide for collegial support for short-term illnesses and emergencies.
- D. Other Benefits: Each institution has the discretion to provide additional benefits to its graduate assistants, in light of the role of graduate assistants at the institution and the availability of resources.
- E. Administration: The administration of leave policies for graduate assistants shall be determined by each institution in a manner that recognizes both the graduate assistant's duties to the institution and the student's academic obligations.
- VI. Communication with Administration
- A. Institutions shall provide opportunities for graduate assistants to communicate their concerns to campus administration, provide advice in the development and implementation of policies and procedures related to graduate assistants, be represented in institution-wide graduate assistant orientations, and otherwise participate fully in shared governance.
- B. At a minimum, the institution will provide graduate assistant representatives with the opportunity to meet for discussions with campus administration, including the institution's vice presidents for academic affairs and administration and the graduate dean, at least twice annually.
- C. Each institution will facilitate the formation and operation of a graduate assistant advisory committee, to be comprised of graduate assistant members who will represent the interests of the institution's graduate assistants.
1. The committee may be part of an existing shared governance body or a distinct advisory group formed for the purpose of addressing the interests of graduate assistants.
 2. Members will have the option of engaging an external representative in their discussions with administration, as described in paragraph D, below.
- D. Graduate assistants may elect to engage a representative, which may be a labor organization, to assist them in "meet and confer" discussions with institution administrators

over issues of concern to graduate assistants, including stipends, benefits and terms of appointments.

1. The institution will give serious consideration to the information, views, and suggestions gained from the meet and confer process in any relevant policy decisions regarding graduate assistants. Agreements reached during the process that are amenable to formalization as policy may be adopted as such through appropriate decisional processes of the institution; however, the President retains final authority over all such decisions.
2. The Chancellor, in consultation with the Presidents, shall develop principles and guidelines for organization of the meet and confer process at USM institutions.
 - a. Principles underlying the “meet and confer” process must include appropriate legal parameters, requirements for fairness and adequate representation, respect for the fundamental elements of higher education shared governance, and administrative feasibility.
 - b. Guidelines will address the processes by which graduate assistants will determine whether to engage a labor representative, the selection of the representative, access to information, and minimum requirements for meet and confer meetings.
3. Communications between graduate assistants and institution administration are based upon the free and candid expression of views. The presence of a meet and confer process at an institution in which graduate assistants engage a representative does not limit or constrain the role, function or processes of institutional shared governance. Shared governance bodies and other groups of graduate assistants remain free to confer with administrators regarding matters of concern to those groups, and graduate assistants may participate in institutional shared governance bodies, consistent with institution policies.

VII. Implementation

The provisions of this policy shall be implemented by each institution that appoints graduate assistants no later than September 1, 2011, and each President shall submit a report to the Chancellor summarizing the measures taken to implement this policy no later than November 1, 2011. The Chancellor will report to the Board of Regents on the impact of the implementation of this policy on the status of graduate assistants no later than November 1, 2012.

