

Teaching Assistants, Teaching Fellows and Graduate Student Assistants

Academic Regulations

June 1, 2022

Definitions

Teaching Assistants (“TAs”), Teaching Fellows (“TFs”) and Graduate Student Assistants (“GSAs”) at the University of Pittsburgh are graduate students who are receiving financial support while gaining invaluable teaching and other educational experience under the guidance of faculty mentors. The primary purpose of teaching, from the standpoint of the University and the student, is for students to make steady progress toward an advanced degree, become a valuable member of the academic community, and gain valuable professional experience. TA/TF/GSA status is dependent upon being enrolled at the University as a graduate student.

The University uses the following descriptions to define and differentiate TAs, TFs, and GSAs.

Teaching Assistant: A graduate student who holds a teaching or teaching-related appointment made in accordance with the University regulations pertaining to TAs. TAs often assist faculty with teaching classes, such as large lecture classes with recitation or lab sections. TAs should not be assigned to teach post-baccalaureate or graduate courses or be the instructor of record. Exceptions may be made only in rare cases where the student shows clear evidence of outstanding knowledge in specialized areas and when the individual is directly guided by a member of the graduate faculty.

Teaching Fellow: The same as a TA except that a TF is more educationally advanced or experienced, typically holding the equivalent of a master’s degree. TFs are responsible for teaching a significant portion of a course for their own advanced academic and professional training and may be the instructor of record. TFs should not be assigned to teach graduate courses. Exceptions may be made only in rare cases where the student shows clear evidence of outstanding knowledge in specialized areas and when the individual is directly guided by a member of the graduate faculty.

Graduate Student Assistant: A graduate student who assists in the educational or research mission of the University that support the student’s academic and professional development, but does not teach a class, recitation or laboratory.

Appointment Guidelines

The TA, TF, or GSA must receive a letter from the department, school or University unit that states the general conditions of the appointment and that specifies the stipend, teaching or other expectations, duration of the appointment, other benefits, and any other pertinent terms. The letter will also include a reference to this Academic Regulation and state that this policy governs the appointment. The letter of appointment should be sent to the student. If the student accepts the appointment, they must return a signed copy to the designated University office or representative.

Students with a full appointment as a TA, TF, or GSA should not spend more than 20 hours in any week on assistantship activities for which the student is not receiving academic credit. Fractional appointments should not exceed the corresponding fraction of the 20-hour standard.

TAs, TFs, and GSAs who receive 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. TAs, TFs, and GSAs who receive appointments in the summer term or in a summer session do not need to be registered for credits or FTDS if their summer appointment is part of an 8- or 12-month appointment. However, if the student's summer appointment is for 4 months or less, students must register for at least 1 credit or for the Full-Time Dissertation Study option in the summer term or session. International students who begin their graduate programs in the spring preceding a summer appointment should contact Office of International Services (OIS) to determine whether or not they must register for credits or FTDS if they receive a summer appointment.

All appointments are conditioned on students continuing to make satisfactory academic progress towards completing their degree. When a student accepts an appointment in writing, both the student and the program are expected to comply with the terms of the appointment. A department may, during the appointment term, transfer a student, after consultation with the student, from a teaching assignment to a research appointment or to another appropriate appointment that provides for essentially equal financial support and academic and professional training.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act requires the University to verify that a TA, TF, or GSA is authorized to receive a stipend in the United States. Each new TA, TF, or GSA is required to verify that they are either a U.S. citizen or authorized to receive a stipend in this country. To receive financial support, a TA/TF/GSA is required to produce the necessary documentation to the University.

In accordance with the English Fluency in Higher Education Act of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, prior to their appointment all TAs or TFs who are non-native speakers of English must be evaluated by the [English Language Institute](#) to ensure adequate English language fluency for effective communication with students. Schools or departments may require higher scores than the established University minimums. All TAs and TFs obtaining unsatisfactory scores must complete an enhancement program. If a TA or TF does not obtain a satisfactory score by the time of appointment, their appointment may be or may not be renewed.

Reappointment Guidelines

Although TA, TF, and GSA appointments may not be made for more than one year, a student may be reappointed. If it is impossible to offer renewals or other appointments to all qualified TAs, TFs, or GSAs, priority should be given to those with superior academic and teaching qualifications. The same regulations which pertain to original appointments apply to reappointments.

The criteria for reappointment include satisfactory academic performance, satisfactory academic progress towards their degree, and the demonstrated quality of the TA, TF, or GSA's teaching or other activities necessary to their academic and professional development. Examples of unsatisfactory academic performance would be a GPA below 3.0, completion of fewer than six credits of graduate work per term, or failure to pass preliminary or comprehensive examinations as specified.

Responsibilities

Department, Schools and University

For all appointees:

The department or program should make application and appointment procedures available to all graduate students. The department, program, school or University unit is responsible for generating the TA/TF/GSA appointment letters and ensuring that the terms are being followed.

Each term, every department or program is expected to provide all appointees with timely notification of specific assignments detailing their teaching or support expectations during the term. A reasonable effort should be made to take into consideration the competencies and preferences of the graduate student as well as their graduate course schedule when assignments are being determined.

To ensure adequate progress and provide additional supports, if necessary, the department or program should provide the TA/TF/GSA with feedback on the quality of their teaching activities necessary to complete their academic and professional training and degree requirements at least once per year with a written record of the feedback shared with the student and saved by the department and program.

A brief written description of each department or program's orientation and training and evaluation and oversight plans for the academic training and professional development of students should be made available by the department. It is the responsibility of the dean's office to assure that specific efforts in training, oversight, evaluation, and orientation of TAs, TFs, and GSAs for the academic training and professional development of students 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.

Each department is expected to provide all students with preparation space.

For students with teaching appointments:

The ultimate responsibility for all courses taught at the University rests with the faculty. Each department is responsible for providing orientation, training, oversight and evaluation of its graduate students for the academic training and professional development of the students, and for assigning one or more faculty members to work closely with the individual graduate students to assist them in their teaching activities 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 and TFs should also attend the orientation program sponsored by the Center for

Teaching and Learning. The teaching coordinator or faculty director should meet with each TA and TF at least three times each term.

If the TA and TF is instructing a laboratory, recitation section, or course for the first time, the teaching coordinator or faculty director should arrange to observe the instruction, either directly or by means of video recording, several times. Experienced TAs and TFs should be observed at least once. Each individual will be informed in writing of the conclusions resulting from the evaluation, and they should be given appropriate suggestions for improvement for their academic training and professional development. Each term teaching surveys should be distributed to the students in the TA's or TF's class for the purpose of improving their teaching. These survey results must be made available to the TA or TF and the teaching coordinator or faculty director.

The University is responsible for testing the English-speaking fluency of TAs and 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.

Students

Graduate students holding TA, TF and GSA appointments are required to meet the expectations of their appointments and participate in departmental orientation and training programs. TAs and TFs must participate in departmental deliberations concerning their courses. All TA, TF and GSAs are expected to meet academic enrollment requirements and to maintain satisfactory academic performance.

Graduate students are not permitted to hold more than the equivalent of one full appointment within the University at a time. In rare circumstances, graduate students may seek additional appointments, but they must be approved by the departmental chairperson and the dean. Due to federal immigration regulations, graduate students on J-1 or F-1 visas may not be engaged in their academic appointment for more than 20 hours per week on campus when school is in session during the fall and spring terms, and thus those on regular appointments are not eligible for additional appointments during these terms. Given the intensive and time-consuming nature of graduate studies and training, graduate students holding TA, TF, and GSA appointments are discouraged from employment outside of the University.

Stipend

The minimum stipends for TAs, TFs, and GSAs are standard throughout the University. Each year the stipend amount will be considered and adjustments made when possible by the Office of the Provost.

Tuition Scholarships

In recognition of academic merit, the University offers TAs, TFs, and GSAs a tuition scholarship. The tuition scholarship that will be provided in Fall and Spring terms is as follows:

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

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

The prevailing Wellness, Computing and Network Services, Security and Transportation fees will be included in this merit scholarship. The fee assessed to full-time students will be included with the full tuition scholarship to a TA, TF, or GSA holding a full appointment in the fall or spring terms; the fee assessed part-time students will be included with the scholarship awarded to students holding fractional appointments.

The student is responsible for their 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 graduate student activity fee.

Health Insurance Coverage

TAs, TFs, and GSAs who receive full-time or fractional appointments are eligible to enroll in the graduate student health insurance plan at no cost. Students with 8- and 12-month appointments receive 12 months of individual health insurance coverage. Students on 4-month appointments receive 4 months of coverage.

Accommodations

In the event a TA, TF or GSA needs an adjustment to the expectations of their appointment due to a serious illness or physical incapacitation, the TA, TF or GSA involved should receive their stipend and tuition for a length of time to be determined by the dean's office.

Students seeking disability related accommodations in their TA, TF or GSA appointments should contact [Disability Resources and Services](#) (DRS), 140 William Pitt Union, (412) 648-7890, drsrecep@pitt.edu, (412) 228-5347 for P3 ASL users, as soon as possible. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations as appropriate.

For students who are new parents, please see the [Graduate Student Parental Accommodation Guidelines](#).

Grievance Situations

Unfair Treatment: The University of Pittsburgh strives to build and maintain a positive and healthy learning environment. Reporting concerns, asking questions and understanding Pitt's response to them is critical to this process. Any student who believes that they have been treated unfairly or has been denied eligibility according to these guidelines are encouraged, but not required, to first discuss the situation with their program advisor, research advisor, ombudsperson, or office of student services. Students are also encouraged to report any unfair treatment, bias or discrimination via the [Pitt Concern Connection](#). The Pitt Concern Connection enables our campus communities to elevate irregular or troublesome issues so that they can be investigated and resolved. TAs, TFs, and GSAs can also seek review in accordance with the [University's Guidelines on Academic Integrity](#) as adopted by their school.

Termination or Suspension of Appointment: In rare cases, a TA, TF, or GSA may have their appointment terminated before their appointment ends. Early termination or an interim suspension may only be initiated if the TA, TF, or GSA has received an appropriate written warning or has been alleged to have violated or has been found to have violated a major canon of institutional responsibility including, but not limited to, the Student Code of Conduct, Academic Integrity, Research Integrity, or other civil right or Office for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion policies. The TA, TF, or GSA must be informed in writing by the department chair or of the reasons for termination. Appeals procedure (see below) must be referenced.

Appeals Procedure: A TA, TF, or GSA may appeal, in writing, within ten business days after notice of interim suspension or termination of appointment, to the dean, and the dean or their designee(s) will review the matter and make a finding of resolution on behalf of the school. In the event the dean was consulted as part of the termination or suspension process, the appeal shall be forwarded to the Vice Provost for Graduate Studies and they or their designee(s) shall review the matter and make a final determination as to the resolution of the appeal.

Related Links to Policies/Resources

[FAQs for Guidance on Graduate Student Academic Appointments](#)

[Graduate and Professional Student Parental Accommodation Academic Regulations](#)

[School Ombudspersons](#)

[Student Code of Conduct](#)

[Academic Integrity Guidelines](#)

[Research Integrity](#)

[Office for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#), including complaint/grievances

[English Language Institute \(ELI\)](#)

[Pitt Concern Connection](#)

[Disability Resources and Services \(DRS\)](#)

[Office of International Services](#)