

FAQs for Guidance on Graduate Student Academic Appointments
Office of the Provost – Graduate Studies
June 10, 2020

These FAQs provide additional clarification on the [Guidance on Graduate Student Academic Appointments](#). Initially this guidance and the FAQs were provided as a draft, and the Office of the Provost – Graduate Studies continues to welcome your feedback. Where there are gaps in these policies and their implementation, we understand that schools have adopted their own standards. If you have any questions about where the guidance differs from your current practices, please reach out to Stephanie Hoogendoorn, Office of the Provost, at hoogen@pitt.edu or at 412-624-9246. As needed, additional FAQs will be added.

Teaching

1. Can a teaching assistant (TA) grade for a post-baccalaureate or master's course?
YES, with faculty oversight.
2. Can a teaching assistant (TA) lead a recitation for a post-baccalaureate or master's course?
YES, with faculty oversight.
3. Can a teaching fellow (TF) teach a post-baccalaureate or master's course?
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 and not teaching their peers. Exceptions should be approved by the dean with a copy to Vice Provost Nathan Urban.
4. What is the difference between a teaching assistant (TA) and teaching fellow (TF)?
In general, a student should be appointed a TF to reflect an attainment of experience. The distinguishing feature is not the content of the assignment (i.e., teaching vs. grading or leading a recitation).
5. Once a student is appointed as a teaching fellow (TF), should they always be appointed as TF if they are teaching?
YES. Based on FAQ 3, the appointment as a TF is based on the student's experience.
6. If a student moves from a teaching assistant (TA) or a teaching fellow (TF) appointment to a graduate student assistant (GSA), what should their stipend be?
The stipend should not decrease from one year to another, so it should remain at the TA or the TF rate.
7. If a graduate student assistant (GSA) is assigned some grading in addition to administrative duties, should they be appointed as a fractional teaching assistant (TA)?
It depends on how much grading is being done. If the teaching duties comprise more than 50% of the total assignment, then YES – the student should be appointed as a fractional GSA and TA.

If the teaching duties are less than 50% of the total assignment, then the appointment can be a 100% GSA.

8. If a graduate student has exhausted their funding from the program/school, can the student be appointed as an adjunct?

YES. We have no rules to prohibit this. Ideally, we should try to maintain a student's funding package which includes a stipend, individual health insurance, and tuition.

Health Insurance

9. What do we tell incoming graduate students about the effective date of their health insurance when we require them to arrive to campus for various orientations in late August? Because their health insurance is typically effective September 1, the student may not be covered by other health insurance.

We are currently working to address this gap. If you become aware of an emergency where a new student needs insurance coverage, please contact the Office of the Provost – Graduate Studies.

10. Some of our students receive a summer appointment as an hourly student worker and then for the fall semester are appointed as an academic appointment. What do we tell graduate students who experience a two-week or more delay in being able to enroll in health insurance?

We are working to resolve this situation for the summer 2021 term by maintaining these students on an academic appointment in the summer.

11. Should students appointed as pre-doctoral fellows or certificate trainees be provided individual health insurance?

YES. If the appointment is for the fall and spring semesters, then the student's stipend should be increased by the amount to cover 12 months (and not 8 months) of individual coverage from the graduate student health insurance plan. In 2019-2020, this amount is \$4,204.44.

12. Can certificate trainees or a pre-doctoral fellows purchase individual health insurance from the undergraduate student plan or even another plan?

YES. A graduate student does not have to purchase the graduate student plan. However, we advise students to take advantage of the graduate student plan. It is designed for graduate students and will provide them the best possible coverage to help them successfully complete their graduate studies.

13. Has the University discussed mandating health insurance for all graduate students?

The University has discussed this question, but not recently. One concern has been adding another high cost required fee on to our cost of tuition. The only University-wide mandate for health insurance coverage is for our international students. This is also a visa requirement.

Appointments that do not meet the requirements of academic appointments.

14. How should a Pitt or non-Pitt undergraduate who is receiving a stipend for research be appointed?

Undergraduates have been paid in a variety of different ways. We are looking into an optimal payment mechanism and when available, this guidance will supplement the [Guidelines for Undergraduate Students Participating in Research](#)¹. In the meantime, our recommendation is to use the certificate.traine category to process stipend payments.

15. How should a small monthly stipend payment (~\$500) be paid out if the student does not have an academic appointment?

These payments have been made in a variety of different ways. We are looking into an optimal payment mechanism. In the meantime, our recommendation is to use the certificate.traine category to process stipend payments.

Stipends for Academic Appointments

16. The guidance states: "Stipend rates are posted here: <http://www.gradstudents.pitt.edu/stipend-rates>. The stipends listed are base amounts; schools may choose to provide higher stipends up to the graduate student researcher (GSR) maximum without approval." Does this mean that any appointment type can be paid an amount up to the GSR maximum?

YES.

17. The graduate student researcher (GSR) stipend can range from a minimum rate to a maximum rate. Can a GSR's stipend remain the same from two consecutive years?

The policy states that a reappointment should be made at the same or higher salary. However, where possible stipends should be increased by at least the % amount of the annual increase.

Additional Questions

18. If a student is appointed as a teaching assistant (TA) for 50% and a graduate student researcher (GSR) for 50%, how should their appointment letter be spelled out?

The student should be informed of both appointment types as well as the duties for each type. This can be done in either one letter or two, so long as it is clear what the expectations are. The split can be recorded on the ER. As we work to complete the appointment letter template, we will address this situation.

19. Can a master's student who does not have a thesis requirement be appointed a graduate student researcher (GSR)?

YES.

20. When an Employee Record (ER) is submitted to Faculty Records, should the signed appointment letter be included?

YES. If the signed copy is not available, it can be submitted to Faculty Records at a later time and the record will be updated.

¹ <https://www.provost.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/Students%20Research%20Experience%20GuidelineFINAL.pdf>