

Supervising Graduate Assistants: Professional Expectations, Considerations, and University Resources

Faculty members supervise graduate assistants (GA). This may occur

- when individual faculty members hire graduate students to work for them as **Graduate Research Assistants** (e.g., on a grant);
- when an academic department hires a student to serve as a **Graduate Teaching Assistant** to support instruction, or
- when a unit hires a student as a **Graduate Assistant-Other** to support the operation and administration of a program or unit.

The following guidelines apply to all supervisory relationships between a faculty member and a graduate assistant, regardless of the type of GA or how the GA position is funded.

Graduate assistantships are a type of student employment that provides compensation to support graduate students while they pursue their studies at the University. GAs are students first, and employees second. For the supervisor of a GA, this implies that they should view themselves as advisors first and employers second, though both clearly apply. That is, supervisors of GAs are responsible for providing guidance, support, and mentorship to the students in addition to oversight and direction regarding the assigned job duties.

To ensure the balance of the advisor/employer role, the following provides expectations and guidelines for the graduate supervisor role and the university policies and resources available.

Setting Expectations: Supervisors shall discuss their expectations with their GAs at the beginning of the supervisory relationship and throughout the assistantship. These topics covered include time commitment expectations, schedule, how to address schedule changes, absence procedures, etc. Wherever appropriate, these expectations shall be shared in writing with the GA.

Constructive Feedback: Supervisors need to provide students with feedback on their work in a timely and constructive manner. Effective feedback should be specific, actionable, and respectful. In keeping with the nature of the assistantship, feedback should be provided not only on workplace expectations but also as an advisor to help students advance in their own teaching, research, and professional development.

Graduate Research Assistants. Supervisors should help students develop their research skills, including designing and conducting research projects, analyzing data, and writing research papers. Whenever appropriate or feasible, supervisors should ask students to publish the work generated as part of the GRA in peer-reviewed journals, present at conferences, or similar professional contexts.

Graduate Teaching Assistants. Supervisors should demonstrate and assess teaching skills, provide guidance on syllabi, assignment construction, and grading practices. Feedback in the form of observations of teaching and reviewing student evaluations, if applicable, should also be considered.

Graduate Assistants-Other. Supervisors should provide feedback based on the specific duties assigned.

Supportive Environment: Supervisors shall create a supportive and respectful environment for their students. This includes being available to students, responding to their needs in a timely manner, and treating them with courtesy and respect. Whenever possible, supervisors should provide students with professional development opportunities. Supervisors should be aware of the signs of student stress and burnout and provide support and resources to students who are struggling. Supervisors should encourage students to take breaks and have a work-life balance. This includes taking breaks throughout the day, and supporting activities outside of their studies, in balance with work commitments. In the case of 12-month/year-round assistantships, supervisors shall work with the GA to enable them to take vacations or engage in conference travel (unrelated to the GA).

Policies and Considerations: Supervisors shall be familiar with the university's policies and additional considerations related to graduate education including policies on research ethics, professional standards, academic misconduct, and student support services. When disputes or conflict arise, supervisors should help clarify the students' needs and guide them to a solution that is appropriate based on guidelines and business needs. Supervisors should address conflict as it arises and take steps to prevent it from happening in the future. This may include referring students to the various support offices on campus (See **Campus Resources**).

Salary Guidelines

- The minimum compensation of GAs must comply with the minimum rate established by the University, the College, the Department or the Graduate Program. In no case shall students be paid less than the minimum as posted on the Department of Human Resources' website on [Graduate Assistant Compensation](#).
- Employers are encouraged to pay GAs above the established minimum rates if the GAs' performance warrants. In the case of state-funded positions, any additional compensation beyond the University minimum as posted on the Human Resources website must come from non-state resources.
- Monthly pay for the GAs shall not exceed the posted maximum stipend for graduate assistants as posted on the Department of Human Resources' website on [Graduate Assistant Compensation](#). If the nature of a graduate assistant's work warrants this, supervisors can request an exemption from the posted maximum stipend by submitting a General Exception to Policy request to the Graduate School.

Hours of Limitation/Employee FTE

- *Students first.* GAs are graduate students first and foremost. Thus, their primary goal is to earn a graduate degree. As GAs, they should be hired by the University to perform work that is central to the goals of the hiring unit. Wherever possible, the assistantship should contribute to the professional development of the GA.
- *Typical work expectation.* GAs are expected to spend, on average, no more than **20 hours per week** (.50 FTE) over their appointment periods fulfilling the duties and responsibilities of their positions.
- *Flexible scheduling.* The nature of GA work means that there will be peak times where higher volumes of work may be needed. Supervisors must be cognizant of the employees' FTE and be prepared to arrange flexible schedules so that students' work, on average, is the appropriate number of hours. To balance peak times, hours may be reduced at other times.
- *Overloads.* For any work over 50% FTE, an **Overload Memo** must be approved by the Dean of the Graduate School, the GA's academic supervisor(s), and their department(s). Work may not exceed 75% FTE during the semester.
- *Winter/Summer Break.* All students can work **up to 40 hours** during the summer, spring, and winter breaks. This includes international students. **No student can work more than 40 hours per week.** Spring break is approximately 5 days, winter break - 22 days and summer break - 3 months.
- *Holidays/breaks.* Work expectations are to be prorated for holidays and scheduled University closures such that one fifth of the expected weekly work hours are to be subtracted for each day the University is closed.¹
- *Unforeseen closures.* In case of unscheduled University closures (e.g., due to weather), the work expectation is not suspended. Wherever possible or required by the nature of the work, GAs must continue to perform their duties, but supervisors should work with the GA to provide flexibility
- *Professional responsibilities.* If there are tasks that must be completed during holidays or official breaks, supervisors may request that graduate assistants complete these tasks. However, to

¹ For students who are employed for 20 hours per week, 4 hours per week are to be subtracted from the weekly work expectation for every day during which the University is closed, as is the case on federal and state holiday, as well as spring break.

balance time, GAs' work hours should be reduced. Moreover, the work must be shared fairly between different members of a work group (if applicable).

- *Keeping track of hours.* If there is ever any disagreement concerning the hours that a graduate student devotes to their GA, or about how long a particular task takes, supervisors should ask GAs to record the time spent on their assistantship/various tasks.
- **Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs)**
 - Per the NSHE Handbook, GTAs may teach no more than **two courses per semester**. When teaching two courses a semester, GTA should only have to teach one new course ("new prep"); that is, if they teach two courses, GTAs should teach either two sections of the same (new) course, or teach one section of a course which they taught before in addition to one section of a course which they have never taught before.
- **Graduate Research Assistants (GRAs)**
 - If GRAs are employed in the lab/department where they also earn their graduate degree, there may not be a clear boundary between their work as a GRA and their own research work, e.g., for their own thesis. At least nominally, time devoted to their employment as a GRA, and time spent working on their degree must be assessed separately. The practical consequence is that GRAs often spend many more hours in the lab/department where they are employed.
 - GRAs cannot be required to work more than 20 hours/week (assuming a .50 FTE appointment) on projects that do not relate to their own professional development or their own research agenda.
 - GRAs must receive professional credit for any work they are performing, typically in the form of authorships in a way that corresponds to the nature of their contribution. Supervisors must follow the guidelines of relevant professional societies.

Leave

GAs are not eligible to accrue leave though it is expected that illness, family emergencies, and other life situations may occur. Supervisors should build a schedule that allows hours for students' needs, if possible, balanced with the needs of the lab/department. Supervisors should expect communication about such needs/requests from the students.

Unlawful Discrimination and Harassment

NSHE is committed to providing a place of work and learning free of discrimination on the basis of a person's age (40 or older), disability, whether actual or perceived by others (including service-connected disabilities), gender (including pregnancy related conditions), military status or military obligations, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, genetic information, national origin, race (including hair texture and protected hairstyles such as natural hairstyles, afros, bantu knots, curls, braids, locks and twists), color, or religion (protected classes).

The University of Nevada, Reno, does not discriminate on the basis of protected classes in any education program or activity that it operates. Federal anti-discrimination laws prohibit discrimination based on protected classes. The University's commitment to nondiscrimination in its education programs and activities extends to applicants for admission and employment.

Termination

GAs are *at will* employees who can be hired and fired without the employer having to provide a justification. Because arbitrary firings are not in the interest of the University nor the employer, the University has a review process when an employer of a GA wishes to let them go during the semester, or before their current contract period has ended. Employers wishing to terminate a GA must complete a "Recommendation for Termination of Graduate Assistantship" (see [faculty forms](#)). Employers articulate a reason for this termination and must have the termination approved by the Graduate Dean. No such review occurs when a GA's contract has ended, and an employer decides to not renew the contract.

When a termination occurs while the semester has not been completed, the employer may request that the terminated student reimburse the employer for the tuition and fees that the employer paid for the graduate assistant (see [UAM 2,907](#)). Tuition and fees are prorated based on the number of weeks completed.

Campus Resources:

Supervisors should make every attempt to address and informally resolve concerns when they arise with their GAs. Supervisors should be familiar with campus resources available to help support themselves and their students, some of which are listed below.

- **College/Division:** The College/Division provides a variety of resources to support supervisors and students, including access to department human resources partners, department chairs, and deans office personnel.
- **Graduate School:** The Graduate School provides information and resources on graduate assistantships, as well as academic support for graduate students.
 - [Graduate and Teaching Assistantship information | The Graduate School | University of Nevada, Reno \(unr.edu\)](#)
- **Provost Office:** The Provost Office provides support for supervisors and students on academic concerns.
 - <https://www.unr.edu/provost>
- **Human Resources:** Human Resources provides support for supervisors and students on general employment questions, including graduate assistantship information and FAQs. Employment-related accommodations are also handled by Human Resources.
 - [Graduate Assistantship Information and FAQ | Human Resources | University of Nevada, Reno \(unr.edu\)](#)
- **Counseling Services:** Counseling Services provides confidential counseling and support to students and supervisors.
 - [Counseling Services | University of Nevada, Reno \(unr.edu\)](#)
- **EO/Title IX:** The Center for Civil Rights and Equal Access provides support to supervisors and students on issues of discrimination and harassment.
 - [Center for Civil Rights & Equal Access | University of Nevada, Reno \(unr.edu\)](#)
- **Office of International Students:** The Office of International Students and Scholars provides support to international students and supervisors.
 - [Office of International Students and Scholars | University of Nevada, Reno \(unr.edu\)](#)
- **Teaching Excellence:** The Office of Advancements in Teaching Excellence supports faculty, postdocs and graduate students in their continued development as teachers.
 - [Advancements in Teaching Excellence \(unr.edu\)](#)
- **Teaching Technology:** The Office of Digital Learning provides support for academic technology, course design, and course delivery.
 - [Office of Digital Learning \(unr.edu\)](#)
- **Disabilities:** The Disability Resource Center assists students with disabilities in higher education.
 - [Disability Resource Center \(unr.edu\)](#)