

**Texas State University
Department of Geography**



**Graduate Assistant
Policies and
Procedures Handbook**

2016-2017

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1. Overview of the Graduate Assistantship Program

The Department of Geography takes great pride in its graduate assistantship program. The Department recognizes that its graduate assistants (GAs) play a vital role in the achievement of its research, teaching, and service goals and responsibilities. The purpose of the graduate assistantship program is to provide deserving graduate students with financial support in order to help them obtain their educational objectives, and to provide them with professional experience that will assist them in launching and furthering their careers as professional geographers. The purpose of this document is to acquaint Department of Geography faculty, staff, and current and prospective graduate assistants with the Department's policies concerning graduate assistants. In addition to the policies set forth in this document, graduate assistants are subject to the policies, procedures, and regulations of the Graduate College and of Texas State University, as well as to all state and Federal laws.

These policies, procedures, regulations, and laws take precedence over Department policy in the event of any conflict.

2. Applications and Selection of Graduate Assistants

Graduate assistants are appointed by the Department Chair upon recommendation of the Graduate Committee and the Graduate Program Coordinator. Ordinarily, GAs are appointed each August for the following academic year. GAs must be degree-seeking students in good standing in a graduate degree program in Geography at Texas State University.

Current or prospective students who wish to apply for graduate assistantships must submit an application to the Graduate Staff Advisor. The application consists of a GA Application. The application may be submitted prior to formal application to the degree program, but a GA must be a degree-seeking student in good standing before her or his contract takes effect.

Applications may be submitted at any time, but applications received before February 1st are given initial consideration for the following academic year. Shortly after the February 1st deadline, the faculty members of the Graduate Committee convene, discuss, and evaluate the applications.

In accordance with the guidelines of the Association of American Geographers and of the American Association of Graduate Schools, no applicant may be required to respond to an assistantship offer for the ensuing academic year before April 15 of the previous year. Accordingly, those applicants who are initially offered assistantships are given until April 15 to respond to the offers. In the event that some applicants turn down their offers or in the event that additional assistantships become available, shortly after the April 15 deadline the Graduate Committee convenes and re-evaluates the remaining applicants along with additional applicants who have applied in the meantime.

If assistantships come available at other times of the year, the Department Chair working in consultation with the Coordinator is empowered to hire GAs as the need arises.

An offer of a graduate assistantship, once accepted, is a formal contractual obligation between the student accepting the offer, the Department, and the University. This contractual obligation must be taken seriously. Professional courtesy dictates that a student who has signed a contract to work as a GA gives ample notice to the Department if he or she chooses not to honor the contract. (Unless the student is unable to honor her or his contract because of medical problems or other unforeseen contingencies, students are expected to honor their contracts unless notice is given to the Graduate Coordinator by July 1 for the following fall semester, or December 1 for the following spring semester.)

3. Continuation and Termination

Incoming GAs at the Master's level are given contracts stating that they are entitled to up to four long semesters of support, provided that the GA's academic performance and work performance as a GA are satisfactory. Those entering at the Ph.D. level are given contracts stating that they are entitled to up to four years of support, provided that the GA's academic performance and work performance as a GA are satisfactory. Ph.D. and master students work on 9 month contracts.

In the early spring of each year, the Coordinator surveys those GAs who are eligible for continued support in accordance with the above guidelines. Those eligible for support the following year who indicate that they wish to be continued for the following year are automatically renewed if they meet the academic and work performance requirements described below.

Satisfactory academic performance is determined on the basis of the GA's grades in course work. GAs must maintain a 3.1 grade point average and must make consistent progress toward their degrees in order to retain their positions. A student who is suspended from the University for poor academic performance is automatically relieved of her or his position as a graduate assistant.

Satisfactory work performance is evaluated by the faculty supervisors. During the fall and spring semesters of each academic year, the Department Chair surveys the faculty to determine if any faculty have reason to believe that GAs under their supervision are not performing their work assignments in a satisfactory manner. If any faculty member states that he or she believes that the GA may not be performing in a satisfactory manner, the Coordinator works with the GA and her or his supervisor to ascertain why the supervisor has questioned the quality of the work performance by the assistant. Based on this investigation, the Coordinator may recommend to the Department Chair one of the following: continuation in the same assignment, reassignment to a different supervisor, or termination at the close of the current academic year. The Department Chair makes the final decision as to whether the contract will be renewed. Unless a faculty supervisor states specifically that he or she believes that the

GA is not working in a satisfactory manner, it is presumed that the work performance is satisfactory.

In addition to the above, the Department Chair reserves the right to terminate a GA's contract at any time with proof of any of the following circumstances: failure to enroll for at least nine hours of course work in accordance with University regulations (unless an exception has been approved by the Graduate Coordinator); withdrawal from the University; gross negligence of responsibilities; consistent failure to work 20 hours per week in accordance with the contract; consistent violation of Department or University policies and procedures; academic misconduct; theft or willful destruction of Department or University property; abuse of illegal drugs; or arrest, indictment, or conviction on any criminal charge (not including non-felony traffic or motor vehicle violations). At the discretion of the Department Chair, such termination can occur at the close of the contract or immediately.

In accordance with University policy, all GAs must complete exit paperwork upon completion or termination of their final contracts.

4. Work Hours

GAs work 20 hours per week during the contract period, except during the academic year (Fall and Spring) holidays. Supervisors may not require GAs to work more than 20 hours per week on a consistent basis. Consistent overwork or underutilization of the GA's time may result in reassigning the GA to other duties by the Department Chair.

Because the University's fiscal year begins on September 1 of each year, GAs at the master's degree level are given contracts calling for them to work 20 hours a week between September 1 and May 31 of the following year. Ph.D. GA contracts call for them to work 20 hours a week between September 1 and May 31 of the following year.

In addition to the above, new GAs must attend a University-sponsored orientation workshop for all new employees, and they must attend a Department orientation for new GAs. These are held during the week prior to the beginning of fall semester classes. New GAs are notified in writing and by electronic mail of the exact dates, times, and locations of these orientation activities.

Department policy encourages graduate students to attend and give presentations at meetings of the Association of American Geographers, the Southwest Division of the Association of American Geographers, the National Council for Geographic Education, and other professional organizations. A GA who wishes to attend a professional meeting must notify her or his supervisor(s) at least one month prior to the meeting. The supervisor may not forbid or penalize the GA who wishes to attend as long as a month's notice is given and as long as meeting attendance is clearly related to the student's professional objectives. The GA and the supervisor must work together so that the hours missed by attending the meeting are made up prior to or after the meeting.

GAs are required to attend Department colloquia, GAs are strongly encouraged to attend brown bag lunch presentations, and other Department events in order to obtain different intellectual perspectives and to exchange ideas with professional colleagues.

5. Work Assignments

Work assignments are of four types. Some Ph.D. students are assigned to teach undergraduate courses or to teach laboratory sections of undergraduate courses. Other GAs are assigned to work as research assistants under the supervision of one or more faculty members. Others are assigned to work for a Department center, or as research assistants on grants and contracts.

Each assignment is associated with a credit value, measured in terms of number of hours a week or work. Students teaching undergraduate courses are generally granted 20 hours credit per section. Students teaching laboratory sections but not teaching lectures are given an appropriate number of hours of credit per section. This credit value applies regardless of the actual number of hours that the student devotes to the assignment. The credit value associated with non-teaching assignments, on the other hand, reflects the actual number of hours that the GA is to work each week. Each GA's assignment has a total credit value of 20 hours per week. Some students are given multiple assignments, but under ordinary circumstances no GA is assigned more than two supervisors.

Prior to the outset of each long semester, the Department Chair working with the Coordinator determines the specific assignment of each assistant. Every effort is made to honor the preferences of faculty and GAs for work assignments. However, it must be recognized that achieving the professional goals of the Department sometimes override personal preferences and that the achievement of these professional goals is the paramount consideration in making assignment decisions. Before the assignments are finalized, the Coordinator circulates a list of tentative assignments to the faculty and the GAs to determine if there are any significant problems or objections. If problems and objections arise at this stage, the Department Chair makes adjustments as appropriate prior to finalizing the assignments.

If at any time a faculty member decides that he or she no longer needs the graduate GA's time, he or she must notify the GA, the Coordinator, and the Department Chair. The Chair then reassigns the unused portion of the GA's time to another assignment.

6. Professional Conduct and Channels of Communication

Graduate assistants are representatives of the Department of Geography to the University, the Central Texas community, and the community of professional geographers in the United States. As such, they are expected to adhere to the highest standards of professional comportment during the performance of their duties, and at any time when publicly identified as graduate assistants in the Department. GAs must be

aware of the appropriate channels of communication, and must follow these channels in the event of any concern, disagreement, or misunderstanding. GAs are encouraged to ask questions about any of the policies of the Department concerning graduate assistantships. They must address such questions to their supervisors. If the supervisor cannot answer the question, the question is referred to the Coordinator and/or the Department Chair.

The appropriate channels of communication are as follows. In the event of any disagreement between the GA and her or his supervisor concerning work hours, working conditions or any other aspect of the assistantship responsibilities, the GA and the supervisor must make a good-faith effort to resolve their differences amicably. If this good-faith effort to resolve the issue is unsuccessful, parties to the disagreement or misunderstanding must follow appropriate channels of communication. In cases involving GAs supported by state funds, the matter is referred to the Coordinator. The Coordinator investigates and tries to resolve the issue. If the Coordinator cannot resolve it, the matter is then referred to the Department Chair for final resolution. In cases involving GAs supported by the Grosvenor Center, Lovell Center, or the Texas G. I. Science Center, the matter is referred to the Director of the appropriate center. The Director investigates and tries to resolve the issue. If the Director cannot resolve it, the matter is then referred to the Department Chair for final resolution.

In cases involving GAs supported by grants and contracts, the matter is referred to the account manager for that grant or contract. The account manager investigates and tries to resolve the issue. If the account manager cannot resolve it, the matter is referred to the Department Chair for final resolution.

Regular communication between the GA and her or his supervisor(s) is required. The GA and each supervisor must communicate in person, by e-mail, and/or by telephone at least once a week when the University is in session.

The Department makes every effort to ensure that the work assigned to each GA is professionally rewarding. However, it must be recognized that the successful achievement of the professional goals of a large and complex organization such as the Department of Geography inevitably requires a certain amount of tedious and routine work including paperwork, clerical work, moving material between offices, and so on. GAs are expected to participate in these activities if requested to do so by their supervisors or the Department Chair. However, supervisors may not assign GAs busywork or work unrelated to the professional objectives of the Department. GAs who are assigned busywork or work unrelated to the professional objectives of the Department, or who are not assigned enough work to cover their twenty hours a week, may be reassigned to other duties by the Department Chair at the Chair's discretion.

7. Offices and Department Property

Unless space constraints dictate otherwise, GAs in the Department are granted office space in the Evans Liberal Arts Building. Masters' GAs are normally given office space in Room 379 or Room 388; Ph.D. GAs are given office space on the third floor of the building.

Offices are assigned to GAs at the outset of the academic year. Each GA is responsible for keeping her or his workspace clean, free of unnecessary clutter, and free of obstruction.

Telephones and computers are provided in GA offices. These are to be used for professional purposes. Their use for personal reasons is not permitted, except in emergencies.

The Department is not liable for loss, theft, or damage to personal property from GA offices. GAs are discouraged from leaving money, jewelry, wallets, purses, personal computers, cameras, and other valuables unattended in their offices. If brought to the Department, such items should be stored in a locked area when not in use. GAs should keep their keys on their persons when in the Evans Liberal Arts Building, and should not leave them unattended in their offices. Offices must be locked at all times when not in use. The last person to leave any office must lock that office.

GAs may need to use Department equipment in the performance of their duties. They must follow Department policy regarding the checkout of this equipment and must return the equipment to the Department immediately after use. GAs are responsible for ensuring that the equipment is clean and in as good running condition as when it was checked out.

Upon completion of the final contract or termination, the GA must vacate and clean her or his office, remove all personal property, and exit paperwork, and turn in keys to the Department office staff. This must be completed no later than the final day of the contract.

8. Keys and Security Codes

The Department provides each GA with a key to her or his office and a key to the Evans Liberal Arts Building. GAs assigned to teach classes or lab sections are also provided with keys to the classroom or laboratory in which the class or lab section is held. These keys must be returned to the Department office upon termination of employment with the Department. The GA is responsible for these keys. In addition, the GA's faculty supervisor may recommend to the Department chair that the GA be granted keys to faculty offices, laboratories, or other rooms in the Evans Liberal Arts Building. If the supervisor wishes to secure such keys for her or his assistant(s), the supervisor prepares a memorandum to the Department Chair making and justifying such a request. If the Department Chair approves this request, the supervisor then obtains the key from the Department office staff. The faculty supervisor is responsible for any such requested keys. When an individual signs for a key or keys, that person becomes responsible for the key or keys. If a key(s) is lost, then the person who signed for the key(s) will pay to re-key the lock(s) and for the replacement key(s). A one-time grace period is allowed.

If the supervisor believes that it is appropriate for the GA to have additional security codes, the supervisor prepares a memorandum to the Department Chair making and justifying this request. If the Department Chair approves this request, the GA obtains the security code from the Computer Systems Supervisor.

9. Revisions to the Handbook

In accordance with Department policy, the Department reserves the right to change the policies and procedures described in this Handbook at any time. Changes must be approved by the Graduate Committee, the full faculty of the Department, and the Department Chair. If changes occur during the academic year, the Coordinator will give ample notice to anyone affected by these changes.