

Department of Sociology Expectations for Graduate Assistants and GA Supervisors

This document lays out departmental guidance for Graduate Assistants (GA) and their supervisors. Formally, we are bound by campus policy for Graduate Assistantships: <https://academiccatalog.umd.edu/graduate/policies/policies-graduate-assistantships/>.

Graduate Assistantships are arrangements that involve graduate students performing work under the supervision of a faculty member. At the same time, the department expects Graduate Assistantships to further the professional development of our students, and the roles should be approached with this in mind. Different types of assistantships can provide for different types of developmental opportunities, and some will have more and less flexibility than others. When students are hired as Research Assistants on grants, for example, the assistantship will often be limited to a set of required activities specified by the grant. There are two primary types of assistantships.

- **Teaching Assistantships** involve a variety of duties related to the delivery of undergraduate education. These can include grading papers, leading discussion sections or labs, developing new materials, or teaching a course.
- **Research Assistantships** generally involve assisting a faculty member with their research activities. Some RA positions involve research collaborations between RAs and faculty members that may, under specific circumstances, involve co-authorship. They may be intellectually stimulating and aligned with the student's research interests, or they may involve less engaging work on a particular research project.

Some assistantships involve both teaching and research activities, and all assistantships may include working on various administrative tasks. The duties of each assistantship, however, will be clearly spelled out and documented in a Statement of Mutual Expectations, collaboratively developed by the assistant and their supervisor prior to each semester, as described below.

General Provisions for all Assistantships

In this document, "GA" is used to refer to all types of assistantships, while TA or RA will be used when discussing characteristics particular to each.

Commitment

All assistantships entail an average of 20 hours per week. The actual hours worked may not be consistent from week to week, but the department expects that GAs will work an average of 20 hours per week over the course of the semester. GAs and their supervisors

will agree on the planned distribution over the course of the semester and will identify times when more or less work may be required.

The GA and supervisor should agree on a schedule of work, which could involve working on particular days or be more task-based. Depending on the duties, there might be particular constraints dictated by the assistantship (e.g., class meeting times or the need to perform work on campus on a government computer).

The department expects that GAs will be in residence and available for in-person activities on campus during the dates of the assistantship. GA's and supervisors can make arrangements for GAs to work remotely for some or all of the assistantship if the arrangement is agreeable to both parties, but such arrangements often may not be possible.

If illness or other circumstances required the GA to take time away from assistantship duties, the department encourages the GA and supervisor to work out a plan together to manage the consequences of the time away. If the GA needs to miss more than a few days, or if the GA and supervisor cannot reach an agreement, they should involve the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) in reaching a resolution.

Dates

Appointment dates vary slightly from year to year, but nine-month assistantships generally run from about August 15th to May 31st. GAs are off work the same dates as are staff (e.g., Thanksgiving and winter breaks). For students who have different assignments for the fall and spring semesters, fall assistantships typically run from about August 15th to January 7th, and spring assistantships from about January 8th to May 31st. In general, duties typically begin two weeks prior to the start of the semester, and extend until two weeks after its end.

General Provisions for GA Supervisors

Part of supervising GAs involves taking responsibility for ensuring the assistantship contributes to the professional development of the student. Supervisors should work with students and attempt, to the degree possible, to align the assistantship and its duties with the developmental and career goals of the student. Supervisors play an important role in helping their students establish the skills necessary to be professional sociologists and find success on the job market. The primary role of an GA is to fulfill their duties, but if supervisors can facilitate professional development opportunities within that overriding goal, they are encouraged to do so.

Supervisors are responsible for working with each student to complete the Statement of Mutual Expectations, which must be filed with the Graduate Office by the end of the first week of the semester in which you are supervising the student. Supervisors must set clear expectations on what they expect from GAs and how they will distribute tasks to them, determine how to structure their hours, identify ways to maintain open communication, and attend to other aspects of the GA and supervisor relationship. Additional elements particular to each type of assistantship are addressed below.

Guidance for Teaching Assistantships

Students

TA duties typically start about two weeks before the first day of classes, and extend until approximately two weeks after the course ends. In some circumstances, supervisors might not need their TA for that entire window, but students should assume that they will unless a different agreement is established in the Statement of Mutual Expectations.

TAs should check Testudo when assignments come out, and make sure their schedules do not conflict with the class meeting times. If TAs anticipate a conflict (e.g., the class meets at the same time as a graduate class they hope to take), they should consult with their supervisor to see if they need to be available during the class's meeting times. If necessary, TAs should check with the DGS to see if an alternative assignment can be made. Please note, however, that such alternative arrangements might not be possible.

How time is structured can vary considerably from one TA assignment to another depending on the course itself (e.g. whether it has discussion sections, the number of students in the course, types of assessments, etc.). That said, a typical TA assignment might involve spending 3 hours each week attending class, 2 hours leading discussion sections, 3 hours preparing discussion sections, and 12 hours grading. Again, the 20 hours per week will likely be an average rather than a consistent amount each week. It is not uncommon for there to be less than 20 hours of work for several weeks, but then considerably more in a week when a major class assessment happens. Anticipated variations of this type should be made clear by the supervisor and addressed in the Statement of Mutual Expectations.

Activities involved in TA assignments can vary considerably. Some TA assignments are all grading, while others involve running discussion sections. Common TA duties include: creating course materials, teaching, running AV equipment, leading review sessions, teaching labs, teaching sections, reviewing class materials, holding office hours, running online material, and more.

Supervisors

Supervisors should take the following steps before the semester begins:

- Complete the Statement of Mutual Expectations and file it with the Graduate Office.
- Construct a plan for regular meetings with their TAs, and proactively plan ways to ensure consistent communication during the semester (both between supervisors and TAs, and between people in different roles in the class and the undergraduate students).
- Set clear expectations for how classes will be run and what responsibilities each person will have (including any division of duties among TAs if more than one). Supervisors should adopt a team approach and consider the shape of the entire semester.
- Establish a mechanism for providing feedback to TAs on their performance throughout the semester.
- Communicate to TAs the anticipated workload over the course of the semester, including whether they should expect each week to involve 20 hours of work or whether there will be ebbs and flows.

Throughout the semester, supervisors should:

- Support the professional development of their TAs, which involves learning what students want to get out of their experience as TAs. For some students, an opportunity to give a guest lecture might be valuable. For some, having their supervisor complete an observation and assessment of a discussion section they lead might be of value. Supervisors should proactively communicate with TAs about their goals and endeavor to provide opportunities that facilitate professional development.
- Respect the TAs' experiences. Recognize that students bring valuable and unique perspectives to the class, and discuss these with the TAs. For international students, for example, discuss how the class might differ from their prior classroom experiences.
- Maintain clear and reasonable expectations. TAs should not be working more than 20 hours each week, on average. If TAs are consistently going over 20 hours per week, even if it seems the duties should take less time, it is the supervisor's responsibility to determine how TA duties can be completed without exceeding 20 hours. A set of activities that took a previous TA less than 20 hours per week might take longer for another TA. The position is for 20 hours per week, rather than whatever is necessary to complete a predetermined amount of work.

- Make sure there are clear understandings between supervisor and TA on the instructional goals for the class.
- Provide clear instructions for tasks the TAs will complete. If possible, supervisors should develop protocols for tasks such as rubrics for grading or instructions on how TAs should approach grading material.
- Establish clear expectations for how the TAs should communicate with the undergraduate students in the class, including how quickly students should expect responses from them, norms for formality in email communications, etc.
- Meet regularly with TAs, and be responsive when communicating. Supervisors should remember that when TAs contact them with questions, there are often undergraduate students who are also waiting on the supervisor's response. Thus, being available and responsive to TAs is crucial.
- If TAs are involved in instruction, supervisors should produce reviews of their instructional activities that students can use to grow in teaching and include in teaching portfolios.

Guidance for Research Assistantships

Students

A Research Assistantship involves assisting a supervisor with their research activities. Some RA positions involve research collaborations between RAs and faculty members, while others do not. Further, the distinction between what constitutes work on a collaboration and what constitutes RA work can sometimes become fuzzy. The RA and supervisor should have a conversation before the assistantship begins that makes explicit what will constitute RA work and what, if anything, will be collaborative work that is not part of the 20 hours per week required by the assistantship. It is the supervisor's responsibility to make these distinctions clear, but in lieu of an agreement to the contrary, RAs should assume that working on joint products such as co-authored papers are not necessarily part of the 20 hours per week of RA duties.

There should be clear understandings between the RA and supervisor about what is required for co-authorship on any papers that result in part from assistantship duties. Again, as discussed below, it is the responsibility of the supervisor to make these expectations clear, but in lieu of an agreement to the contrary, RAs should not assume that work as an RA will necessarily lead to authorship on papers that draw from work performed during the assistantship.

The activities involved in RAs vary considerably across assignments. Sometimes an RA position involves intellectually challenging work, and sometimes it can feel like busy work. The nature of the activities will be driven by what the supervisor needs to facilitate their research, and overlap between RA activities and the student's research interests and goals will not always be possible.

RA positions funded by grants are often limited to activities detailed in the funded grant application. Faculty who have grants with funding for an RA have specified precisely what activities will be completed by the RA in the grant proposal. Funding for the RA requires that RA work promised in the grant application be completed on the timeline presented in the grant. Nonetheless, it is the supervisor's responsibility to ensure that the RA not average more than 20 hours per week on the tasks.

Supervisors

At the beginning of the assistantship, supervisors must work with the RA to complete the Statement of Mutual Expectations and file it with the Graduate Office. For supervising RAs, it is crucial to have a clear, explicit conversation when the assistantship begins about which activities will be included in the 20 hour per week associated with the assistantship and which will not. Just as important is a conversation that establishes whether the assistantship might lead to opportunities for co-authorship and what work would be required for those opportunities to be realized. Supervisors should specify precisely what is required for a product to be considered a collaboration and how authorship will be determined for any products that involve shared contributions.

Managing Unmet Expectations

Students

GAs who believe expectations are unclear and/or inconsistent with Graduate School standards (see <https://academiccatalog.umd.edu/graduate/policies/policies-graduate-assistantships/#text>) should first discuss the issue with the supervisor. If discussions are not satisfactory, GAs should discuss with the Graduate Director and/or the Department Chair, or if they are more comfortable, with the Graduate Student Ombuds Officer.

Supervisors

Faculty who feel that GAs are not responsive and/or do not complete tasks on time or to an acceptable standard should first try to resolve the matter with the GA. If those discussions are not satisfactory, they should discuss the matter with the Graduate Director, focusing on ways to discuss problematic performance with GAs and identifying strategies to address the problem. If those steps do not resolve the problem, faculty may request reassignment of the GA. However, because of personnel and funding constraints, the department may not be able to reassign GAs mid-semester.