Chapter 10: Graduate Assistantships

A. Graduate assistantships

In the Department of Anthropology, graduate assistantships—including teaching assistant and research assistant positions—are academic appointments reserved for graduate students. The department offers appointments to teaching assistant and research assistant positions when available. Teaching assistants (TAs) are employed in support roles in courses, such as graders, discussion section leaders, and lab section supervisors. The Department of Anthropology does not employ graduate teaching assistants as primary instructors; occasionally, however, graduate students are appointed as Graduate Instructors for a class. A research assistant (RA) carries out activities connected with research studies assigned by the department or by a faculty member who is principal investigator on a grant that provides funding for RA positions. Besides financial aid, graduate assistantships are intended to prepare graduate students for future faculty or professional positions.

To be eligible to hold one of these appointments, you must be a graduate student (i.e., you must have been admitted to the Graduate School) and be registered in the Graduate School each term of the appointment; this applies to appointments of any percentage or any number of hours. For more specific information, refer to the Graduate Assistant Employment Area in the Office of Human Resources (612-624-7070 or its web site http://www.umn.edu/ohr/gae/).

Ph.D. Students are offered 10 semesters of support through graduate assistantships upon admission, including that provided by university fellowships, other on-campus assistantships, Graduate Instructor positions, and fellowships that provide support for coursework (e.g. FLAS, NSF GRFP). Ph.D. students within this five-year funding period are guaranteed a TA position, contingent on adequate progress (see below) and University finances. The department aims to offer at least one additional TA year for students during dissertation writing and assumes that students at this stage are also actively seeking other fellowship support; however, this additional support cannot be guaranteed. Students beyond the funding limit may apply for a teaching assistantship, but they are given a lower priority.

All attempts will be made to match students to TA assignments that are in their subfield and that will contribute to their research; however, this is not always possible due to classes offered, personnel, and class enrollments.

B. Terms and conditions of employment and fringe benefits

According to University policies, all graduate assistants are entitled to written notification of their appointments. These letters address the job classification and title, percent, time, and duration of appointment, average weekly hours, start date, benefits information and general position responsibility, duties, and expectations. In some cases you will be offered an assistantship without the job assignment specified, for appointments depend on course enrollment figures, TA funds available from the college, and other factors that may not be
known until the start of a semester. When the assignment is determined, you will be sent a follow-up letter or memorandum that spells out all the details, including what course you will assist in or what research you will participate in, who will be your supervisor, and what your particular duties will be. The purpose of this added communication is to clarify your assignment, to avoid misunderstandings, and to resolve any questions you might have. If you have lingering questions, you should discuss these questions with your supervisor.

See the Graduate Assistant web site at http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/gae/ for enclosures on terms and conditions of employment and fringe benefits that can be downloaded. As a graduate assistant, you are responsible for knowing the policies and guidelines applicable to your appointment.

C. Applying for a teaching assistantship

All graduate students, even those who are within the funding period, must apply for teaching assistantships every semester. The application, commonly referred to as the TA Preferences Form, asks students to indicate their preferences for TA assignments and past funding and will be emailed to you. This form must be submitted by the due date indicated. Failure to do so may mean that you do not receive a teaching appointment. Teaching assistantships are assigned each spring and fall semester, since all assignments are contingent on enrollment figures and monies available from administration. Assignments for fall semester are normally made in late August after the University establishes its budget for the next academic year and enrollment numbers have been established.

If you are away from campus (e.g., doing dissertation fieldwork) and wish to apply for an assistantship for fall or spring semester, you still need to apply by the deadline on the form. Late applications will be considered, but may receive a lower priority.

Please note:

- Students must be making adequate progress toward their degree to be eligible for a teaching assistantship.
- Students who have more than one active incomplete on their record are not eligible for a teaching assistantship position.
- Students must have a Graduate Degree Plan (GDP) form on file by the end of the first semester of their second year in order to be eligible for a teaching assistantship.

D. Evaluation criteria for teaching assistantships

In considering TA applications, the department uses the follow criteria for evaluating “adequate progress” in the program:

- Progress in degree program as judged against the benchmarks by year in chapters 3-6
• Cumulative GPA (applicants must have at least a 3.4 cumulative GPA),
• Grades in anthropology courses (all grades must be above a B)
• Instructor’s evaluations for anthropology courses
• Adviser’s evaluation
• Teaching assistant evaluations
• Submission of the Graduate Degree Plan form by the end of the first semester of the second year
• Number of incompletes (applicants with more than one continuing incomplete are ineligible for a TA position)

E. Responsibilities and duties of graduate assistants

Graduate assistants may help teach (teaching assistant) or do research (research assistant).

The duties of a teaching assistant (TA) vary, depending on class level, class size, subject matter, and personal preferences of the instructor. In each instance, the instructor is responsible for closely supervising the TA and retains overall responsibility for course development, instruction, and the assignment of grades. It is therefore important that the TA and the primary instructor discuss and agree on the TA’s role and responsibilities for a particular class. Nonetheless, the basic duties of teaching assistants can be specified:

• Attend all lectures presented by the instructor responsible for the course unless excused by the instructor.
• Grade examinations, conduct discussions, take attendance, maintain at least 3 office hours per week (prorated for less than a 50% position), and fulfill any other teaching-related duties established by the course instructor.
• Attend all meetings established by the course instructor to discuss teaching techniques, subject matter, and grading standards.
• Attend all meetings mandated by the Department of Anthropology for the purpose of preparing teaching assistants for their duties.
• Request approval from the instructor for any absence from graduate teaching responsibilities.
• Abide by all university, college, and department regulations concerning proper conduct, sexual harassment, academic honesty or misconduct, and other matters.

Research assistants (RAs) work with a professor on some aspect of ongoing research. RAs may, for example, code data, draft figures, do analysis, and/or be involved in writing. Some of this work may overlap with the student’s thesis or dissertation research as well. It is therefore crucial that the graduate student and professor discuss and agree on the student’s duties regarding the assistantship as well as the research project as a whole at the beginning of the RA.

F. Resources for graduate assistants
The Center for Teaching and Learning offers courses in their Teaching Enrichment Series at the beginning of every fall semester to help incoming students prepare for their TA assignments. However, students in any year can sign up for these courses:
http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/workshops/enrichment/index.html

In addition, the Center’s Preparing Future Faculty program offers training for teaching assistants in teaching skills, classroom management, and other aspects of teaching:
http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/graduate/pff/courses/index.html

G. Language requirements for nonnative English-speaking TAs

All nonnative English-speaking teaching assistants (TAs) must demonstrate proficiency in spoken English appropriate for the demands of their teaching assistantship. Details on the University’s requirements for proficiency can be found here:
http://policy.umn.edu/Policies/hr/Performance/LANGUAGE.html

The Center for Teaching and Learning’s also has an International Teaching Assistant Program that offers courses for nonnative English-speaking graduate students who have either received a teaching assistantship or who are interested in preparing for a future TA position:
http://cei.umn.edu/support-services/international-teaching-assistant-program

Writing Class for International Students (Writing Studies 5051) is a course for international graduate students who are not native English speakers and is designed to improve or enhance their writing skills. This course teaches formal writing in English, with an emphasis on the problems that often arise for international students. Students learn rules and styles of many useful document types including data commentary, summaries, critiques, resumes, cover letters, as well as research papers. These skills and knowledge will enhance the international students' written communication skills with advisors, peers and other academic audience, and thus contribute to their future career success as well. Contact the instructor: Sheryl Holt, holtx@umn.edu for more information.