POLICIES AND PROCEDURES ON GRADUATE FELLOWSHIPS AND ASSISTANTSHIPS

University graduate teaching and research assistantships and fellowships are awarded to continuing and newly admitted graduate students. These awards are provided with funds from the university, government, foundations, industrial sources, alumni and other private sources. Most fellowships and assistantships are granted on a competitive basis to eligible applicants and determined based on scholarly potential and excellence. Awards range from assistance for tuition and fees and research expenses to stipend support for full-time study and research in programs leading to graduate degrees.

The decision to award most stipends is determined by the department or school to which the applicant is seeking admission. Applicants for fellowship and assistantship support are notified by the department or school soon after the decision has been made. Fellowship and assistantship awards for new and continuing students are granted on a competitive basis, normally for a period of one academic year.

Inquiry about such awards should be made directly to the school or department in which the student intends to enroll. Students in the process of applying for admission should indicate their interest in such support. Some programs include a separate application for support with the application for admission. Refer to the individual chapters in this Bulletin, program websites and the Graduate School website (http://graduate.vcu.edu) for additional information on graduate student support and funding opportunities.

VCU fully subscribes to the following resolution of the Council of Graduate Schools (http://cgsnet.org/) in the U.S. and Canada regarding graduate scholars, fellows, trainees and assistants:

“Acceptance of an offer of financial support (such as graduate scholarship, fellowship, traineeship or assistantship) for the next academic year by a prospective or enrolled graduate student completes an agreement that both student and graduate school expect to honor. In that context, the conditions affecting such offers and their acceptance must be defined carefully and understood by all parties.”

The council provides the following comments on the CGS resolution:

“Students are under no obligation to respond to offers of financial support prior to April 15; earlier deadlines for acceptance of such offers violate the intent of this Resolution. In those instances in which the student accepts an offer before April 15 and subsequently desires to withdraw that acceptance, the student may submit in writing a resignation of the appointment at any time through April 15. However, an acceptance given or left in force after April 15 commits the student not to accept another offer without first obtaining a written release from the institution to which commitment has been made. Similarly, an offer by an institution after April 15 is conditional on presentation by the student of the written release from any previously accepted offer. It is further agreed by the institutions and organizations subscribing to this resolution that a copy of this resolution should accompany every scholarship, fellowship, traineeship and assistantship offer.”

Graduate fellowships

Fellowships are not work-related and are designed to free students to spend all of their time on graduate studies and research. Fellowships are awarded on the basis of a student’s demonstrated academic achievement, promise and need.

Fellows are required to maintain strong academic records and to remain in residence as full-time students during the fellowship period unless special approval is given by the dean of the Graduate School.

Requests for graduate fellowships from students seeking admission to the university should be included in the personal statement submitted with the application for admission and/or on supplemental forms required by individual departments or programs. To be considered for a fellowship, students must return application forms to the university in accordance with deadlines established by the individual departments or programs.

Fellowships for minority students, such as those provided by the National Science Foundation and Ford Foundation, are made by the sponsoring agencies to individual students. Applications are submitted directly by the students to the sponsor, usually in early fall.

A number of graduate tuition fellowships are funded by the commonwealth of Virginia. Funding for this program is allocated by the Graduate School to individual schools and program directors who, in turn, identify recipients. These fellowships are awarded in most graduate departments with preference given to Virginia residents. Tuition fellowships may range from a minimum of $500 a semester to full tuition and fees for an entire academic year.

Fellowships are awarded for not longer than one calendar year and are not renewed automatically from year to year unless specifically stated in writing. Graduate program directors generally determine eligibility for renewal of fellowship awards in subsequent years.

Graduate assistantships

Graduate assistants are typically more effective members of their chosen fields due to formal instruction and close interaction with faculty by assisting faculty in classrooms, research or administrative endeavors. All graduate assistant duties are designed to foster student training and graduate learning experiences.

Although assigned teaching, research or administrative support duties, graduate assistants are regarded by the university as students and not as employees. As such, graduate assistants do not accrue paid sick leave, annual leave or holiday leave.

A number of graduate assistantships are awarded each year on the basis of exceptional scholastic achievement, promise and competence for service in the departments of the university. Assistantships are generally also available in those departments which have government, foundation, business and industrial research grants and contracts.

The duties of graduate assistants require work from 10 to 20 hours per week, depending on the stipend awarded. Graduate assistants must satisfactorily perform the duties assigned by their departments; make satisfactory progress in their programs as defined by the degree requirements and the regulations of their departments; and may not hold any employment or appointment of a remunerative nature during the term of their assistantship.

Additional opportunities for involvement in outside activities may arise in the course of the training period, some of which may provide for additional/supplementary compensation. Involvement and/or participation in such opportunities may assist the department in maintaining the research infrastructure, provide additional experience in instructional activity, assist other units of the university in the delivery of programs consistent with the missions of the institution, involve participation in university organizations and so forth. Such activities may include those for which supplementary compensation is provided. While such activities have the potential for enriching the development of the individual graduate student, they also hold the potential for interfering with the graduate student's responsibilities to his/her department or program and her/his timely progress toward the completion of his/her educational degree requirements.

Therefore, graduate students **must** consult with their advisers prior to undertaking additional activities that may detract, or which have the potential for detracting, from their timely progress to degree completion. Advisers are encouraged to provide/encourage opportunities which broaden the training experience for students in preparation for the wide variety of career opportunities now available. The graduate program director should also be made aware of any such activities to ensure that completion of degree requirements is not compromised.

Some graduate assistants are appointed to support faculty when conducting research. Whenever possible, these assistants will be assigned to faculty who are working in a variety of areas to extend the student research experience and professional development. Graduate assistantships that involve research are generally assigned to those students pursuing degrees that require a thesis or a dissertation.

Other graduate assistants are assigned to departments, divisions, institutes, schools and other offices of the university to assist in the administration of these units. Such assignments are generally given to those pursuing professional degrees in the management sciences. These assistants will be exposed to a variety of administrative experiences and tasks as an integral part of their academic endeavors to prepare them for future professional roles as administrators.

Graduate assistantships are awarded for not longer than one calendar year and are not renewed automatically from year to year unless specifically stated in writing. Graduate program directors generally determine eligibility for renewal of graduate assistantship awards in subsequent academic years. Specific work assignments, scheduling and arrangements relating to vacation and personal leave are determined by the department, program or administrative unit to which the graduate student is assigned.

Required compliance with the Commonwealth of Virginia Manpower Control Program

VCU is an agency of the executive branch of the commonwealth of Virginia. The commonwealth's Manpower Control Program stipulates that employees in the executive branch who are not eligible for benefits under a health care plan established by the Virginia Department of Human Resource Management or by an agency administering its own health care plan may not work more than 29 hours per week on average over a 12-month period. Eligibility for the health care plans is limited to classified state employees, salaried faculty as defined in the state health insurance manual and postdoctoral scholars paid through the university.

All other employees, including graduate assistants, may not work more than 29 hours per week on average over a 12-month period, regardless of the number of positions they hold at VCU that are ineligible for the health care plans. Graduate students should not hold both an assistantship and an hourly or adjunct instructor position at the same time. In exceptional cases, schools/colleges may authorize graduate assistants to have additional jobs, but only if both jobs do not exceed 29 hours total in a work week in compliance with the Manpower Control Program. Noncompliance with the Manpower Control Program exposes VCU to the risk of significant penalties and costs and constitutes a violation of state requirements.

Eligibility

Students who are candidates for appointment as graduate fellows and assistants are responsible for meeting the following eligibility requirements and for taking the initiative in ascertaining that all have been fulfilled. The requirements are described here to provide graduate student applicants with an understanding of the usual conditions for awarding fellowships and assistantships; however, individual schools, departments or programs may set more rigorous standards.

An entering student is awarded an assistantship or fellowship on the basis of academic potential. The student is expected to have been admitted fully and without academic provision, having achieved a minimum grade point average of 3.0 on a 4.0 scale for the last 60 semester hours of academic credit earned. Another indicator of academic potential is a score on the Graduate Record Examination that places the applicant above the 50th percentile of all students who take this examination. In those disciplines requiring GRE subject tests, an upper 50th percentile achievement is required. An equally high achievement level is expected on the Graduate Management Admissions Test, the Law School Admissions Test or the Miller Analogies Test. Students applying for studio and performing arts must demonstrate potential through the quality and promise of their portfolio or audition.

Graduate fellows and assistants, once appointed, must maintain a minimum grade point average of 3.0. Graduate students may be retained as fellows and assistants only as long as they are registered as current, full-time students in good academic standing and are satisfactorily performing their teaching, research or administrative duties.

Appointment and notification

Each year the dean of the Graduate School will notify individual department chairs, program directors and deans of the allocation of the university's graduate student support funds. This notification will include detailed award criteria and instructions for processing these funds. It is the responsibility of each awarding unit to provide funded graduate students with award letters which clearly define the amount, term of appointment and conditions of the award, including the job description of assistantships, renewal criteria, associated tuition and fee support, disbursement information, and minimum enrollment requirements. Award letters should also be provided to students funded by other sources, such as department funds, grants and overhead accounts.

Notices of awards should include the Graduate School policy statement on graduate fellowships and assistantships. Graduate students should be instructed to return signed copies of award letters to the awarding unit(s) in order to acknowledge that they have read these documents and to indicate acceptance of the award and its conditions. All newly appointed graduate assistants will be subject to a criminal records check as a condition of employment at VCU.

Termination of appointments

Graduate assistantships and fellowships normally end when the period of appointment is concluded and the term of the assistantship or fellowship agreement is fulfilled. An appointment may also end when the grant or contract supporting the student expires, even if that occurs before the end of the student's current appointment. Otherwise, a graduate fellowship or assistantship may be terminated for the following reasons:

1. Resignation for cause by the student. Such resignation is to be in writing for approval by the department chair or program director, with a copy to the dean of the Graduate School.
2. Failure of the graduate fellow or assistant to perform assigned duties adequately or to behave professionally. Termination of assistantship or fellowship appointments requires written documentation to support the action. Documentation should clearly show that the infraction, any needed remedy and consequences were conveyed to the graduate student in writing in a timely manner. Such termination is to be recommended by the department chair or program director, with a copy to the dean of the Graduate School.
3. Failure of the graduate fellow or assistant to remain in good academic standing or to adhere to enrollment policies in accordance with this policy statement.

Any stipend funds remaining after termination of a graduate fellowship or assistantship revert to the funding department or program and may be reallocated to another graduate student. If students withdraw from classes or programs or reduce enrollment below full time, tuition and fees and stipends may be rescinded and students will be responsible for returning all funds to the university. Exceptions are made on a case-by-case basis by the dean of the Graduate School on the recommendation of the student's graduate program director.

A graduate student who believes that his or her graduate fellowship or assistantship has been terminated unjustly, and who has exhausted all departmental and school appeal procedures, may appeal the decision in writing to the dean of the Graduate School. A student who wishes to appeal a termination of a graduate fellowship or assistantship must notify the graduate dean in writing within 10 business days after the decision to terminate has been upheld by departmental and school appeal procedures.

Minimum course load

During the academic year, all graduate fellows or assistants whose tuition is being paid by the university must enroll for at least nine hours of graduate course work each semester. Undergraduate credits may be included in the minimum, provided they are relevant to the student's degree program and approved by an adviser and the dean of the Graduate School. Courses taken for audit are not counted toward the enrollment requirement. Students awarded summer stipends and tuition are expected to enroll for at least three credit hours during the summer session [change approved by the Graduate Council April 14, 2009, effective summer 2009]. All students are subject to the continuous enrollment rules (http://bulletin.vcu.edu/academic-regs/grad/registration-policies/) published in the VCU Graduate Bulletin.

Stipends

Stipends for graduate assistantships vary by discipline, level of degree, hours of work required and availability of funds. All graduate assistantships, however, are subject to the university's minimum stipend levels. For nine- and 10-month assistantships, minimum stipends are $4,000 for 10 hours of work per week and $7,500 for 20 hours of work per week. For 12-month assistantships, minimum stipend levels are $5,000 for 10 hours of work per week and $9,000 for 20 hours of work per week. Not all appointments guarantee payment of tuition and fees, nor do payment schedules necessarily coincide with registration dates.

Tuition and fee support

Tuition and fee support associated with graduate fellowships and graduate assistantships varies from year to year and by program. Awards typically include the stipend plus university tuition. Payment of special program or class fees varies from program to program. Students are responsible for settling their accounts according to the rules and procedures of the university's Student Accounting Department (http://www.enrollment.vcu.edu/accounting/).

Tuition will be charged according to a student's official residency status as determined by the university's admissions office (https://www.vcu.edu/admissions/apply/graduate/). Questions related to residency status should be directed to that office.

Payments and tax status

The stipend portion of a graduate assistantship package is designated by the Internal Revenue Service as wages for work performed, is processed through the university's Payroll Office and is subject to withholding taxes. A graduate assistantship stipend is reported to the IRS as earned income. Tuition and fee support, if provided, is processed through the university's Office of Financial Aid and is applied directly to the student's account.

A graduate fellowship stipend is not work-related and is not reported to the IRS as earned income. A recipient of a graduate fellowship, however, may be required to report fellowship support as other income and to pay quarterly withholding taxes. Graduate fellowship stipends and tuition and fee support are processed through the university's Office of Financial Aid (http://www.enrollment.vcu.edu/finaid/) and are applied directly to the student's account. Once all outstanding tuition, fees and other charges are paid, excess funds are refunded to the student.

For additional information about the tax status of student awards, students are referred to the student tax guide [Word] (https://hr.vcu.edu/media/hr/forms/studenttaxguide.docx) published by the Office of the Vice Provost for Student Affairs and the Office of Payroll Accounting. In all cases, final decisions and interpretations as to the tax status of graduate assistantship or fellowship stipends or tuition and fee awards are made solely by the IRS and, ultimately, it is the student's responsibility to ensure accurate reporting of such support.

Need-based financial aid

All graduate fellowship and tuition and fee awards are reported to the university's Office of Financial Aid and are included in any calculation of financial aid need. Fellowship funding impacts need-based financial aid eligibility differently than funding received from graduate teaching and research assistantships. Students with questions about their need-based financial aid packaging should contact their financial aid advisers, graduate program directors or departmental fiscal administrators about the status of their funding before accepting offers.

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University Graduate Council