The Ohio State University
Short-Term Absence and Leaves of Absence Program for Graduate Students
Appointed as GAs, Fellows and Trainees

A. Introduction

The university is engaged in a multi-year effort to address the recommendations of the 2001 Graduate Quality of Experience (G-QUE) report produced by the Graduate School and Council of Graduate Students. The G-QUE study recognized the centrality of graduate education and graduate students to Ohio State’s teaching, research and service missions. Excellent graduate programs are also essential to the success of the university’s Academic Plan. The G-QUE report made recommendations about strengthening the academic core and interdisciplinary experiences of graduate students, enhancing professional development and career services for graduate students, improving the quality of graduate student life, improving the campus climate for special populations, optimizing the administration of graduate education, linking graduate education to larger institutional goals, and alleviating graduate students’ financial concerns, especially in the area of health care and especially for students supported on associateship, fellowship and traineeship appointments. Many of the recommendations in the G-QUE report have been implemented.

This document presents guidelines to support Graduate Associates (GAAs, GRAs, and GTAs, collectively referred to hereafter as GAs), Fellows and Trainees during instances of personal and/or family illness, bereavement, childbirth and adoption. These guidelines formalize many of the practices currently used by academic and administrative units at Ohio State to manage short- and long-term absences of GAs, Fellows and Trainees. Extended absences, especially those that are unexpected, are usually the most difficult to manage, since they require careful balancing of the student’s personal needs with academic and administrative policies, the student’s academic standing and degree progress, unit or principal investigator needs, and funding realities. Appropriately addressing these challenging life situations, which can also jeopardize degree progress or degree completion, typically involves not only the graduate student and his/her supervisor but also the student’s advisor, graduate studies committee chair, and often the department head; some situations may require additional expertise (from the Graduate School, the Office of International Education, the Office of Human Resources, or other areas).

B. Overview

It is impossible to list every life circumstance and every academic situation that an individual graduate student might face. It is also impossible to list every situation that a faculty or administrative supervisor might face in a teaching, research, or administrative setting. These guidelines recognize that it is important for faculty and administrative supervisors to retain flexibility in working with individual students to determine the most fitting response to a particular student’s situation. At the same time, this program sets out guidelines that are intended to provide more consistency across the university in managing short- and long-term absences for funded graduate students. Nothing in these guidelines should be read to require the alteration or diminution of policies presently in place in programs that go beyond what is presented here.
Whenever possible and academically appropriate, these guidelines aim to preserve student status and the student’s means of financial support (including stipend, fee authorization, health care subsidy, and other appointment benefits). These guidelines recognize that it is often possible to manage difficult life situations and support continued academic progress by allowing a reduced course load and/or shifting a funded graduate student temporarily to a different research project, a different instructional assignment, different administrative duties, and/or to an alternate location (including the student’s home). In some cases, appointment obligations can be suspended without great harm for the duration of a leave, especially in situations where there is sufficient advance notice to allow for necessary planning. In some cases involving Fellows and Trainees, it may be possible to reduce scholarly obligations associated with the appointment for the duration of a leave. In other cases, it will not be appropriate and/or possible to manage difficult life situations by temporarily reassigning or relieving funded graduate students of their appointment duties; in such cases, the most appropriate approach will be for the student to take a period of time off from both academic and appointment responsibilities. These decisions are best made through consultations among the student and appropriate representatives from the student’s academic unit and, if different, appointing unit.

To be eligible for the extended leaves of absence described in this document, Ohio State graduate or professional students must:

- Be on fellowship, traineeship or associateship appointments of at least 50% FTE paid through the Ohio State payroll system (hereafter collectively referred to as “funded graduate students”)
- Be making reasonable progress toward the degree
- Be in good academic standing
- Be enrolled at the level required to hold the appointment

In the event that a funded graduate student is unable to meet the obligations of his/her appointment because of a reason stated below, the graduate student must contact the appropriate immediate supervisor as promptly as possible to determine the best way to respond to the situation. Reasonable requests for short-term absences or extended leaves of absence for appropriate duration should generally be approved, without requiring make-up time, for reasons due to:

- Personal illness or bereavement of an immediate family member (Section E);
- Personal serious health condition or care of an immediate family member with a serious health condition (Section F); or
- Childbirth or adoption (for birth mothers, fathers, domestic partners and adoptive parents) (Section G).

A request for stipend-protected leave may be denied due to inappropriate or unreasonable request, including inadequate documentation (see Section C); repeated requests for absences or leaves; documented unsatisfactory performance; and/or incompatibility with funding agency or other institutional guidelines (such as requirements applying to international students).
Requests for short-term absences and leaves of absence are handled at the local level. In the case of requests for short-term absences, the academic or administrative supervisor will make the decision. In the case of extended leaves of absence, the supervisor should consult with the chair of the graduate studies committee in the student’s program of study and the student’s advisor. The appointing unit may designate additional individuals who must approve requests for extended leaves.

Eligibility requirements, definitions and details pertaining to each type of absence/leave are explained in Sections E, F, and G. Section C provides guidelines applicable to all three types of absences and leaves. Section D explains how extended leaves will be funded.

C. Guidelines Applying to All Absences and Leaves

Academic Leaves
In some cases, it will be most appropriate for a funded graduate student to take a period of time off from both school and appointment responsibilities (e.g., an academic leave of absence). A funded graduate student faced with a difficult life situation should discuss options with his/her advisor, graduate studies committee chair, and immediate supervisor. Students who decide to take an academic leave of absence should understand what impact, if any, that the time off will have on their expected funding opportunities upon their return to their graduate programs. Students who are taking time off from their studies (i.e., not registered) are not eligible for the leaves described in this document.

Appointment and Stipend Protection
Whenever possible and academically appropriate, the funded graduate student’s appointment and stipend (including fee authorization, health care subsidy, etc.) should be protected and should extend as long as is required by proper documentation, or until the end of the appointment, whichever comes first, as provided for in the leave provisions in Sections E, F and G.

Extension of Leave Period
In some cases, it may be appropriate to extend leave time into a new, contiguous appointment. Leaves that need to be extended beyond the initial appointment may be stipend-protected (in whole or in part) for reasons stated in Section B above, and at the sole discretion of the appointing unit.

Registration Requirements
Unless an exception has been approved by the appropriate Graduate Studies Committee, the Graduate School, and other relevant entities (such as a funding agency or Office of International Education), graduate students on stipend-protected leaves must meet the minimum Graduate School registration requirements to hold an appointment.

Coverage of Responsibilities
Funded graduate students who are requesting short-term or extended absences must follow the procedures established by their appointing units to cover responsibilities in cases of absence. When managing coverage of duties for an absent funded graduate student, appointing units must be sensitive to the load of other graduate students. Appointing units currently use a variety of
practices to manage absences that extend beyond two weeks. Approaches include temporary assignment of responsibilities to another funded graduate student, accompanied by a temporary increase in that graduate student’s appointment percentage (e.g., from 50% to 75%) or a special payment to that graduate student to compensate for additional effort over a period of time. In some situations, it is not necessary to cover the duties, and the assignments can be held until the student returns from leave. In some cases, a graduate student who is not funded is placed on a new appointment to cover the duties. Graduate students may not serve as “volunteer GAs” for the duration of an extended absence, that is, without a stipend, at a stipend not commensurate with the expected load, or without appropriate payment of tuition and fees. Circumstances that may warrant an exception must be approved in advance by the Graduate School.

Approval Process
Requests for short-term absences and leaves of absence are handled at the local level. When in need of a short-term absence or a leave of absence, the funded graduate student must make a request as promptly as possible to his/her immediate academic or administrative supervisor. In the case of short-term absences, the supervisor will make the decision. In the case of extended leaves of absence, the supervisor must consult with the student’s advisor and chair of the graduate studies committee in the student’s program of study. The appointing unit may designate additional individuals who must approve requests for extended leaves. In some cases it may be necessary for the supervisor and/or student to consult with other entities (such as a funding agency, the Office of International Education, etc.).

Documentation
Appropriate documentation regarding the reason for the leave, such as a letter from a medical practitioner, is required, but may be waived in some circumstances. Documentation and tracking of short-term absences and extended leaves is maintained at the appointing-unit level. In the cases of extended leaves of absence, the information must also be shared with the student’s advisor and the chair of the graduate studies committee in the student’s program of study. In order to have appropriate consultation with the student’s advisor and graduate studies chair, it will be necessary for the appointing unit to obtain the student’s written consent to share information about the leave prior to doing so. Every effort should be made to protect the student’s privacy, including maintaining medical documentation in a secure location that is separate from other files related to the student’s appointment or academic status.

Appeal Process
A request for leave without requiring make-up time may be denied due to inappropriate or unreasonable request, including inadequate documentation; repeated requests for absences or leaves; documented unsatisfactory performance; and/or incompatibility with funding agency or other institutional guidelines (such as requirements applying to international students). If a dispute over a request arises, the graduate student should follow the appointing unit’s appeal guidelines. Such guidelines often begin with an informal discussion with an advisor, graduate studies committee chair, department chair, college dean, or unit director. Such discussions will often lead to a successful resolution. In cases where a successful resolution cannot be reached at the local level, the Graduate School is available to offer advice and, in certain situations, to provide a formal hearing and adjudication. The Office of Human Resources Consulting Services can also provide information and consultation.
D. Funding for Extended Leaves

Appointing units at Ohio State currently manage the financial aspects of GA absences within their departmental budgets, seeking assistance from their colleges, the Graduate School or other offices (such as the Office of Research) in cases of hardship.

In many cases, the costs associated with GA absences are fairly modest, such as the cost of temporarily increasing a funded graduate student’s appointment percentage (e.g., from 50% to 75%) or making a special payment to that graduate student to compensate for additional effort over a period of time. In some cases, it is not necessary to cover the duties, and the assignments can be held without harm until the student returns from leave.

There are cases where a person who is not currently on a university appointment has to be placed on a new appointment to cover the duties; this person would most often be another graduate student but, especially in the case of the performance arts, could be an instructor or lecturer with special skills. In such situations, costs could potentially include a stipend or salary and any benefits associated with the appointment, such as coverage of tuition and fees.

As current practices are formalized, care must be taken to ensure that appointing units do not experience additional financial hardship in managing leaves. Principal investigators with externally funded research grants have expressed particular concern about the possibility of encountering hardship due to the requirements of their grants, where flexibility may be limited.

College deans have identified significant advantages to continuing to use the present approach of managing GA absences within departmental budgets, with departments able to seek assistance from their colleges, the Graduate School or other offices (such as the Office of Research) in cases of hardship. If the current approach is retained, it will be important to identify individuals in the colleges, Graduate School and Office of Research who could work with appointing units and principal investigators to address hardship cases.

Use projections are given below. It will be important to evaluate the impact of the program on a regular basis to determine actual use, document actual costs, and identify unanticipated consequences, so that adjustments can be made as necessary. The first evaluation should take place no later than two years after the implementation of the program.

It is projected that this program will result in no more than 325 extended leaves per year taken by GAs, Fellows and Trainees. This figure is based on projections of no more than 125 extended leaves for childbirth/adoption situations per year and no more than 200 per year for extended medical/family leaves of absence.

E. Short-term Absences

Any GA, Fellow or Trainee may request a short-term absence to recover from a personal illness or to bereave the death of an immediate family member. (Definition of “immediate family member” is provided in Section F.) "Short-term" is generally considered to be one to three days.
In rare circumstances, it might be up to two weeks, and should always be proportionate to the needs of the situation. In these instances, the GA, Fellow or Trainee will make a request to the appropriate immediate supervisor as promptly as possible so that options for coverage during the requested absence can be addressed, often jointly, by the graduate student and his/her supervisor. Options for coverage might include temporarily shifting responsibilities, creating alternative work assignments or work locations, etc.

Reasonable requests for short-term absences will generally be approved and stipends will be maintained, without requiring make-up time. Appropriate documentation regarding the reason for the short-term absence is required, but may be waived in some circumstances.

Eligibility for Short-term Absences

All GAs, Fellows and Trainees, regardless of appointment length or type or FTE, are eligible to request a short-term absence.

F. Extended Medical/Family Leave of Absence

Funded graduate students may, on occasion, require a more extended leave for a personal serious health condition or to care for an immediate family member with a serious health condition. In these rare circumstances, every effort should be made to protect the funded graduate student’s stipend and appointment. Medical documentation is required in cases of extended medical/family leaves of absence.

Extended Medical/Family Leave Provisions

- An eligible funded graduate student on a leave of absence from appointment responsibilities for a personal serious health condition or to care for a family member with a serious health condition receives 100% of his/her stipend and other benefits associated with the appointment (fee authorization, health care subsidy, etc.).

- For an eligible funded graduate student, the stipend will be maintained for up to 6 weeks, or until the last day of the appointment, whichever comes first.

- The same appointment status (with equivalent benefits, pay, and other terms) will be available after an extended medical/family leave of absence has been taken, provided the appointment or reappointment would normally have been available. Assigned duties, however, may be subject to change.

Definitions

- Serious health condition – an illness, injury, impairment, or physical/mental condition that meets any one of the following:
• Involves inpatient care in a hospital, hospice, or residential medical care facility, including any period of incapacity or any subsequent treatment in connection with such inpatient care.

• Continuing treatment by a health care provider that consists of a period of incapacity that also involves treatment multiple times by a health care provider, or treatment at least once by a health care provider that results in a regimen of continuing treatment and continuing incapacity.

• Chronic conditions – episodic incapacity (e.g. diabetes, epilepsy), permanent/long-term conditions (e.g. Alzheimer’s, cancer) or multiple treatments (e.g. chemotherapy, dialysis)

• Immediate family – spouse, domestic partner, mother, father, sister, brother, daughter, son, grandparent, grandchild, mother-in-law, father-in-law, sister-in-law, brother-in-law, daughter-in-law, son-in-law, grandparent-in-law, grandchild-in-law, or corresponding relatives of the graduate student’s partner, other persons for whom the graduate student is legally responsible, and anyone who stood in loco parentis to the graduate student as a child.
To use leave for the care of a domestic partner or for the corresponding relative of the partner, a completed Affidavit of Domestic Partnership must be on file with the appointing unit and with the Office of Human Resources.

Eligibility for Extended Medical/Family Leave of Absence

• A funded graduate student must have completed three out of four consecutive quarters as a GA (GAA, GRA, GTA with appointment at least 50% FTE), Fellow or Trainee paid through the Ohio State payroll prior to the date a leave of absence is to commence.

• A GTA, GRA or GAA must hold an appointment of at least 50% FTE (or multiple concurrent appointments combined for at least 50% FTE) paid through the Ohio State payroll to be approved for a leave of absence. In the case of multiple appointments, different appointing units should work together with the student (and his/her enrolling unit, where appropriate) to create a coherent plan for the leave.

• Fellows and Trainees funded by external agencies are also subject to the guidelines established by the funding agency.

• Reasonable progress toward degree and good academic standing are required to be approved for a leave of absence. Full-time registration is also required. Requirements for full-time enrollment may be reduced with the approval of the appropriate Graduate Studies Committee, the Graduate School, and other relevant entities (such as a funding agency, Office of International Education, etc.).

G. Childbirth/Adoption Leave of Absence

This leave of absence allows for a specified period of appointment- and stipend-protected leave associated with the birth or adoption of a child.
Childbirth/Adoption Leave Provisions

• A funded graduate student on a leave of absence from appointment responsibilities for childbirth or adoption receives 100% of his/her stipend and other benefits associated with the appointment (fee authorization, health care subsidy, etc.).

• For a birth mother, the stipend will be maintained for up to 6 weeks, or until the last day of the appointment, whichever comes first.

• For a father, domestic partner or adoptive parent, the stipend will be maintained for up to 3 weeks, or until the last day of the appointment, whichever comes first.

• The same appointment status (with equivalent benefits, pay, and other terms) will be available after this leave of absence has been taken, provided the appointment or reappointment would normally have been available. Assigned duties, however, may be subject to change.

• Leave following the birth or adoption of a child shall not have a negative impact on appointment status or opportunities.

Definitions

• Birth mother – a female who gives birth to a child.

• Father – a male who is legally responsible for child rearing as the male spouse or domestic partner of the birth mother.

• Domestic partner – a same- or opposite-sex adult partner who has met the requirements of and has a completed Affidavit of Domestic Partnership on file with the department and with the Office of Human Resources.

• Adoptive parent – a parent who has taken a child into one’s family, through legal means, to raise as one’s own child

Eligibility for Childbirth/Adoption Leave of Absence

• A funded graduate student must have completed three out of four consecutive quarters as a GA (GAA, GRA, GTA with appointment at least 50% FTE), Fellow or Trainee paid through the Ohio State payroll prior to the date a leave of absence is to commence.

• A GTA, GRA or GAA must hold a current appointment of at least 50% FTE (or multiple concurrent appointments combined for at least 50% FTE) paid through the Ohio State payroll to be approved for a leave of absence. In the case of multiple appointments, different appointing units should work together with the student (and his/her enrolling unit, where appropriate) to create a coherent plan for the leave.
• Fellows and Trainees funded by external agencies are also subject to the guidelines established by the funding agency.

• Reasonable progress toward degree and good academic standing are required to be approved for a leave of absence. In most instances, full-time registration is also required. Requirements for full-time enrollment may be reduced with the approval of the appropriate Graduate Studies Committee, the Graduate School, and other relevant entities (such as a funding agency, Office of International Education, etc.).

Use

• A leave of absence for childbirth or adoption for a funded graduate student should generally commence immediately following the birth or adoption of a child, but in some instances, may commence prior to the event when deemed medically necessary or when requisite to fulfill the legal requirements for an adoption.

• A leave of absence for childbirth or adoption for a funded graduate student should be completed within six weeks from the birth or adoption of a child and is not intended to be used intermittently.

• A leave of absence for childbirth or adoption is available for each funded graduate student, for each birth or adoption event. The number of children involved does not increase the length of a leave of absence granted for that event.

• A mother, father, domestic partner or adoptive parent may not request a childbirth/adoption leave of absence and a medical/family leave of absence for the same birth or adoption event.

• Written notice should be provided to the immediate supervisor or appropriate person within the department as far in advance as possible, and, whenever possible, prior to assignments being made for the quarter of the proposed leave.