

MEETING SUMMARY

Hiring Graduate Students on Sponsored Projects

October 11, 2024

The following summary was generated by AI and reviewed and revised for accuracy by the presenters. For additional detail, refer to the presentation slides posted to <https://research.syracuse.edu/research-development/trainings-and-presentations/>.

Meeting Overview

- **Meeting Purpose:** Jill Ferguson, Director of Research Services, Office of Research, explained that the meeting is an informational session and Q&A on graduate research assistantships and hourly research assistants under the newly ratified Syracuse Graduate Employees United contract. The focus is on the impact of the contract on assistantships terms, compensation, employment conditions, and additional considerations for sponsored projects.
- **Documents Provided:** Jill mentioned that FAQs and policy documents from the Graduate School were disseminated by email in August and are available in the chat for reference during the meeting. [Also posted to https://graduateschool.syr.edu/grad_awards_info/; email gradawd@syr.edu for access.]
- **Recording and Transcription:** Jill stated that the meeting is being recorded and transcribed. The transcription and slides will be available in Teams for future reference. [Slides also posted to <https://research.syracuse.edu/research-development/trainings-and-presentations/>.]

Union Contract History

- **Negotiation Process:** Peter Venable, Associate Provost for Graduate Studies and Dean of the Graduate School, described the negotiation process for the Union contract as having many ups and downs, with significant efforts from various parties to reach an agreement.
- **Role of Administrators:** Peter emphasized the important role of grants administration and departmental staff in understanding and upholding the contract to avoid grievances and ensure compliance.

Bargaining Unit and Assistantships

- **Inclusion in Bargaining Unit:** Peter clarified that the bargaining unit includes research assistants, teaching assistants, and graduate administrative assistants, and it is important to use the correct terminology to avoid confusion.
- **Terminology Importance:** Peter stressed that terms like "graduate assistant" should not be used generically, and specific titles like "research assistant" or "teaching assistant" should be used to ensure compliance with the contract.
- **Hourly Positions:** Peter explained that hourly positions should not be referred to as RA positions or assistantships and should be clearly distinguished to follow the correct set of rules.

Expectations for Students

- **Work Hours:** Peter stated that students on assistantships are expected to work up to 20 hours per week, with the contract specifying that 20 hours is an average, allowing for occasional variations.

- **Primary Goal:** Peter emphasized that the primary goal for students is to make good progress on their degree, and the assistantship work should support this goal without overburdening the students.
- **Compliance Culture:** Peter highlighted the importance of maintaining a culture of compliance with the contract, ensuring that students are not overworked and that their academic progress is prioritized.
- **Faculty Role:** Peter mentioned that faculty should have ongoing conversations with students about workload expectations and ensure that the work is reasonable in relation to the 20-hour expectation for an RA position.

Hiring Options and Roles

- **Appointment Parameters:** Jill explained the parameters for research assistantship appointments, including full academic year, fall or spring only, and summer appointments, with specific hours per week for full and half-time assistantships.
- **Tuition Remission Changes:** Jill highlighted that tuition remission is included for PhD students funded on assistantships and fellowships. For Master's students funded on assistantships, tuition credits are no longer included as part of the assistantship agreement.
- **Sponsored Awards:** Jill and attendees discussed how changes in tuition remission affect sponsored awards and the paperwork required to implement these changes, including the Graduate Grant Authorization form. [See Office of Sponsored Accounting Forms: <https://finance.syr.edu/comptroller/forms/>]

Minimum Stipend Amounts and Annual Increases

- **Stipend Amounts:** Jill provided the minimum stipend amounts for PhD and Master's students for the academic year, as specified in the Union contract, and the equivalent hourly rates.
- **Annual Increases:** Jill explained the mandatory annual percentage increases for graduate assistants, which are part of the Union contract, and how these increases should be applied to stipend levels.
- **Budgeting Implications:** Jill discussed the implications of these stipend increases for budgeting purposes, emphasizing the need for accurate tracking and planning for future years.

Budgeting for Future Years

- **Budget Planning:** Jill and Peter emphasized the importance of planning budgets for future years, considering the mandatory annual percentage increases for graduate assistants as specified in the Union contract.
- **Tracking Stipend Levels:** They highlighted the need for accurate tracking of stipend levels for both incoming and continuing students to ensure compliance with the contract and proper budget allocation.
- **Inflationary Increases:** Jill mentioned that for budgeting purposes, a 3% inflationary increase should be used, provided the sponsor does not prohibit such increases, and adjustments may be needed based on specific project requirements.

Start and End Dates

- **Appointment Letters:** Jill emphasized the requirement to send appointment letters 60 days prior to the start date of the assistantship whenever possible, to ensure compliance with the Union contract.

- **Consistent Dates:** She highlighted the importance of maintaining consistent start and end dates for assistantship appointments to avoid confusion and ensure proper planning.
- **Non-Aligned Dates:** Jill discussed options for when assistantship and sponsored project dates do not align, including departmental bridge funds, pre-award spending, and no-cost extensions, and the need to work closely with the Office of Sponsored Programs.

Hourly Research Assistant Work

- **Hourly Work Guidelines:** Peter explained that students in a research assistant role should be hired as assistantships, and hourly positions should be limited to tasks that do not require specialized knowledge.
- **Task Examples:** He provided examples of tasks suitable for hourly positions, such as data entry, scheduling research participants, and running simple protocols, which do not require specialized knowledge.
- **Less Than 10 Hours:** Peter mentioned that if the research assistant work is less than 10 hours per week, students can be hired on an hourly basis but must be paid the equivalent hourly rate of the assistantship.

Second Job Policy

- **Prior Approval:** Peter discussed the policy for students holding a second job, explaining that they are allowed to have a second job as long as it does not interfere with their progress towards their degree. He outlined the approval process for second jobs. [See FAQs posted at https://graduateschool.syr.edu/grad_awards_info/; email gradawd@syr.edu for access.]
- **International Students:** Note that an international student on an F-1 visa is not eligible to work more than 20 hours per week during the academic year.

Summer Research Assistantships

- Jill and Peter discussed the guidelines for summer research assistantships, including the requirement for appointment letters and the pay rate for summer positions. They also addressed the flexibility in hiring students for intermittent hourly work during the summer. [The Graduate School will provide additional guidance during the spring semester.]

Paid Time Off

- **Vacation and Sick Time:** Jill explained the policies for vacation and sick time for graduate assistants, including the requirement for mutual agreement and approval for vacation time and allowability on sponsored projects.
- **Extended Leaves:** Jill and others discussed extended leaves on sponsored projects and emphasized the importance of reviewing payroll on sponsored projects to ensure only allowable costs are charged.