



**University Policy: Merit-Based Graduate Financial Aid Policy**

**Policy Category:** Academic

**Subject:** Award and Administration of Graduate Financial Aid

**Responsible Executive:** Provost

**Office Responsible for Review of this Policy:** Office of the Provost

**Related University Policies and Procedures:** Academic Rules and Regulations for Graduate Students; Graduate Assistant Assignments Policy; Graduate Funding & Financial Aid; Payroll Procedures for Graduate Stipends; Graduate Financial Aid Budget Allocation; Administration of Philanthropic Financial Assistance, Freedom of Expression and Expressive Conduct Policy; Discrimination and Non-Title IX Sexual Misconduct Policy

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**I. SCOPE**

This Policy provides guidance for the administration and oversight of institutional merit-based graduate financial aid (GFA) awards and, generally, applies to all academic units and degree-seeking graduate students. However, because some graduate programs have separate financial aid policies and procedures, this Policy does not apply to students enrolled in the Washington College of Law (WCL), Kogod School of Business (KSB), and the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies (OGPS), as well as students enrolled in a degree seeking program delivered in a remote modality or programs offered in conjunction with an external partner.

**II. POLICY STATEMENT**

The purpose of this Policy is to ensure that merit-based GFA is awarded and managed in accordance with the University's academic, fiscal, and administrative policies. Individuals engaged in merit-based GFA administration must adhere to the requirements outlined in this Policy and associated procedures.

**III. DEFINITIONS**

**Graduate Full-time/Half-time/Part-time Status**

Full-time graduate student status during the fall or spring semesters is defined as registration for at least nine (9) credit hours. Full-time graduate student status during the summer semester is defined as registration for at least four (4) credit hours. The total number of summer credit hours in which a student is enrolled during a calendar year are combined to determine the student's total summer enrollment.

Half-time graduate student status during the fall or spring semesters is defined as registration for five (5) credit hours. Half-time graduate student status during the summer semester is defined as registration for two (2) credit hours. Students who are registered for more than a half-time credit load in any semester, but less than a full-time credit load for that semester, will be considered half-time students.

### **Graduate Assistantships**

Graduate assistantships are merit-based GFA awards that provide the recipient with a monetary stipend and/or tuition remission for degree-related courses. For example, individuals holding the position of a Teaching Assistant or Research Assistant is a specific type of graduate assistantship. Individuals may be assigned to other types of graduate assistantships as needed.

### **Teaching Assistants**

A teaching assistant (TA) is customarily a graduate student who assists a faculty instructor with instructional activities. TA responsibilities vary greatly and may include the following: tutoring; holding office hours; assisting with grading homework or exams; administering tests or exams; or assisting a faculty instructor with a large lecture class by teaching students in recitation, laboratory, or discussion sessions. The University generally considers a TA to be a graduate assistantship.

### **Research Assistants**

A research assistant (RA) is a graduate student who assists a faculty member with academic research. Research assistants are not independent researchers and are not directly responsible for the outcome of the research. They are responsible to, and report to a research supervisor or principal investigator (PI). The University considers an RA to be a graduate assistantship.

### **Tuition Remission**

Tuition remission is that portion of a GFA award that covers the cost of tuition for degree-related courses in which the student is enrolled.

### **Stipends**

Stipend is that portion of a GFA award that is paid to students in cash while the students fulfill work requirements assisting faculty members or staff members. Stipends are paid during the academic terms when work is performed.

### **Work Requirement**

Graduate assistantships require recipients to work with faculty members or staff members during the academic semester for a designated number of hours per week, up to a maximum of 20 hours per week for full awards or the equivalent of 600 hours over the course of two academic semesters. Consistent with procedures established by the department or unit, students serving in a graduate assistantship role must report all hours worked (which typically occurs through the use of time sheets, the electronic payroll system, or other approved procedures) and receive certification of their hours worked from their supervisor.

#### **IV. POLICY**

To assist graduate students in financing the cost of attendance in a graduate degree program, the University provides access to two forms of financial aid: need-based and merit-based. This Policy focuses on merit-based GFA. Full-time and part-time graduate students who meet specified qualifications may be eligible to receive merit-based financial aid assistance.

The GFA awarding and reporting procedures are administered by the Office of Graduate & Professional Studies, reporting to the Dean of Graduate & Professional Studies and in conjunction with the Deans and Associate Deans of academic units.

Merit-based forms of GFA are funded through the University's operating budget, which is approved by the Board of Trustees and allocated to the Office of the Provost for distribution to all academic units.

Merit-based forms of graduate financial aid may also be funded via external grants awarded to the University, endowment-generated funds, or funds derived from gifts to the University.

Funds derived from the University budget for merit-based GFA are allocated to academic units to accomplish strategic academic objectives regarding the desired academic quality of students admitted to graduate degree programs and to meet target enrollment budgets.

Depending on funding availability and respective academic unit approval, merit-based GFA awards may be used to support attendance throughout the semester-based academic year, including summer classes. Continuation of GFA awards to subsequent academic years is dependent on students' ability to meet eligibility criteria, including maintaining satisfactory academic progress, as well as the availability of GFA funds within the academic unit. It is the responsibility of all academic units to ensure that all GFA recipients meet and continue to meet GFA requirements and standards. This includes the obligation to complete all work obligations, including, for example, reporting all hours worked consistent with this Policy and procedures of the relevant department or unit. A student who fails to meet their work obligation may have their stipend terminated.

All GFA reports and records are subject to audits by the University's internal and external auditors.

#### **Additional Guidance on Graduate Financial Aid for Doctoral Students**

GFA awards for doctoral students are renewable up to a maximum of four (4) years, contingent on maintenance of satisfactory academic progress and availability of funds. Academic units may use their own internal funds to provide additional support to select doctoral students. Extensions beyond the four (4) years must be approved by the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies. GFA awards for students in the School of Communications doctoral programs are typically for three (3) years. For students in all other doctoral programs GFA awards are typically for four (4) years.

Health Insurance coverage is provided to eligible doctoral students enrolled at American University and receiving GFA funding for twenty (20) hours of work per week during the entire academic year. Work

from other employment not paid from the GFA funds does not count toward the 20 hours per week, unless the student is supported by an external grant or other sponsored project for their stipend. In addition, the PhD student must be continuously enrolled at AU and maintain satisfactory academic progress in his or her program. Eligibility for student health insurance requires that the student is enrolled in at least 6 credits for the semester.

The student health insurance plan is offered to all eligible AU students through an external insurance company. An eligible graduate student may purchase additional health insurance for a spouse/partner, children, or dependents, but the additional costs for health insurance coverage beyond the individual health care plan must be paid by the graduate student individually.

Eligible graduate students are not required to use the AU plan and may opt to hold a different health insurance plan. Students that are covered under another comparable health insurance plan, can waive the university-sponsored student health insurance plan by submitting a waiver request. Information on the waiver is available at <https://www.american.edu/aucentral/health-insurance-waiver-information.cfm>.

If a graduate assistant at the doctoral level secures external funding which includes health insurance coverage or a scholarship, the student may use the external funding instead of using AU based GFA funding to cover the costs associated with health insurance.

Graduate students must be enrolled students in order to obtain health insurance coverage. Consequently, students who will be on leave for one semester of the academic year cannot be covered by the student health insurance during the semester they are on leave. The Office of Graduate & Professional Studies will contact academic units with the information needed for eligible graduate assistants to enroll for the applicable coverage periods. Failure to submit required information or applications by the deadline may result in the student losing the coverage benefit for that academic year.

### **External Funding Sources, MOUs, and Partnerships**

Academic units, the university, or individual students may obtain funding from external sources and, contingent on the rules for the external funding source, may apply those funds towards merit-based GFA.

Academic units and the university may establish MOUs or other partnerships that provide merit-based GFA funding. The creation and approval of the MOUs or other partnerships must abide by university policies.

### **Multiple Benefits for Employees and Spouse or Domestic Partner**

In cases where an individual is eligible for university provided benefits under more than one category, the tuition benefit under the educational benefits program is applied first. For example, if a family member of a university employee is eligible to receive tuition benefits under the educational benefits program and also receives a university fellowship award, the tuition benefit will be applied first and any remaining eligible expenses will be covered by the university fellowship award.

**V. EFFECTIVE DATE AND REVISIONS:**

This policy is effective April 11, 2019. This policy was revised on August 27, 2024.