

Northeastern University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Guidelines, Roles, and Responsibilities for SGAs (RAs and TAs) and Faculty Supervisors¹

1. Objectives of this document

The objective of this document is to formally outline the appropriate roles and responsibilities for graduate teaching and research assistants, and their faculty supervisors. The department recognizes that Stipended Graduate Assistants (SGAs) provide valuable services to the University and the Department. SGAs contribute in important ways to the Department's mission to contribute to the production of cutting-edge social science research and provision of high-quality education in sociology and anthropology. These activities could not be carried out without the active participation and engagement of the department's SGAs. As such, SGA's academic and personal well-being is the department's top concern.

It is our hope that these guidelines will serve as a framework to develop and shape mutually beneficial relationships among graduate students, their faculty supervisors, and the wider University. These recommendations are designed to complement academic or teaching unit or policies for graduate assistants, as well as to provide additional guidance where needed and appropriate. Our objective is that this document will provide best practices, help clarify expectations and reduce miscommunication, frustration, and dissatisfaction on the part of faculty, graduate students, and the administrative support in the department.

2. Types of Stipended Graduate Assistants and their Duties

A Stipended Graduate Assistant (SGA) is a graduate student who is given financial support, either with tuition remission and a stipend, for work in an academic unit. There are two main types of SGAs: teaching assistants and research assistants. Additional SGA assignments are sometimes given, including editorial assistance for the journal *Signs*, more examples of which will likely arise in the future.

A teaching assistant (TA) is a graduate assistant whose work primarily involves an instructional assignment. TA responsibilities vary greatly and may include, but are not limited to:

- Giving class lectures on occasion
- Covering Class (leading a discussion/showing a film)
- Tutoring individual or small groups of students
- Holding office hours and meeting with students
- Administrative support for the course
- Assisting with the grading of homework or exams or written assignments
- Administering tests or exams
- Assisting a faculty instructor with a large lecture class by teaching students in recitation, laboratory, or discussion sessions
- Helping software users in a computer laboratory

¹* Finalized version, approved at GC meeting 4/19/22

The creation of course materials (exams, assignments, slides, rubrics, etc.) is the primary responsibility of the faculty member, though they can solicit feedback from their TA. Teaching Assistants are not responsible for the initial creation of writing exams, assignments, rubrics, course materials, or syllabi.

The specific roles and expectations for TAs should be discussed at the beginning of each semester. TAs should be provided a timely overview of the course syllabus, and adequate notice when they are asked to lead class discussion or run the class – either because the opportunity would be beneficial to the TA or because the faculty member is away. Giving class lectures and covering class are two separate things. Class lectures should always be a choice that benefits the student, normally set up and agreed upon at the beginning of the semester; “covering class” in the case of faculty absence should be limited to holding a class discussion and/or showing a film, not giving a lecture. A TA may need to step in due to an unforeseen emergency, but faculty are encouraged to plan any academic-related absences prior to the start of the semester.

TAs should not be responsible for planning activities for a class session without the help and active involvement of the faculty supervisor. Should a TA feel they are being asked to cover an excessive number of courses, they can consult with the Grad Director. It is not the TA’s responsibility to assign final course grades or ensure their accurate reporting to the registrar, although TAs may support the faculty in this process.

A research assistant (RA) is a graduate assistant whose work primarily entails assisting a faculty member or members with academic research. RAs 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). RAs’ responsibilities vary greatly and may include, but are not limited to:

- Conducting literature reviews or library research
- Collecting, coding, cleaning or analyzing quantitative, qualitative, or textual data
- Conducting interviews
- Preparing materials for submission to funding agencies and foundations
- Preparing materials for IRB review
- Coding computer programs to automate processes
- Writing reports or designing conference presentations
- Organizing conferences or workshops
- Supervising other team members, including undergraduate research assistants

Research Assistants should be informed of the travel requirements expected of them at the beginning of the term and consulted with when making the travel arrangements. RAs should never be expected to pay for their RA-based travel arrangements.

RAs should carry out all research with the highest degree of scientific integrity. When human subjects are involved, RAs should comply with all of Northeastern’s policies for the protection

of human subjects, according to the [Northeastern Institutional Review Board](#).

For RAs who contribute to a research project, issues of recognition and co-authorship should be discussed in an open and honest manner between the RA and faculty supervisor at the beginning and throughout the process. Decisions about co-authorship should be consistent with the norms and practices in the given subfield.

Additional SGA assignments may include, but are not limited to:

- Provision of administrative support to the Department Chair, Graduate Program Director, or administrative staff
- Serving as an undergraduate advisor, or preceptor, and providing support to the Undergraduate Program Director
- Providing editorial support to an academic journal

In these cases, which fall outside of the more typical TA/RA assignments, active communication between the SGA and faculty supervisor becomes even more important to define the nature and boundaries of the work.

Regardless of the type, all graduate assistantships should be beneficial to both the graduate student and the academic or teaching unit. The unit receives assistance from the supported graduate student and the graduate assistants receives experience and mentorship in research or teaching, which is intended to facilitate professional development. As a general rule, SGA duties should be limited to tasks that benefit both the academic unit and advance the professional development of the graduate student.

It is the expectation of the department that SGAs and their faculty supervisors meet at the start of each term to discuss the specific duties that will be expected during the period of assignment. Although specific arrangements can be worked out that may entail the blending of RA and TA responsibility sometimes students may be assigned a 10-hour RA and 10-hour TA for a combined 20-hour SGA, it is a general rule that students with RA assignments should not be responsible for any instructional duties and students with TA assignments should not be responsible for any research duties. In certain cases, an SGA may be assigned both research- and teaching-related duties, but all assignments should be specified clearly at the beginning of the semester.

3. SGA Assignment Process and Timeline

The graduate director along with the department chair and graduate program assistant (also known as the graduate leadership team-GLT) work collectively to assign SGAs in the semester preceding the one in which SGAs begin their duties due to college deadlines for course planning each semester. All efforts are made to provide graduate students with TA assignments as early as possible. The department will strive to equitably and appropriately assign TA responsibilities to graduate students, bearing in mind students' year of study, academic interests, and professional goals. For example, for SGAs assignments in a fall semester, the GLT usually begins discussing such assignments in mid-late summer. By early/mid-August (for fall) or early/mid-December (for spring), the GLT usually has completed and alerted faculty and SGAs of that semester's SGA assignments. However, sometimes due to late changes for the upcoming semester, notification of SGA assignments may need to be modified. Some reasons or unanticipated

circumstances may include: course cancelation, faculty member(s) receiving a grant for course release or to have an RA, or faculty or student-related emergencies or leaves due to medical or other reasons that make them unavailable or unable to teach a course or serve as SGA. In such unavoidable cases, the GLT will alert the faculty supervisor and assigned SGA or other relevant parties (e.g. a new SGA who may need to be reassigned) about those changes as soon as possible. However, in some cases, this can occur very close to the start of the semester without much notice. The GLT will attempt to provide additional support and resources as necessary to ensure a smooth transition and start to the semester under such conditions.

4. Instructor of Record

As part of professional development and to receive more in-depth teaching experience, graduate students who have reached candidacy may request or be offered the opportunity to become the instructor of record for a course in Sociology or another suitable unit based on the course topic. Serving as instructor of record is valuable because it allows students to learn and implement the mechanics, process, and pedagogy for designing and implementing a course from beginning to end. Such preparation is important particularly for students who want to pursue an academic career. And for students who do not, the written and oral communication and organizational skills needed to teach a course independently are useful for working in non-academic contexts. This includes ongoing preparation that happens before and for the duration of the semester in terms of developing a syllabus, designing course assessment measures (i.e. exams, papers, project), meeting with students throughout the semester, and assigning final grades at the end of the semester.

Prerequisites for Being Instructor of Record: A student can be offered or requested to serve as an Instructor of Record under the following circumstances:

1. Advanced to candidacy (required)
2. Has TAed for a course with the same/similar topic for a faculty member for at least 2 times (preferred)
3. If extenuating circumstances arise such that a course of a particular topic needs to be taught in the dept for course enrollment purposes, but the faculty member who usually teaches the course becomes suddenly unavailable or unable to teach the course.

Should a student be offered or requested to serve as an Instructor of Record, they have the option to decline. The GLT will not assign a student to serve as an Instructor of Record without prior consultation or consent. Students are approached about serving as Instructor of Record the semester or two prior to the teaching assignment. The Instructor of Record is equivalent to a 20-hour a week SGA. If a student accepts serving as Instructor of Record, additional resources may be requested to assist in preparation for the semester. The student will consult with the GLT to determine what resources can be provided for this purpose.

5. Supervisory Roles for Faculty

Faculty supervisors should treat SGAs with respect as colleagues-in-training. Faculty members should meet regularly with the SGAs they supervisor to discuss the collective goals for the semester in teaching or research, the SGA's progress toward these goals, and the ways in which the faculty member will support the student in achieving these goals. Faculty supervisors should serve as mentors, which entails explaining the course design and providing insight on pedagogical choices and teaching philosophy,

research aims and project trajectories, and/or perspectives on department service.

When supervising TAs, faculty members should provide guidance and regular constructive feedback on all aspects of class lectures, grading, and other tasks of TAs.

Faculty members supervising RAs should provide guidance and regular feedback on all aspects of the work, including grant or fellowship applications, the IRB process, and conference presentations.

Both students and faculty are allowed one business day to respond to emails, and no response should be expected outside of business hours (9am-5pm). Email should be utilized as the primary means of communication between students and faculty, with personal cell phones being a secondary and optional means of communication.

In cases where the SGA is working for their advisor as either a TA/RA, the advisor should not include comments on TA/RA performance in the Annual Review/Advisor Meeting Form.

Faculty members should recognize that a graduate assistant's SGA responsibilities are only one part of a student's workload. An SGA should never be asked to skip a class or delay course assignments. An SGA should not be asked to provide personal services for a supervisor.

CSSH graduate administrators are requesting more detailed information on SGA performance on a semester basis. As a compromise, the graduate director has agreed to request feedback on SGA performance that will only be shared among the graduate leadership team for the purposes of making future SGA assignments. However, faculty supervisors can provide feedback on SGA performance at the end of the semester. The grad director will contact all SGA supervisors soliciting any feedback, particularly regarding unsatisfactory SGA performance, at the end of the semester. SGA supervisors can submit such feedback via email. If an SGA receives unsatisfactory feedback, the SGA will meet with the grad director. **If such a meeting occurs, the student should also be able to review the feedback and provide a response.** This feedback will only be reviewed by the department chair, graduate director, and grad program assistant and kept at the department level for consideration when making future SGA assignments. Such feedback will not be shared with the college unless there is a violation of the Student Code of Conduct.

6. Dates of Employment and Weekly Workloads

All graduate assistantships are either 10 or 20 hours per week beginning on the first day of classes and ending the last Friday of finals week. The work requirements for 10-hour TA/RA- ships are different and more limited than those of the 20-hour SGA assignments. 10-hour TA- ship should be reduced to the comparable duties of a grader (simply grading assignments, tests, and papers). SGAs on 10-hour TA/RA- ships will be holding two at a time, often split between two faculty members. This necessitates the need for coordination between both of the faculty members and the SGA over the appropriate use and sharing of the SGA's work obligations. SGAs should meet with both faculty members at the start of the semester and fill out a form (make a form) defining the work obligations for each faculty member.

The dates that a TA can be expected to work are regulated by the academic calendar. TA/RA duties begin on the first day of the semester and end on the last day of finals, in accordance with college and university-level policy. Although there may be weekly variation in the workload of a graduate assistant, the workload should not be too heavy or too light in any week. If the TA's assignment is connected to a course, the TA must be ready to start work by the beginning of the semester of the instructional

assignment. This might involve a small amount of preparation before the start of the semester. When the TA is finished with all assigned duties for the course, no more work should be expected.

The dates that an RA can be expected to work are regulated by the payroll dates of the assignment and should be discussed and worked out before the assignment begins. SGA assignments should be 20 hours per week *for each week in the semester*. Therefore, SGA assignments should not “bank” or “store” hours across the weeks in the semester. SGAs do not have to work on University Calendar-designated Holidays. For each holiday in a week, the SGA can deduct 4 hours per day from their 20-hour workload expectations. If there is one holiday day in a week, the SGA’s workload changes to 16 hours, if there are two holiday days in a week, the SGA’s workload changes to 12 hours, and so on.

7. University Policies and Additional Resources

Graduate Assistants, faculty supervisors, and academic units are all subject to the rules and regulations of the university. These include, but are not limited to, Northeastern University’s policies on Sexual Harassment and Discrimination, the Student Code of Conduct, and the Graduate Academic Regulations. For a more complete list of regulations and resources about teaching and research, please visit the Office of Graduate Studies website.

8. Procedure for Grievances

SGA appointments usually end at the end of a designated period of appointment. They may also be terminated at any time for reasons, such as for failure to perform the required duties of the position. But in the event that an appointee becomes ineligible for continued appointment through unsatisfactory academic progress, failure to maintain the minimum required credit hours per semester, or through failure to continue enrollment as a student, the appointment may be terminated at any time.

Efforts should be made to resolve concerns informally between the SGA and the Faculty Supervisor. But when issues cannot be resolved informally, the SGA and or faculty supervisor should raise the issues with the Graduate Program Director and/or Department Chair. The Graduate Program Director and Department Chair should be viewed as resources for both the SGA and the faculty member, and can be consulted at any time.

Employment disputes by SGAs are handled according to departmental review policies, recognizing the need for confidentiality, preserving trust, and acknowledging the power differential present in student-faculty relationships. The order of review for employment disputes is as follows:

- the faculty member employing the SGA;
- the Graduate Program Director;
- the Department Chair;
- the Associate Dean for Graduate Affairs