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**University of Massachusetts at Amherst  
Department of Physics**

**APPOINTMENT AND RE-APPOINTMENT PROCEDURES  
FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS IN PHYSICS**

In general, graduate students in the Ph.D. program of the Department of Physics are appointed either as Teaching Assistants (TA), or as Research Assistants (RA). Typically, a new Ph.D. graduate student in Physics will be appointed as a TA and later move into a RA position when their interest becomes focused on a specific research topic. However, because RA positions are supported by external funding and are not readily available in all research areas, some graduate students remain on TA appointments for the duration of their graduate studies. The appointment of TAs in Physics is closely linked to graduate admissions into the Ph.D. program. Admission into the Ph.D. program is by competitive application following procedures published by the University Graduate Admissions Office in the Graduate School Bulletin. Currently consisting of seven Physics faculty members, the Graduate Admission Committee makes recommendations regarding graduate admissions. These recommendations are passed on to the University Graduate Admissions Office which makes the final decision on all graduate admissions.

Typically about 8 students are admitted into the Physics Ph.D. program, but the number can vary appreciably according to the applicant pool and the availability of funds for supporting new TAs and RAs. With few exceptions, successful applicants into the Ph.D. program are offered Teaching Assistantships for their first year of study. TA appointments are guaranteed for subsequent years provided three conditions are met:

- Satisfactory progress is made towards the Ph.D.,
- The student has not exceeded their Statute of Limitations date, and
- Their teaching is satisfactory.

At the start of their first semester, successful applicants receive this information in writing from the Chair of the Graduate Admission Committee or from the Chair of the Graduate Assistantships Committee. For TAs satisfying the three conditions, reappointment is generally routine and requires no new application.

The Department of Physics defines satisfactory progress towards a Ph.D. in Physics according to the attachment, a copy of which is distributed to each new graduate student. Particularly important is the need to pass both the Comprehensive and the Qualifying Examinations by the second attempts. Graduate students approaching second attempts of either of these exams will not be reappointed until the examination is passed. If circumstances permit, students who fail for the second time may receive TA appointments for one additional semester only in order to complete a M.S. degree. However, such support is not assured. TAs in peril of being denied reappointment for reason of unsatisfactory progress are usually reminded of the conditions to be met for reappointment by the Graduate Program Director.

For any graduate student beyond their original Statute of Limitations date, continuation of the TA appointment is negotiated following discussions with the student and the dissertation supervisor. Furthermore, in order to be reappointed, written approval to extend the Statute of Limitations date must be received from the Graduate School. Even in such circumstances, further support is not

guaranteed and, moreover, if provided, may be for a fixed duration, and/or at a lesser stipend.

It is exceedingly rare for a graduate student to be denied reappointment for failure to satisfactorily execute teaching duties, however this may occur when there are, for example, repeated instances of absenteeism, lateness, or ill-preparedness with regard to teaching. Appointments may also be terminated in cases where a TA fails to submit on time grading records to the course instructor as requested, or who, without written approval from the Chair of the Graduate Assistantships Committee, is absent from campus during the first week of semester, including Registration Day. The Department of Physics strives for excellence in teaching, and will not reappoint TAs who are unsatisfactory in their attendance to teaching duties. Graduate students denied reappointment for this reason are notified at least two months in advance by the Chair of the Graduate Assistantships Committee.

Occasionally, students may be admitted into the Ph.D. program without the assurance of a TA appointment. Such students may have private resources, be supported by an independent Fellowship, or have an offer of an immediate RA position. Students admitted under these circumstances are entitled to make one subsequent application for a TA appointment. When this is made, in writing to the Graduate Program Director, the student will be considered for a TA position in competition with new applications for graduate admissions during the next Fall admissions period. Successful individuals are guaranteed continued financial aid provided they meet the three conditions previously noted.

Students admitted into the M.S. program in Physics are not normally considered for TA positions. However, in the rare case that funds remain after all commitments to Ph.D. students are met, M.S. candidates may be offered full or partial TA appointments. Such appointees are selected primarily on the basis of teaching performance or potential; grades in 600- and higher level courses may also be taken into account. There is no guarantee of continuation of such support in subsequent semesters. M.S. students may also compete for Teaching Assistantships by transferring to the Ph.D. program. Indeed, any graduate student in good standing in the Ph.D. program, within their Statute of Limitations date, and who has passed the Ph.D. qualifying examination, will be offered a Teaching Assistantship to begin as soon as funds are available. The only exception to this would be a student who was previously unsatisfactory in attendance to teaching duties.

In all cases, however, it is University policy that assistantships can be offered only to degree candidates; non-degree graduate students are restricted to hourly or contract employee appointments, made by completing a Graduate Student Personnel Action form. Non-degree students are therefore not entitled to tuition or fee waivers.

The Chair of the Graduate Assistantships Committee notifies all TAs of their teaching assignment at the start of each semester. Requests by graduate appointees to teach specific courses are always welcome, but the final TA assignments depend on various manpower issues including class schedules, the needs of specific courses, and the experience and strengths of individual appointees.

Funds for RA positions are derived from various external sources and are awarded not to the Department of Physics, but to individual Principal Investigators (PIs) who are responsible for administering their grants. Decisions regarding appointment and reappointment of RAs are therefore made by PIs, who have much freedom in this process. Graduate students seeking RA appointments may make direct application to PIs at any time. Frequently, before receiving an RA appointment a graduate student would spend some initial time working on a research project under the PI's supervision. Graduate students previously on Teaching Assistantships continue

their appointments during this period provided they continue to progress towards the Ph.D. and adequately fulfill their teaching duties.

All graduate students in Physics are eligible for RA appointments, irrespective of whether they are enrolled in the Ph.D. or the M.S. program. All Ph.D. graduate students admitted with the initial promise of financial support and who meet the three conditions previously noted is assured a total stipend that is not less than the prevailing departmental TA stipend. Thus any graduate student on a RA appointment at less than the prevailing Teaching Assistantship stipend may seek a partial TA appointment to supplement the RA stipend.

From time to time, other opportunities for graduate student employment become available, for example, teaching during the summer session or teaching in institutions such as Community Colleges. Information regarding such positions is distributed electronically to graduate students.

## **Satisfactory Progress Towards the Ph.D. Degree in Physics**

### **Formal Exams**

1. Students shall take the Comprehensive Examination in September of their first year and pass it by September of the second year.
2. Foreign students who do not receive a passing grade English Language Proficiency test must remain continuously enrolled in ESL courses until a passing grade is obtained. Failure to attend ESL classes will result in the termination of Teaching Assistant support. Foreign students are expected to attain at least a Level 1 evaluation in English communication by the end of their second semester.
3. Students shall attempt both parts of the Qualifying Examination no later than January of their second year and pass it by end of their second year.
4. Upon passing the Qualifying Exam, each student will be provided an individual schedule indicating their deadlines for meeting all remaining requirements for the Ph.D. If a particular deadline is delayed for any reason, the student will be provided a new revised schedule.

### **Research Advisor and Dissertation Committee**

1. Students shall acquire a preliminary thesis advisor no later than eight months after passing the Qualifying Examination. The academic advisor will notify the Graduate Program Director when this requirement has been satisfied.
2. Students shall form a dissertation committee no later than twenty months after passing the Ph.D. Qualifying Examination.

### **Indication of Progress**

1. Students shall submit a dissertation prospectus to the Graduate Program Director by twenty-four months after passing the Ph.D. Qualifying examination. Part of the process of preparing the prospectus will include an oral presentation to the dissertation committee.
2. Each year, on the anniversary of their passing the qualifying exam, students shall submit to their academic advisor written documentation describing progress in research. The document should carry the comments and signature of the thesis advisor. Copies of this material will be sent to the members of the student's dissertation committee.
3. For advanced students (fifth year and beyond) the documentation of satisfactory progress should include an estimated time of completion.

**Exceptions**

1. If, due to failure to pass the Comprehensive Examination or the Qualifying Examination or due to illness, a need to change research advisors, or some other major problem, the above schedule may be revised by the Graduate Program Director upon recommendation of the student's academic advisor.
2. If a student enters the program with advanced standing, the Graduate Program Director will determine the status of the student and set the schedule by which satisfactory progress is to be judged. The determination should be based upon the recommendation of the student's academic advisor and should be set before the end of the first semester after admission.

**Impact of Schedule upon Status and Financial Support**

1. Requests for extension of the Statute of Limitations (SOL) will not be processed by the GPD as long as one of the above conditions remains unsatisfied.
2. Forms for re appointment to a research or teaching assistantship will not be processed by the GPD as long as one of the above conditions remains unsatisfied.