

## **Guidelines for the hiring and assignment of MCB Teaching Assistants (TAs)**

### **Overview**

Graduate Teaching Assistantships (TAs) are a key mechanism that provides funding to MCB graduate students while they progress toward the completion of their degrees. Graduate student TAs are an indispensable and valued part of the MCB teaching community. MCB commits to supporting all MCB Ph.D. students for at least 6 years, so long as they make progress toward completing their degree program. MCB also frequently provides M.S. students with such support when resources are available (i.e., although M.S. students frequently receive support, MCB is not obligated to provide it). All graduate students are expected to follow the regulations of the UConn Graduate School and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) to remain in good standing in their academic programs (e.g., meeting the minimum grade and progress toward degree requirements, including research progress) as a requirement for receiving a TAs. While holding a TAs, graduate students are employees of UConn and therefore must follow all employment-related regulations; they are also entitled to employment-related benefits.

### **Purpose of this document**

This document outlines the guidelines and procedures that MCB uses when assigning TAs. By doing so, it provides standards that will be applied transparently and in an unbiased manner throughout the TA assignment process. MCB recognizes that these guidelines cannot accommodate all future issues relating to TA assignments and will handle such exceptions on a case-by-case basis with other relevant parties (e.g., the UConn Americans with Disabilities Act Case Manager when dealing with required workplace accommodations). Such cases will be discussed with the MCB Associate Department Head of Graduate Research and Education (GRE) to ensure their approval and oversight. Policies relating to time to degree and TA-instructor conflict will be described separately.

### **1. Overarching guidelines**

- a. TA assignments are made by the MCB TA Assignment Committee. This includes one or more MCB faculty members supported by the Graduate Program Coordinator.
- b. The TA Assignment Committee is responsible to the MCB Assoc. Head of GRE.
- c. The primary mechanism that MCB uses to support its Ph.D. students is a 20 hour/week, in-person TAs (hereafter: "full TAs"). Other mechanisms of support are possible (e.g., a 10 hour/week TAs, hereafter: "half TAs") but MCB is not obligated to provide them unless following superseding UConn policies (e.g., if required as a workplace accommodation).
- d. MCB's support of Ph.D. students is contingent upon their following the regulations of the UConn Graduate School, CLAS, and Human Resources, and their fulfilling the teaching and professional behavior expectations of their MCB course instructors and lab directors, e.g., as described in their contract and supplemental description of duties. Should challenges arise in meeting these expectations (e.g., students taking longer than CLAS's 6-year time to degree expectation, poor TA job performance) they must be discussed with the MCB Assoc. Head of GRE to determine appropriate accommodations and/or other next steps. The MCB Assoc. Head of GRE will communicate their approval

of such students to continue receiving an MCB TAsip to the TA Assignment Committee before TA offer letters are issued.

- e. TA employment will follow the terms established in the Graduate Student Union contract.

## **2. Priority for receiving an MCB TAsip.**

MCB TAsips are primarily assigned to MCB graduate students, with non-MCB students also hired when insufficient MCB graduate students are available. There are several types of MCB graduate students; these have differing support obligations, levels of expertise, supervisory situations, and financial implications. Recognizing this, MCB students in good standing will be considered for MCB TA positions in the following order of priority:

- I. MCB Ph.D. students in years 1-6 that are supervised by MCB faculty
- II. MCB Ph.D. students beyond year 6 that are supervised by MCB faculty (see Footnote [a]).
- III. MCB Ph.D. students in years 1-6 that are supervised by non-MCB faculty
- IV. MCB Ph.D. students beyond year 6 that are supervised by non-MCB faculty (see Footnote [a]).
- V. Plan A (thesis-based) MCB M.S. students in years 1-3.
- VI. Plan A (thesis-based) MCB M.S. students beyond year 3 (see Footnote [b]).
- VII. Plan B (course-based) MCB M.S. students.
- VIII. MCB PSM students, if approached by and with prior approval from their PSM program head(s) (see Footnote [c]).

If open MCB TA positions remain after considering all available MCB students, non-MCB students will be solicited for these positions. The guiding principles of this process will be to ensure that non-MCB students have sufficient expertise and that opportunities are not monopolized by particular non-MCB faculty. The following priorities will be considered (not necessarily in this order):

- a. Non-MCB students will be considered for an MCB TAsip only if there are no outstanding needs for TAs in their home departments (as confirmed by those departments).
- b. Non-MCB students with previous experience teaching MCB classes will be given preference for MCB TAsips, especially if requested by MCB course instructors.
- c. Only non-MCB students with experience related to a course will be offered a TAsip in that course. Completion of an undergraduate degree is a requirement (but is not typically sufficient) for an MCB TAsip.
- d. If a course instructor requests that a non-MCB student not be assigned to them in the future, the TA Assignment Committee will discuss the situation to determine the appropriate response. Depending on the rationale given for such a request, responses might include that student not being offered additional MCB TAsips or being offered TAsips only in certain courses. The MCB Assoc. Head of GRE will be notified of all decisions to ensure appropriate oversight.
- e. A non-MCB graduate student mentor will not typically receive >1 MCB TAsip for their non-MCB graduate students per annual year, except by approval of the TA Assignment Committee.

- f. Non-MCB students who work on projects that actively share collaborative funding with MCB faculty will be given preference for MCB TAs in recognition of their existing relationships with MCB.
- g. Non-MCB Ph.D. students will be preferred for MCB TAs over non-MCB students who are pursuing other degrees.
- h. MCB will not compensate other departments for tuition revenue lost due to a non-MCB student taking an MCB TA. Thus, students in non-MCB professional graduate programs that require such tuition reimbursement will not typically be considered for MCB TAs.
- i. After consideration of the above points, non-MCB students will be prioritized on a “first-come, first-served” basis based on their date of nomination to the TA Assignment Committee. Non-MCB students are welcome to nominate themselves at any point in any semester.

Footnote [a]: CLAS policy limits support for Ph.D. students to 6 years, reflecting the expectation that graduate students will finish their degrees by that time. MCB recognizes that it is not unusual for Ph.D. timelines to extend beyond this and will seek to continue TA support for students who remain in good standing. To balance these expectations, MCB Ph.D. students beyond their 6<sup>th</sup> year will discuss their progress with the MCB Assoc. Head of GRE annually, e.g., to ensure that they receive all needed accommodations, comply with all relevant policies, (e.g., the documentation required by the Graduate School following year 8), and are progressing toward the completion of their degree. Such meetings should occur before the end of the Spring semester so that the MCB Assoc. Head of GRE can approve such students for continued TA support before the subsequent offer letter deadline, which occurs mid-summer. Such approval can be for 1 or 2 semesters at the discretion of the MCB Assoc. Head of GRE. Should concerns arise during these meetings, the MCB Assoc. Head will communicate with all relevant parties (e.g., student faculty mentors and committee members) to ensure an appropriate resolution. MCB expects that requirements for the continued approval of TA support will increase with increased time past the 6<sup>th</sup> year of a Ph.D. student’s program unless specific accommodations are warranted.

Footnote [b]: Similar to Ph.D. students, MCB M.S. students beyond the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of their program must discuss their progress with the MCB Assoc. Head of GRE for them to approve the TA Assignment Committee awarding that student a TA, following the procedure in Footnote [a]. MCB notes that M.S. students are not guaranteed support via a TA. Long-term support of a M.S. student beyond 3 years must be balanced against making TA opportunities available for other M.S. students.

Footnote [c]: MCB notes that because a TA provides a graduate student with a tuition waiver, a PSM student employed as a TA would not provide any tuition-based revenue to their PSM program. Approval by the PSM Directors includes the agreement of these financial consequences. PSM students should therefore expect such approvals to be rare.

### **3. Procedures for TA assignment**

- a. MCB faculty will be surveyed to determine if the graduate students that they supervise will receive an RA or TA during the following semester. This survey will take place in the middle of the regular semester preceding that for which TAs are being assigned (i.e., mid-Spring for Fall TAs, mid-Fall for Spring TAs) to ensure that

graduate student letters of offer are issued following the timelines in the Graduate Student Union contract. Students supervised by faculty who do not respond by the survey deadline will be assigned to TAships by default (but see Footnote [d]).

- b. Graduate students assigned to TAships will be surveyed to determine their ranked preferences among the courses offered that semester. This survey will occur alongside the faculty survey in 3a. Students may be asked for their experience relative to the classes that they select (especially incoming students and those preferring upper-level courses). Students not responding to this survey will be considered to have no preference. Students who do not provide all requested preferences will be considered to have selected “any course is fine” for the preferences that they did not provide.
- c. Lab coordinators and/or faculty instructors will be surveyed so that they can request preferred student TAs. This survey will occur alongside the faculty survey in 3a.
- d. The TA Assignment Committee will assign graduate students to the available positions. In doing so, they will seek to globally optimize many criteria, which include:
  - I. Student expertise
  - II. Instructor requests
  - III. Previous student experience in a course
  - IV. Student preferences (in ranked order)
  - V. The balance of new vs. experienced TAs assigned to a course (such that an instructor is not disproportionately burdened by the need to train new TAs)
  - VI. The equitable spread of sought-after opportunities among equally qualified students
  - VII. The availability of preferred courses (see Footnote [e])

NOTE: The course preferences of a TA’s research supervisor are not considered during the TA optimization process, especially because survey results are not shared beyond those involved in the TA assignment process. Students and supervisors are welcome to discuss the process with the TA Assignment Committee, who will be as transparent as possible without jeopardizing any confidences.

- e. TA assignments will be sent to course instructors and laboratory supervisors for feedback before being released to the students.
- f. The TA Assignment Committee will endeavor to communicate TA assignments to students as soon as possible. However, this must be weighed against the need to accommodate the ongoing opening and closing of lab sections based on enrollment and the complexities of hiring non-MCB students.
- g. Should they be necessary, the TA Assignment Committee will communicate last-minute adjustments to the affected students and instructors as soon as possible.

Footnote [d]: MCB recognizes that faculty funding can change unexpectedly such that an RAship may become available for a student assigned a TAship after the survey deadline. In this case, the faculty member should inform the TA Assignment Committee as soon as possible so that they can initiate a search for a replacement TA. MCB also recognizes their need to fully staff the available TA positions, so such replacements may not always be possible and can prevent MCB from offering an RA contract that would supersede a signed TA contract. Faculty should expect that the earlier the TA Assignment Committee is informed, the more likely it is that a replacement TA can be found in time.

Footnote [e]: Some courses have a limited number of sections less than the number of students who list them as preferences. Such courses often require specialized skills and are filled following instructor requests. The TA Assignment Committee will enunciate this limitation to students before they select their preferences. Should students request many such courses they may be assigned a non-preferred course due to the limited availability of their preferences.

Footnote [f]: The needs of the department to fill TA positions in a course will occasionally supersede the wishes of supervisors and students for a particular TA placement. Such placements will broadly be made based on student experience and expertise, and will ensure that sub-optimal placements are spread equitably among equally qualified students.

#### **4. Guidelines for UConn GA employment outside of MCB**

- a. By default, MCB assumes that graduate students will hold a GAship within MCB. Should a GAship outside of MCB be desired the Graduate Program Coordinator should be informed as soon as possible. This may trigger additional discussion (e.g., led by the MCB Assoc. Head of GRE) to ensure that such employment is in the best interests of all parties (students, faculty, and MCB).
- b. Graduate students must not accept an external GAship without the approval of both their faculty advisor and the MCB Assoc. Head of GRE, who will communicate with each other upon receiving a student request to determine their mutual approval.
- c. MCB Ph.D. students will not typically hold TAships outside of MCB to prioritize fulfilling the teaching needs of MCB before those of other departments. TAing for cross-listed courses or other types of GAships (e.g., for WiMSE, the Graduate Student Union, service units such as UITS, etc.) may be considered pending appropriate approvals and the recognition of benefits for all parties.
- d. MCB Plan A and Plan B M.S. students will be released to seek non-MCB employment once the TA Assignment Committee determines that there are no MCB TAships available to them. The Graduate Program Coordinator will notify them of this at the earliest possible opportunity and facilitate such employment (e.g., by passing on opportunities) when feasible.
- e. As noted in 1c above, MCB commits to support MCB Ph.D. students with full TAships but not  $\frac{1}{2}$  TAships. Thus, MCB is not obligated to provide  $\frac{1}{2}$  TAships to students who wish to take a  $\frac{1}{2}$  GAship outside of MCB, although it may do so if a suitable opportunity exists that is in the interest of all parties.
- f. If a student accepts a  $\frac{1}{2}$  GAship and signs an offer letter that includes both the Fall and Spring semesters, MCB is not obligated to provide matching support in the Spring semester even if it does so in the Fall semester. This is because MCB uses separate offer letters for the Fall and Spring semesters and assigns TAships for each semester separately. Therefore, MCB cannot predict what Spring opportunities will exist at the time that a student would sign a year-long  $\frac{1}{2}$  GAship offer letter in the Fall.

#### **5. Guidelines for $\frac{1}{2}$ TAships**

- a. In certain circumstances, MCB offers students  $\frac{1}{2}$  TAships. However, as described in 1c above it is not obligated to do so as part of its commitment to Ph.D. student support.
- b. Faculty may request a  $\frac{1}{2}$  TAship by notifying the TA Assignment Committee. The Committee will then determine the availability of a  $\frac{1}{2}$  TA position or if there are other

requests for  $\frac{1}{2}$  TAships that might facilitate this request. The Committee may not be successful in finding such positions or requests. The sooner a request is made, the more likely the Committee will be able to accommodate it.

- c. Only certain courses can accommodate a  $\frac{1}{2}$  TAship (e.g., a TAship where students teach 3 sections cannot be split easily). Thus,  $\frac{1}{2}$  TAships will only be possible for a limited subset of MCB courses that may not match student preferences or expertise.
- d. MCB does not generally endorse students holding two  $\frac{1}{2}$  TAships in different courses. A student holding two  $\frac{1}{2}$  TAships could potentially perform more work than a student holding a single full TAship if the in-class hours are the same but the hours dedicated to other tasks that cannot be split (e.g., time spent in pre-lab meetings or trainings) differ. This would impose an undue burden on such a student and potentially violate their Graduate Student Union contract.

**Guidelines drafted by Jonathan Klassen (December 2024).**

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