

# Distinguishing Between Academic Progress and Assistantship Duties for GRAs, GAs, and RAs During a Work Stoppage

*Updated November 15, 2024*

## Purpose

Graduate students with assistantships are both active learners (students) and compensated service providers (workers). This memo offers guidance to support graduate students maintaining good academic standing when those students engage in a work stoppage. Academic progress refers to activities supporting fulfillment of degree requirements set forth by the student's academic program within a certain time period.

A graduate assistantship is a paid position that includes a service expectation that may also provide an opportunity for engagement in scholarly research for academic credit. Graduate research assistants (GRAs), graduate assistants (GAs), or research assistants (RAs) often perform research activities for credit in addition to their service responsibilities. The Graduate School's primary goals are to support best efforts for graduate students to sustain good academic progress, maintain productive relationships within research teams, and position graduate students for degree completion and long-term success.

As a reminder, graduate students funded through fellowships are not represented by the bargaining unit.

## The Dual Roles of Faculty

Many graduate students at Cornell University are both students completing the requirements of a degree program and employees with a GA, GRA, RA, or TA appointment who receive stipends and benefits in exchange for providing services to the university. Faculty serve as both academic advisors and mentors in the educational context and supervisors in the employment context.

In the case of GRAs, GAs, and RAs, the distinction between a graduate student's academic/degree completion requirements and their assistantship responsibilities may be intertwined given that the graduate student's academic goals often align with a faculty member's research aims.

## Practical Tips

In light of these dual roles that many graduate students hold, faculty should be mindful of their responsibilities to support the satisfactory academic progression of their graduate

students even when those graduate students engage in a work stoppage (e.g., strike) or other labor action. Here, we provide five practical tips.

## 1. Prioritize academic progress

Graduate workers are first and foremost students at Cornell University. Even when on strike, a graduate worker must maintain good academic progress towards their degree(s). This includes coming to classes they are registered for, completing academic assignments, taking exams, continuing research toward their dissertation, and meeting the relevant academic milestones determined by their academic program. Accordingly, faculty advisors and programs should establish clear and written guidance on academic requirements and milestones and communicate those expectations early and often.

Academic development and providing a high-quality educational experience should be the central focus, as well as preserving the faculty-student relationship. Graduate workers who choose to engage in a strike are still expected to fulfill their academic requirements and continue to make good academic progress.

Generally, the work/service requirements of an assistantship should not account for more than 15 hours per work week. A striking assistant, therefore, may withhold service duties for no more than 15 hours per work week. A striking assistant is still accountable for meeting academic requirements consistent with established (and preferably written) requirements and milestones.

In the event of a strike, bargaining unit members will attest daily to the work time they have completed. Typical research duties attestation only covers the assistantship appointment. It does not cover the research activities needed to continue to make academic progress.

Students will be asked to attest whether they have completed their typical job responsibilities for a specific time period (which could include leading a discussion or lab section, grading, or tutoring if they are in a teaching role or completing their typical research duties if they have a research assistantship) or a percentage thereof.

The [university's FAQs](#) and [Supervisor "TIPS"](#) provide guidance on what faculty can and cannot ask students with respect to strike participation.

## 2. Consistently assess academic progress

Faculty/research advisors and special committee members are in the best position to assess whether students are making good academic progress. You should preserve the pattern and tools of assessment that have historically been established within your research group. Continue your regular means of communications (e.g., weekly group meetings, regular 1:1 meetings, emails, etc.) It is important to judge academic progress in research for your graduate workers as you always have. This might include classroom

learning, participation in research meetings, collection of research data, and so forth. All advisors at Cornell are expected to complete an annual Student Progress Review (SPR) for their advisees during and after the student's second year in their program. In addition, some faculty may assess progress more frequently. For example, some faculty may assess academic progress by collecting weekly or biweekly progress reports from their students in written form or in 1:1 or group meetings; in this case, advisors should continue to assess academic (research) progress using their standard approach.

### 3. Acknowledge the need for professional judgment regarding a student's agency in managing their academic progression.

Compared to assistantship duties, academic work typically requires a greater degree of independence on the part of the graduate student; with faculty providing overarching guidance and mentorship. Students benefit from some flexibility in managing the specifics of their academic progress, so long as they comply with safety regulations and other shared expectations as a member of a research team. Cornell students are motivated to do great work. Allowing them to help define the tasks necessary for academic progress can lead to better outcomes and preserve the faculty-student relationship. On the other hand, dictating tasks too rigidly is unlikely to produce sustained benefits and undermined the student's agency in managing their academic success.

In contrast, paid assistantships may involve more direct supervision and specific instructions from faculty members on how and when to complete tasks in furtherance of the faculty member's sponsored research aims. The extent to which assistantship duties co-mingle with tasks associated with progress in academic research varies by field. For many Ph.D. students, the two are not fully separable, so reasonable judgment will be necessary. The best people to make these decisions are those closest to the work: the faculty member and the student.

When providing academic advising or assistantship supervision, faculty members must refrain from threatening, promising, interrogating or otherwise interfering with students' protected activities, including the decision to strike.

### 4. Communicate expectations for good academic progress

Faculty should have regular conversations with graduate students about academic progress and what tasks must be prioritized to maintain good standing. When thinking about these tasks, faculty should be clear about what is necessary for students to complete academic requirements. Topics include academic research activities, programs of study, classes and coursework. In any communication, the importance of maintaining a positive mentor-mentee relationship should be the priority. We encourage faculty to discuss these topics with their students throughout the semester, and to seek assistance from their field's Director of Graduate Studies, or the Graduate School, as they typically would in situations of extended absences or lack of progress for the student.

Cornell's [Faculty Advancing Inclusive Mentoring \(FAIM\)](#) program offers tools for mentoring, including a [Guide to Establish Research Group Shared Expectations](#), a [Mentor / Mentee Mentorship Expectations Scales Worksheet](#), and a [Mentoring Expectations Agreement Plan](#).

## 5. Embrace flexibility

The balance between academic work and assistantship duties will likely shift over time. While the split may be demarcated typically as 15 hours/week for students who are on an assistantship, the reality is that in some weeks a graduate student will focus more on their academic research progress, and in other weeks they may focus more on assistantship work duties. Flexibility and judgment should be used consistent with historical practices, to allow for an average of 15 hours/week for an RA, GA, GRA, or TA appointment. Similarly, for research progress, graduate students should plan for the time needed to meet milestone should be over a period of set time (e.g., within a semester, quarterly, or monthly) to allow for good degree progress. This flexibility is a normal part of the process, and local discretion based on past practice is key to navigating it effectively. Students may also have a partial assistantship appointment that is less than 50%, and division of effort and expectations should be prorated accordingly.