Roosevelt University Graduate Assistantship Program

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Introduction

The Office of Graduate Studies currently supports 39 full time graduate assistantships across the University, many of which are divided into half time and even third-time positions. In addition, some colleges and programs also support graduate assistantships. During the spring 2007 semester, 24 of the 48 students serving as either full- or part-time graduate assistants supported by the Office of Graduate Studies were interviewed about their experience with graduate assistantship program. The interviewees were currently serving as graduate assistants in the College of Arts and Sciences, the Walter E. Heller College of Business, the College of Education, and University College. Graduate assistants for the Office of the Provost and the Office of Admissions were also included in the interviews. Of the 24 interviewees, 10 were full time graduate assistants, working 17 hours per week; 13 were half time, working 9 hours each week; and one was one-third time, working 5 or 6 hours each week. The personal interviews were conducted either face to face or by telephone at the convenience of the interviewees.

In the interviews, graduate assistants were asked to describe their work hours, their positions, and the kinds of tasks they were expected to perform. They were asked to explain the benefits for themselves of being graduate assistants, both educationally and personally, as well as to make suggestions for improving their specific work situations and the graduate assistantship program in general.

Job Responsibilities of Graduate Assistants

The graduate assistants interviewed described having a variety of job responsibilities, among them clerical work, recruitment and advising of students, administration of the programs they were working for, tutoring, support for teaching, and research. Only a few of the students reported spending significant amounts of their working hours on clerical work, and of those, only one interviewee described her position as mostly (75%) clerical.

Several graduate assistants described their positions as partly or entirely devoted to recruitment of new students and advising of undergraduate students. As part of recruitment, these graduate assistants explained that they regularly responded to telephone calls and email messages from prospective students and met with them face to face to describe their programs and respond to questions from the prospective students. Graduate assistants who advised undergraduate students reported assisting the undergrads with deciding on majors, developing program plans, and course selection.

Graduate assistants whose work was administrative in nature described a variety of different tasks, depending on the needs of the departments or offices where they worked. These graduate assistants prepared reports for their programs or departments, assisted

with scheduling of classes, organized events, interacted with and scheduled guest speakers, developed and maintained websites, planned for publicity, monitored internship placements, and maintained regular communication with students during their internships.

Another group of graduate assistants reported spending at least half of their time tutoring undergraduate students. They provided tutoring in such areas as general mathematics, statistics, economics, and accounting.

About half of the graduate assistants noted that they spent significant amounts of time (ranging from 25% to 90%) supporting professors teaching. The specific tasks they described included preparing materials for classes; developing and proctoring exams; grading homework, quizzes and exams; and preparing laboratories and laboratory materials for students and cleaning up after lab classes.

Three fourths of the graduate assistants interviewed reported that at least a portion of their time was spent in research-related activities, and more than half described their jobs as 80% or more research. These graduate assistants conducted literature searches, investigated and sought permissions for use of research instruments, participated in the design of research instruments such as surveys and questionnaires, and recruited subjects for research. They also gathered data, input data, and transcribed interviews. A number of them also described being involved in the reporting of research, either writing it up themselves or writing with their faculty supervisors. A few of them also reported that they had authors or coauthored reports and papers that were either published or presented at professional meetings.

Benefits of the Graduate Assistantship Program

Graduate assistants were asked to describe whether their graduate assistantship benefited them in terms of enhanced learning and personally. All of the interviewees agreed that there were many benefits to being a graduate assistant and described both academic benefits and personal benefits.

Academic benefits. Interviewees described a myriad of ways they have benefited academically from being graduate assistants. The benefits for them included

- having additional contact with professors, and thus opportunities for extended learning;
- developing mentor relationships with professors;
- having "actual experience in the field," seeing real world applications of what they had been studying in classes, and enacting what they had been studying in a real context; as one student said, being immersed in the subject she is studying is helping her to think like a professional in the field;
- becoming more well-rounded in their subject areas and being able "to fit the pieces together;"

- learning through tutoring, both because of having to review material learned earlier and having to explain that material to someone else—"When I teach, I learn the material better;"
- improving their technology skills in general, and in particular those technology skills needed for research, for web applications, and for research software such as SPSS:
- extending learning about their own subject area through doing research for and with their supervising professor;
- expanding learning about research in general, and more specifically, research methodology, processes, and techniques;
- seeing the University from a different way, and understanding it as a system;
- opportunities to work with and teach students, experience that will be important as they continue on into PhD programs;
- opportunities for writing research, individually, and collaboratively with a professor; and
- opportunities to present at professional meetings and conferences and to publish their work.

Personal benefits. The graduate assistants interviewed also described a number of ways that they were benefiting personally from the graduate assistantship program, not the least of which was the stipend they were earning and the tuition benefits. Several of the interviewees noted that without their graduate assistantship, they would not be graduate students. One interviewee spoke for many when she said, "It's the only way I can afford to go to grad school."

Beyond the financial benefit, though, the graduate assistants interviewed saw many additional benefits to their being in the graduate assistantship program. These benefits include:

- job experience;
- experience with multitasking and meeting deadlines;
- experience in a multicultural setting, which provides the opportunity to work with people from a variety of backgrounds;
- a sense of responsibility;
- a sense of being appreciated and contributing to the department in which they work:
- opportunities for networking;
- an addition to a resume or vita that looks great; and
- mentoring from faculty that "helps to get your name out there."

Every graduate assistant interviewed described his or her experience in the graduate assistantship program as positive and beneficial both academically and personally. One interesting note is that the graduate assistant who described the job responsibilities to be mostly clerical cited expanded technology learning as a benefit, through having integrated designed and integrated graphics into a large project completed for the program and supervisor!

Suggestions for Improving the Graduate Assistantship Program

Interviewees were invited to evaluate the graduate assistantship program in general and to provide constructive feedback about the program. While more than half of the interviewees reported the program to be working well for them as it was, several made suggestions for improvement.

Some of the improvements suggested related to specific placements and job assignments. Those included such things as "having more clearly defined objectives and knowledge of how the work fits into the bigger picture" and having a department policy about who was entitled to tutoring and how much tutoring could be provided to individual students, given that there was a waiting list for tutoring. One graduate assistant would have liked less clerical work (not the one who described the job as 75% clerical), and said, "We could be doing so much more."

Other suggestions related to the graduate assistantship in general. Included were suggestions about procedure as well as substance. A number of graduate assistants noted having difficulty with financial aid, the business office, and getting the paperwork processed; they suggested that the communication process among the Offices of Graduate Studies, Human Resources, and Financial Aid be improved to avoid such confusion.

Some graduate assistants recommended that more thought be given to providing guidelines and structure for the supervisors of graduate assistants, both in terms of selection of supervisors and in how to work with graduate assistants. Some suggested that supervisors should be selected because they are willing to mentor their graduate assistants rather than to act as "bosses." Others suggested matching student and supervisor professional interests, to ensure that graduate assistants have opportunities to work in their areas of professional interest.

Several graduate assistants expressed concern that the departments they worked in hired graduate assistants for a semester or a year, but not for the entire length of their programs. They suggested that graduate assistants be allowed to continue in the graduate assistantship program with the same supervisors for their entire programs, both for financial purpose and for continuity in the projects in which they worked.

Other recommendations included the provision of office space to graduate assistants, allowing graduate assistants to earn course credit for the research that they do with their supervisors, making the graduate assistantship a full-time position with benefits so that graduate assistants would not have to work other jobs, having opportunities to teach, and having enough graduate assistantships so that every professor had a graduate assistant.

Several graduate assistants suggested that there be a University-wide graduate assistantship orientation each semester for new graduate assistants. Some also suggested that colleges or departments organize activities for graduate assistants to network together.

Summary

The graduate assistants who were interviewed viewed the Roosevelt University graduate assistantship program to be a positive experience that both contributes to their academic experience at the University and has benefits for them personally. For the majority of the graduate assistants interviewed, the work that they do as graduate assistants involves immersion into the real world of their academic fields, providing them with opportunities to participate in their academic fields with mentoring from experts in those fields, to observe the conduct of and participate in conducting research, and to learn about teaching in their academic fields.

All of the interviewees described their work experiences in the graduate assistantship program as enhancing their learning, and many described how their graduate assistantship experience would benefit them as they continued their educations at the PhD level or as they entered or continued in the world of work.

Every interviewee also described a number of personal benefits from the graduate assistantship program. Included in each interviewee's list of personal benefits was the stipend and tuition benefit, without which some would not be graduate students.

Graduate Assistantship Program Actions

Based on the feedback from the graduate assistants interviewed, the Office of Graduate Studies might do the following:

- Meet with representatives of Human Resources, Financial Aid, and the Business
 Office to develop a plan for better communication relative to the graduate
 assistantship program and a more efficient process for their hiring;
- Form a committee of graduate assistants and supervisors of graduate assistants to develop guidelines for graduate assistants and supervisors of graduate assistants;
- Organize an orientation for new graduate assistants and their supervisors, to be offered each semester:
- Investigate the plausibility of increasing the number of graduate assistants, improving the compensation for graduate assistants, and offering them graduate assistantships that continue throughout their graduate programs; and
- Solicit feedback from graduate assistants about the graduate assistantship program on a regular basis.