

Physics Memorandum

To: Physics Faculty and Graduate Students
From: Nicholas J. Giordano
Date: January 14, 2013
Ref: Policy for Supporting Department Graduate Teaching Assistants

Background

Most graduate students in Physics are supported as graduate teaching assistants (TAs) during some portion of their time at Purdue. In many cases, a student is supported as a TA until he or she is certified (passes the qualifier exam and finishes core courses), which typically takes two years. At that time students should join a research group and begin thesis research, signified by enrolling in the course PHYS 699. From that point on, the student will, in most cases, be supported on grant funds as a research assistant (RA). The purpose of this memo is to describe policies pertaining to students in research groups in which such an RA appointment is not available.

Goals of the policy

I certainly understand that it will not be possible to find RA support for all students in all circumstances. As a result, there will probably always be some number of students who spend their entire graduate student career as a TA. On the other hand, I believe that it is to the benefit of both students and the department that the number of such students should be small. The policies described below have the goal of (1) encouraging students to complete their Ph.D.s in a timely manner, (2) encourage faculty to be more aggressive in seeking support for their Ph.D. students, (3) preventing any particular faculty member from overusing the privilege of supporting their thesis students as TAs on department funds, (4) allotting the available TA support for PHYS 699 students to those working in areas that are important to the department and for which adequate external funding is not currently available, and (5) maintaining the flexibility needed to deal fairly with special cases.

For students joining a research group.

(1) When a graduate student signs up for his or her first semester of PHYS 699, I will expect that the student will be supported henceforth as an RA.

(2) If a PHYS 699 student wants to be supported as a TA, the student and advisor must apply to the Head for an “exception” to point #1. This application could take the form of a paragraph or two describing plans for obtaining RA funding in the near future and the funding arrangements for the advisor’s other Ph.D. students and post-docs. An acceptable reason for an exception might be that a more senior member of the group is about to graduate, which would then open up an RA position for the student in question, and thus the TA support is a temporary measure. Another acceptable reason for granting an exception might be that there are proposals either submitted or planned that would support the student as an RA.

(3) If the faculty advisor in question currently has two or more PHYS 699 students supported as TAs, it is very unlikely that an exception will be granted. Likewise, if the faculty member is using grant funding to support multiple post-docs while choosing not to support any RAs, it is unlikely that an exception will be granted.

(4) Exceptions will be granted at the discretion of the Head in consultation with the Associate Heads. Indications that there is a feasible plan for obtaining funding for an RA position would greatly increase the probability that an exception would be granted.

(5) If an exception is not granted and a student still chooses to join the research group, the student will immediately lose department support.

Time limits

(6) Students who have been supported as TAs are not guaranteed this support forever. TA support will be limited to a maximum of six years after a student first enrolls in the graduate program, so long as the student remains in good standing (i.e., completing the prelim exam by the deadline set by the Graduate Committee, etc.). At the end of this time, the student may be offered support as a 1/4 time TA (which gives full tuition but half the normal TA salary) for an additional year, after which all departmental financial support may end. Exceptions to these time limits will likely be granted to students who change advisors after their third year in the graduate program, or in similar situations.

(7) All students who are in their sixth year or beyond will be reviewed for continued support. Priority for continued support will be given to those who have had some period(s) of RA support before being supported as TAs during later years. The time limits for TA support described above in #6 will then be extended by an amount to be determined on a case by case basis taking into consideration time at Purdue and time supported as an RA.

Final comments

The broad goals of the policies described above should be clear. There may be ways that people try to circumvent the obvious intent of these policies. Rather than attempt to close every potential loophole explicitly in this policy document, it is my hope that we deal with these using judgment and common sense. If that approach does not work, we can revisit this policy document at a later date.