

Graduate Funding: Employment and Compensation

Effective Autumn 2026

Introduction

This document defines policies for employment and compensation of graduate-level academic student employees (ASEs) in the Department of Astronomy at the University of Washington.

Student Employment and Scholarship

Graduate students in the Astronomy Department are not only students, but also frequently part-time employees of the University. Through employment, the University offers a way for students to offset graduate program tuition and costs of living, while simultaneously providing opportunities for additional training.

Although they are often similar in the type of work performed, the roles of student and employee are formally distinct; they are governed by different sets of rules and expectations. One is a student-mentor relationship, while the other is an employee-employer contract. Scholarship towards the completion of the Ph.D. is governed by policies set by The Graduate School. Work performed as employees is governed by a contract between the University of Washington and UAW. This document concerns the latter, employee role^{1,2}.

General Definitions

It is important for ASEs to familiarize themselves with the provisions of the UAW ASE union contract prior to accepting their appointments. Both the student and the Astronomy Department are legally bound by the terms of this contract, which, among other things, sets minimum pay rates, maximum hours worked and vacation time policies. When appointed as an ASE, a student will be offered an opportunity to join UAW. As members, students will pay dues each pay period. If a student should choose not to become a member, the contract requires that they pay a service fee each pay period. The dues or service fee are withheld from ASEs' twice-monthly paychecks.

ASE Graduate Assistantships

An appointment as a Teaching Assistant (TA) or Research Assistant (RA) or Graduate Staff Assistant (GSA) classifies one as an Academic Student Employee (ASE). ASE employment is contingent on being enrolled at the University. The minimum registration in order to hold an ASE appointment is 10 credits during the regular academic year and 2 credits during summer Quarter³.

Supervisors

Every ASE appointment letter will contain the name of an Astronomy department supervisor who is responsible for making sure that the required duties of the position are carried out. Both faculty and staff can serve in these supervisory positions, and ASEs with multiple appointments may have multiple supervisors. Generally, for TA ASEs, the supervisor is the course instructor. For RA ASEs, the supervisor is often a faculty member who is the funding grant's principal investigator. In many cases, an ASE's supervisor is different from their faculty advisor, whose primary responsibility is to ensure that satisfactory academic progress is maintained and that relevant milestones are achieved along the path to a Ph.D.

Full-time Equivalent (FTE)

Work expectations for all appointments are listed as percentages of "Full Time Equivalent," or FTE, for short. Federal and State governments are in the practice of characterizing workloads as fractions of the FTE, equivalent to the total number of hours worked divided by the maximum number of compensable hours in a full-time schedule as defined by a contract. Because the University of Washington is a (partially) state-funded institution, it reports employee workloads as FTEs.

The UW/UAW contract with Academic Student Employees (ASE) stipulates that the standard 50% FTE appointment will consist of 220 hours of assigned work per quarter. By extension, the maximum number of compensable hours in a full-time schedule is 440 hours per quarter, which is approximately 40 hours per week in a typical ~11-week quarter. **50% FTE appointments therefore reflect an expectation of approximately 20 hours per week devoted to tasks associated with being an ASE at the University of Washington.**

Time spent employed as an ASE is employment, separate from hours spent as a student completing academic requirements, and not guaranteed⁴ to be directly contributing to one's Ph.D. studies. A graduate student registered for 10 credits⁵ during the academic quarter (the minimum required) is expected to spend roughly 30 hours per week on either coursework or research relevant to their Ph.D. thesis work, irrespective of any part-time employment. **Benchmark RA appointments are therefore necessarily part-time, at 50% FTE level during the academic quarters and 65% during the summer**, so as to leave sufficient time for students to make progress through their degree requirements.

Departmental Policies

Funding Sources

We are committed to providing astronomy graduate students financial support for the first six years of their program, contingent on available funding, and provided that satisfactory academic progress⁶ and position requirements⁷ are met. Graduate students who exceed six years in the program will remain eligible for funding, with decisions on appointment type and funding source made on a case-by-case basis. Funding for Teaching Assistantships comes from the State, while funding for

Research Assistantships comes from faculty research grants (which may have specific deliverables to the funding agency), or through Fellowships or Traineeships from National, private, or foreign agencies, the Astronomy Department, or the Graduate School.

Academic Year Funding (9 months, September 16 - June 15)

During fall, winter, and spring quarters, all Astronomy RA and TA ASEs are employed at 50% FTE using the Astronomy Department variable compensation rates given below.

Work as an ASE is ideally aligned with developing skill sets relevant to students' future career paths and/or advancing their Ph.D. theses. As all graduate students are simultaneously enrolled in 10 credits during each quarter of the 9-month academic year (with each credit roughly equivalent to 3 study hours per week), a 50% FTE appointment allows Ph.D. students sufficient time to learn and train independently of their appointment type.

Additional part-time employment is possible as a Graduate Staff Assistant⁸ (GSA). GSAs performing administrative work for the department are paid at the Astronomy variable rate (beginning Winter 2024). These positions typically carry a 10 - 15% FTE appointment. Workload, position availability, appointment lengths, and job descriptions will vary, but every GSA position will have a faculty or staff supervisor.

Summer Funding

Although summer support is not guaranteed after the first year,⁹ Astronomy graduate students often find summer support through a combination of Research Assistantships, Teaching Assistantships, Trainee Assistantships, and Fellowships for two to three months of the Summer quarter. We strongly encourage all graduate students to talk with their faculty advisors, the graduate program coordinator, and/or academic advisors about their Summer funding options by the end of Winter quarter (early March) every year. The Department, in collaboration with the advisors and faculty PIs, makes every effort to find summer appointments for Astronomy department graduate students.

1. Summer Teaching Assistantship appointments are at 50% FTE (20 hrs. per week) for two months (four pay periods, from June 16 to August 15), as budgeted by summer quarter. Summer TA positions also include a 20% supplement to the base-rate salary, per union contract. This supplement is paid as an allowance in Workday during the summer quarter payroll dates and the 20% is added to your base salary rate. For example, for a premaster making \$3197 a month, the 20% allowance would be an additional \$639.40 for two months.
 - **Summer Pay Gap for TAs:** Note that autumn quarter funding begins on September 16, so a pay gap between summer and autumn exists for all TA appointments. Students supported as summer TAs may choose to take vacation time during this pay gap.
 - Depending on funding availability, it may be possible to receive additional RA funding from a faculty PI to supplement the gap period. Any supplemental funding or appointments may not result in the student receiving more total FTE or salary than they would have received as a three-month summer-quarter RA.

2. Research Assistantship appointments during the summer quarter are typically 65% FTE (26 hrs. per week) for 3 months (June 16-September 15) and depend on the availability of funding.

Maximum Allowable FTE

The maximum allowable combined FTE for any ASE in Astronomy - including graduate student RAs, TAs and GSAs, and any combination of those roles - is **70% during the academic year and 85% during the summer**. Accordingly, a student can concurrently hold multiple ASE appointments if the combination of appointments does not exceed the maximum allowable FTE. These caps ensure that students are reasonably able to spend the minimum time required by the graduate school on scholarship and learning outside of the compensable hours. Thus, ASEs cannot hold a full-time appointment (100% FTE) within the Astronomy department. This is to:

- Ensure appropriate separation of employment and academic responsibilities.
- Ensure reasonable pay equality for Astronomy Department ASEs
- Ensure RAs are not burdened with excessive employment duties that interfere with academic performance and progress.

In addition, the Astronomy department strongly encourages spending more time than the Graduate School minimums on scholarship and training outside of the compensable hours but recognizes that some students will be in situations that require them to work more as part of their ASE summer appointment.

Requests for RAs to exceed the summer benchmark of 65% (up to maximum allowable 85% FTE) may be considered in exceptional circumstances. Exceptional circumstances in this context means unforeseen challenges that result in a significant hardship for the ASE.¹⁰ Requests for exceptions to the benchmark summer RA rate must be sent via email to the Graduate Program Coordinator and will be reviewed by Department Leadership, (Chair, Associate Chair(s), GPC, and Head Administrator). Note, the Astronomy department will not consider requests to increase academic-year RA and TA FTE appointments; those are set at 50%.

International Students on F-1 Visas

International students on F-1 visas should be aware that U.S. immigration regulations limit employment to a maximum of 20 hours per week during the academic year. Since a 50% FTE RA or TA appointment is equivalent to 20 hours per week, students on F-1 visas who wish to take on additional GSA or other concurrent appointments may need to obtain Curricular Practical Training (CPT) authorization through International Student Services (ISS).

Students requiring CPT will need to enroll in a designated practicum course (typically 1 credit of ASTR 598 or the equivalent) and apply for CPT authorization through the ISS portal each quarter they hold the additional eligible appointment. The CPT process requires an offer letter, proof of enrollment in the practicum course, and departmental approval.

Important consideration: If a student is authorized for 12 months or more of full-time CPT (more than 20 hours per week), they will no longer be eligible for Optional Practical Training (OPT) after graduation. Part-time CPT (20 hours per week or less) does not count toward the 12-month threshold and should not affect OPT eligibility, according to federal regulations. However, students should be aware that U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS) reviews an applicant's entire CPT history when determining OPT eligibility. Students should carefully consider their future post-graduation employment plans when deciding whether to pursue additional appointments requiring CPT authorization during their studies. Students should consult with the Graduate Program Coordinator and ISS well in advance of accepting any additional appointments to ensure compliance with visa regulations and to understand the potential impact on future OPT eligibility.

Note that these restrictions apply during the standard academic quarter dates (including finals week) as defined by the UW academic calendar. Different rules may apply during official break periods and summer quarter. International students should always consult with ISS regarding their specific circumstances.

Pay Rates

The Astronomy Department faculty set the standard compensation rates for graduate students in the department, paying RAs and TAs equally to reflect their equal value to the department.

An ASE employed as an RA is always paid at the salary rate applicable to their home academic department, no matter where on campus they are employed as an RA. This is a policy set by the Graduate School.¹¹ For example, if a Physics graduate student is employed as an RA in Astronomy, they would be paid at the RA rate defined by Physics, not Astronomy. However, an ASE employed as a TA is paid at the salary rate applicable to the department in which they are serving as a TA.

ASE salary rates for Astronomy graduate students are as follows (effective July 1, 2026 - June 30, 2027):

Astronomy Graduate Salary Table

Effective July 1, 2026

Graduate Status	Qualification	Schedule 1 Rate (50% FTE)
Premaster	Pre-Qualifying Exam	\$3,612/mo
Intermediate	Post-Qualifying Exam / Post-Master (completed the master's degree or equivalent in Astronomy)	\$3,794/mo
Candidate	Post-General Exam	\$3,984/mo

Compensation rates, schedules, policies and tables for the University of Washington are available [here](#).

Increases to salary based on changes to Graduate levels and positions (i.e., passing general exam and becoming a "candidate") are effective the following quarter unless it occurs prior to the first payroll run (typically first week of the quarter).

Quarterly Payroll Dates:

- Autumn: September 16–December 15
- Winter: December 16–March 15
- Spring: March 16–June 15
- Summer (RAs): June 16–September 15
- Summer (TAs): June 16–August 15

Although class schedules do not align with the payroll quarter dates, all ASE RA and TA appointments follow these appointment dates. Therefore, all ASEs should refer to the payroll quarter dates to plan for the start and end dates of their appointments.

Tuition and Benefits

Graduate student academic-year monthly compensation includes health insurance coverage, a fully-subsidized U-PASS and three academic quarters of operating fee (tuition) payment. ASEs are eligible for medical, dental, and vision insurance under the Graduate Appointee Insurance Plan for ASEs and their dependents, described on the UW Human Resources website. Regardless of their appointment during the summer, all ASEs that have been employed at 50% FTE or higher for the 9-month academic year will receive health insurance coverage over the summer, as well as payment of the operating fee (tuition).

While the bulk of a graduate student tuition is covered through ASE appointments, students will be responsible for paying approximately \$265 each quarter in required fees (Services and Activities Fee, Intramural Athletics Building Bond Fee, and Facilities Renovation Fee; 2023-24 rate).

Thus, in addition to salary, the compensation of an ASE includes:

- Academic Year Tuition: \$5946 per quarter (2023-24 academic year rates)
- Summer Tuition: \$1760 (2-credit enrollment; Summer 2024 rates)
- Benefits: 18.2% of Salary

Total Annual Compensation and Salary for Pre-Masters ASEs

Based on the Astronomy variable pay rates, including tuition and benefits, and assuming a 3-month summer RA appointment, the total annual compensation of a Pre-Masters ASE in the Astronomy department is approximately \$67,787 per year for the 2023-2024 period. Thus, after tuition and benefits are paid, this corresponds to a pre-tax take-home pay of \$41,241 per year for the same period.

Vacation/Paid Leave Policy

RAs and TAs are entitled to one (1) week of paid vacation time per quarter. Please refer to the UAW ASE Contract Article 32 for policies and procedures around taking vacation time. As specified in the contract, "vacation time off shall be taken during academic quarter breaks, except when used as a Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML) supplemental benefit, or as otherwise mutually agreed to by the ASE and a supervisor." The Astronomy Department requires that any vacation or paid leave time taken during the instructional or final exam period of a quarter be requested and approved in writing by your supervisor in advance of the absence. Approval is at the discretion of the ASE's supervisor.

TA ASEs are frequently balancing research with teaching, and, in general, the Astronomy department strongly encourages the continued pursuit of research opportunities while serving as a TA. Thus, there is a shared understanding among Astronomy faculty and supervisors that TAs may need to travel (e.g. to conferences or for telescope observing runs) for their Ph.D. thesis work during the instructional period. TAs with such plans are strongly encouraged to communicate early with their supervisors to find a mutually agreeable solution (preferably at, or even before, the time of their TA appointment). Ultimately, it remains the responsibility of the TA to find coverage for any missed sections or other work associated with the duties of being a TA, and approval of these absences is at the full discretion of the supervisor.

Remote Work Policy

An ASE may be able to arrange a schedule with their supervisor that allows them to work from home or from another non-University of Washington location, away from the usual workplace through telecommunications technology.¹² A position's suitability for remote work is based on operational needs and the duties and responsibilities of the position as defined in the ASE position description. Approval to work remotely is granted at the discretion of the supervisor. If remote work is a practical option for an ASE, we encourage supervisors to develop a remote work agreement with their ASEs to enable a clear, shared understanding of how and when work expectations will be met.

Top-off Funding Opportunities

Students may receive fellowships/external funding to support their graduate work from a variety of sources. In cases where an Astronomy student receives external or UW (non-departmental) Fellowship/Scholarship funding that provides an amount less than the student would be paid as an RA at the standard benchmark rates, the department will automatically consider them for top-off funding for the difference between a standard 50% RA appointment in the Department of Astronomy and their fellowship stipend.

This is a need-based award. The award amount may be less than the full difference based on considerations of additional sources of funding. Top-off funding is subject to available funding¹³ and a quarterly review of the student's additional resources. All additional sources of funding available to the student will be considered when determining award amount. Top-off funding is not guaranteed.

To maintain eligibility for Top-off Funding:

1. The student must report and provide documentation of all external fellowship/scholarship funding which totals less than the salary of an Astronomy Department RA during the same quarter as the Top-off Funding.
2. The student must be enrolled and in good academic standing during the same quarter as the Top-off Funding.
3. The student must report all sources of UW and external fellowship/scholarship funding, including compensation, to their faculty supervisor each quarter.
4. For students holding concurrent GSA appointments at 10% FTE or above: Top-off funding may be awarded to bring total compensation (fellowship + GSA appointment + top-off) up to a maximum of 60% FTE equivalent, rather than the standard 50% FTE benchmark. This recognizes the additional work performed in staff positions while maintaining reasonable limits on total compensation.

Examples of external funding sources:

- NSF Fellowship
- Space Grant Fellowship/Scholarship Opportunities
- NASA FINESST

Fellowships and Additional Compensation

Students on external fellowships may hold concurrent appointments subject to their fellowship's terms and applicable FTE limits.

Teaching Assistantships: Fellowship holders are eligible for TA positions. In TA selection, we do not prioritize fellows, but may assign them when needed to meet instructional needs. TA compensation follows standard departmental rates.

Staff Appointments: Small GSA appointments (typically 10% FTE) are permissible and may be beneficial for professional development. Students with concurrent GSA appointments remain eligible for need-based top-off funding as described above.

Advisor Supplements: To maintain equitable compensation across the graduate student population, advisor-funded supplements beyond departmental benchmarks are generally discouraged. Variations in advisor funding levels should not create disparities in student compensation. In limited circumstances where a small, well-defined appointment serves a clear educational or programmatic purpose, such arrangements may be permitted with documentation to the Graduate Program Coordinator.

Fellowship Restrictions: Some fellowships have strict requirements regarding concurrent funding—for example, certain federal fellowships do not permit fellows to receive additional compensation from federal research grants. Advisors and students should work with department administration to understand all applicable restrictions and ensure policy compliance before arranging any additional appointments or supplements.

Different fellowships have different stacking rules; this policy does not attempt to list all permissible combinations. Students are responsible for understanding and complying with their fellowship terms.

Footnotes:

¹ As part of the Ph.D. degree program, the Astronomy department requires students to serve as TAs for at least three academic quarters. Upon meeting this requirement, students are not obligated to serve as ASEs during the pursuit of their Ph.D. at the University of Washington. External internships, employment, traineeships and/or fellowships that are not administered through UW payroll are possible, although students must maintain 10-credits of enrollment, and would be responsible for paying their own tuition. Information about benefit eligibility in the case of external employment may be found here:

<https://hr.uw.edu/benefits/insurance/health/graduate-appointees/gaip-information-departments/>

² Additional work/consulting outside of the University of Washington is permitted for ASEs under certain circumstances, and is governed by Administrative Policy Statement 47.3.

³ In exceptional circumstances, students may petition for reduced enrollment.

⁴ The Astronomy Department tries hard to match student RAs to projects maximally aligned with a student's thesis, usually funded through the faculty advisor's grant.

⁵ <https://www.washington.edu/students/reg/credit.html>

⁶ Set by the UW Graduate School: <https://grad.uw.edu/policies/3-7-academic-performance-and-progress/>

⁷ As outlined in job descriptions and offer letters

⁸ <https://grad.uw.edu/graduate-student-funding/assistantships/>

⁹ Summer support is guaranteed for first-year students, according to their offer letters.

¹⁰ The purpose of this broad exceptional circumstances statement is to allow the department to exercise its discretion when alleviating any unforeseen or unconventional hardship faced by an ASE.

¹¹ Variable Rate Compensation Policy for Research Assistants given at the bottom of this page.

¹² For ASEs who are taking classes and/or serving as TAs, we note that instructors are not obligated to provide hybrid options.

¹³ Fellowships and Scholarships may also have restrictions on whether top-off funding is permissible and/or what kind of top-off funding is allowable.