

From the Graduate Student Perspective

Motivation

- No policy at department or University level to protect Research Assistant (RA) benefits, student status, or tuition remission in case of leave
- Previous leave negotiated between each student and advisor individually – undue burden on both parties
- Create modern working environment by supporting RAs and their medical and family choices



From the Graduate Student Perspective

Goals

- Guarantee paid leave (regardless of advisor or funding situation) in case of serious illness and/or disability for an RA or his/her dependent
- Grant RAs twelve weeks of paid parental leave



From the Graduate Student Perspective

Policy

[http://www.astro.wisc.edu/grad-students/policies-procedures/
medical-and-family-leave-policy/](http://www.astro.wisc.edu/grad-students/policies-procedures/medical-and-family-leave-policy/)

- Twelve weeks of leave allowed for serious medical issues or for the birth or adoption of a child
- Leave length retains student status, tuition remission, and health benefits
- Individual leave plan developed during meeting with student, advisor, department chair, and student coordinator



From the Graduate Student Perspective

“Bottom-Up” Approach

- Started with the graduate students
- Wanted to present a full-fledged policy to the faculty
- Took proactive approach and tried to anticipate major hurdles to reduce time to implementation



From the Graduate Student Perspective

“Bottom-Up” Approach

- Identify faculty partners
- Learn about University policy and procedures
- Involve department staff



From the Graduate Student Perspective

“Bottom-Up” Approach

- Anticipate possible bureaucratic and procedural hurdles and do creative problem solving in advance

Possible roadblocks:

- Funding source
- Policy language use (we used FMLA wording)
 - Maintaining student enrollment status



From the Graduate Student Perspective

“Bottom-Up” Approach

- Presented policy to faculty at department meeting for discussion and feedback
- Collaborated on fine-tuning policy, especially for pre-dissertator status students
- Although it started with students, both students and faculty had ownership of the policy



From the Graduate Student Perspective

“Bottom-Up” Approach

- Department approval!
- Sent to University legal – approved with flying colors
- Policy in place since April 2010 (6 month process)



From the Chair's Perspective

Preamble

Graduate student-led initiative

Broad faculty/senior scientist support

(Faculty contributors to graduate student committee)



From the Chair's Perspective

University-Specific Issues

Research Assistants are not unionized (TA's are)

RA's are not University employees,
("primarily for the benefit of the student's course of study")
so not under FMLA

No campus policy for RA's
=> departmental solution



From the Chair's Perspective

Approach

Self-insurance using department funds

Private funds are the financial backstop

(Unplanned outcome of major fundraising initiatives of last 5 years)



From the Chair's Perspective

Approach: Key Drivers

34% appointment required for health insurance

Strict Effort Certification precludes Federal funds



From the Chair's Perspective

Approach: Financial

\$7300/12 wks for salary, benefits, tuition remission

Anticipate average of one instance per 5 years



From the Chair's Perspective

Approach: Enrollment

Students must be enrolled and in good standing
for 34% appt

Non-Dissertators – 3 credits of research or reading course

Dissertators – 3 credits of research = 135 hours over semester

Academic deadlines extended by duration of leave



From the Chair's Perspective

University Legal Review

Sailed through, with compliments regarding

No gender distinctions in benefits

Legality of funding approach



From the Chair's Perspective

Experience to Date

No instance since April 2010

A positive in graduate student recruitment

Now exploring Post-Doctoral equivalent(s)

(ask Ben Brown during question session!)

