Graduate Student Leave of Absence, Sick Leave, and Vacation Leave Policy

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Whereas the Admission to the Graduate School policy (located at https://catalog.olemiss.edu/graduate-school/admission) requires that students who are not enrolled for any fall or spring term revert to the status of applicant, this Leave of Absence policy allows for a temporary disruption of regular enrollment without the student’s status converting to that of applicant. Leave from assistantships is not considered a Leave of Absence, and the Leave of Absence exclusively refers to leave from the academic program during a semester in which the student would normally have been enrolled.

The Leave of Absence is taken for personal reasons and does not begin until officially approved by the Graduate School. A Leave of Absence must be approved prior to the start of the Leave of Absence except in cases of medical or psychological emergencies.

Eligibility: The Leave of Absence is available to any student in good standing and requires graduate program and departmental approval. The graduate program and departmental approval implies that the individual is still a graduate student in the program (though they will not be currently active/enrolled during the Leave of Absence). Thus, it is expected that programs/departments recommending a Leave of Absence fully intend for the student to resume their graduate studies at the conclusion of the Leave of Absence. If a student who is not in good standing (e.g., who is on probation) is granted a Leave of Absence, the program and/or the Graduate School may require specific conditions to be met prior to the return from the Leave of Absence.

Program Progression and Institutional Resources: A student on a Leave of Absence will not be enrolled in courses and thus, will not have access to University services (e.g., recreational facilities, library services). Similarly, a student on a Leave of Absence cannot make progress towards degree completion, including completion of required coursework, program milestones, or other degree requirements. As such, a student cannot be approved for a Leave of Absence if they are working to finish requirements related to an incomplete or intend to enroll in courses that count towards their graduate degree requirements at another institution. Students who are not enrolled cannot receive financial aid from the University of Mississippi during the disruption of enrollment nor can they hold a graduate assistantship.

Relation to Continuous Enrollment Requirement: Students on an approved Leave of Absence will not be subjected to the continuous enrollment policy during the approved period. In addition, they will not be retrospectively billed tuition for semesters entirely within the period of approved absence. In general, a Leave of Absence will start prior to the first date of a term and cover the full duration of the term. In all cases, the student should enroll in credit hours consistent with the Continuous Enrollment requirement for the term immediately following the end of the approved Leave of Absence to avoid the Penalty Clause related to continuous enrollment.
**Loan Repayment Consequences:** Students who wish to pursue an approved Leave of Absence should be aware that the Leave of Absence counts against the grace period on loan repayment. As such, lenders may require repayment of loans during the period of disrupted enrollment.

**Maximum Length of Leave of Absence:** A Leave of Absence can be approved for up to one year. Extensions for up to one additional year may be approved by the Graduate School with a recommendation from the Graduate Program Coordinator.

**Effects on Time-to-Degree Requirements and Committed Financial Support:** Any requirements for time-to-degree established by the program and/or Graduate School are paused during the approved Leave of Absence such that the time during which the student’s study is disrupted is not counted as time working toward the degree. Similarly, a student who takes an approved Leave of Absence shall have access to any promised financial support such as scholarships (provided the student is in good standing) upon their return. This access to promised financial support does not imply an increase in the total amount of the award; rather, it protects the student from losing the financial award due to the Leave of Absence. However, there is no requirement that a unit “hold” an assistantship position open for a student who is on an approved Leave of Absence except when an offer of assistantship was part of the written recruitment offer from the academic program. In the latter circumstances, the exact nature of the assistantship may change (e.g., a student may be provided a graduate research assistantship when they previously held a graduate teaching assistantship), but the unit making the offer letter will meet the spirit of the offer provided the student was in good standing at the time they took the Leave of Absence.

**Ending the Leave of Absence:** At the end of the predetermined period specified in the approved Leave of Absence, the student will be expected to enroll in courses and resume their graduate studies. Should a student opt not to enroll in the term immediately after the conclusion of the Leave of Absence and not receive approval for an extension of the Leave of Absence, the student will revert to the status of applicant, following the policies specified in the catalog for graduate admissions.

**SICK LEAVE**

Whereas unexpected illness can and does affect employees, graduate assistants require access to support when they encounter illness. In addition, the University discourages individuals who are ill and contagious from reporting to work where others might be exposed.

In general, graduate assistants who must miss work (specific to their assistantship) should ensure responsibilities are covered and make up missed hours. For example, graduate assistants with teaching responsibilities should work to ensure course content is sufficiently covered despite their need to be absent during a scheduled course meeting. Such efforts may be achieved through make-up instruction (which could be delivered remotely and asynchronously) or through use of guest instructors. In other situations, the graduate assistant whose work occurs outside of a specific course meeting time may make up missed hours.
In some cases, the nature of the illness is sufficiently severe that more extensive leave is needed. When there is sufficient documentation from medical providers, supervisors should allow a graduate assistant up to two weeks of sick leave per academic year. In such cases, work that occurs outside of a specific course meeting time would not need to be made up. For graduate assistants with instructional responsibilities, supervisors will assist in identifying strategies to ensure the coverage of course content. Graduate assistants must provide documentation from a medical provider to support their need for sick leave.

Graduate assistants who must be absent for longer than two weeks due to illness may be asked to make up additional missed time at the discretion of the supervisor. The need for such an additional absence must be documented by a medical provider.

**VACATION LEAVE**

Graduate assistants do not normally have paid vacation leave. However, graduate assistants who must work on University holidays when the institution is closed must be given time off equivalent to time worked. That time off shall be used during the normal work week. Times when the University is open but classes are not in session (e.g., Spring Break) do not constitute holidays and are not eligible for accumulation of paid leave. Graduate assistantships that routinely require work on weekends or after hours should include such hours in calculating the percent time of the work (0.25, 0.50, or 0.75 time) and adjust the pay accordingly.

Graduate assistants who must otherwise miss scheduled work time for personal reasons are encouraged to consult with their individual supervisors. Together, the graduate assistant and supervisor can identify alternative days and times for the graduate assistant to fulfill their work obligations.

**Rationale for New Policy**

Without an official Leave of Absence process and policy, programs are not able to offer students the option of temporarily pausing their graduate studies. Many peer institutions offer such a formalized process for graduate students to pause temporarily their enrollment without penalty. Such a strategy communicates care for our students who may experience a range of hardships that make it difficult for them to make good progress on their graduate degree while still maintaining program standards. This proposed policy also decreases the effort required to resume studies (e.g., graduate students with an approved Leave of Absence do not have to reapply or complete additional forms). A reduction in the effort required to resume studies supports retention and degree completion goals within the Graduate School.

Similarly, because an effective workforce requires healthy workers, the University must be prepared to work with graduate assistants who may need to be away from their assistantship duties while sick. Having a policy that provides access to sick leave reflects the important contribution of graduate assistants to the University.

Although not all employees are eligible for vacation leave, those graduate assistants who must work during times when the University is closed for a holiday should be allotted comparable
leave time. In addition, supervisors should be encouraged to consider the value of time away from work in supporting productivity of graduate assistants and be flexible in assigning duties where they can. Such a strategy is best for the graduate assistant and benefits the University.