

University of Houston

Graduate and Professional Student Association

**Graduate and Professional Student Bill of Rights
and Responsibilities**

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University of Houston Graduate Student Bill of Rights

Preamble

Currently, the University of Houston has a Student Handbook¹ in place to protect the rights of its students, both graduate and undergraduate. However, because graduate students face a distinct set of professional and academic needs and are subject to a different set of working conditions and procedures, we found it necessary to form a Graduate Student Bill of Rights. Both the paid and unpaid services provided by graduate students at the University of Houston are highly beneficial to the undergraduate population, and the university as a whole. During the course of their study, graduate students act as a crucial component of the university's structure by performing the following roles: teacher, researcher, mentor, grant writer, conference organizer, campus leader, tutor, and many more. Many of the functions that graduate students are regularly expected to perform are unpaid.

Universities across Texas and across the country, have adopted documents similar to this, created to elucidate and secure rights for graduate students. These universities include: UT Austin (2014)², Texas A&M (2015)³, schools within the University of California system⁴, U Michigan⁵, Penn State (2012)⁶, and many more. As the executive board of GPSA, an organization elected to advocate for the graduate students at the University of Houston, we feel it is our duty to create and encourage the adoption of our own Graduate Student Bill of Rights. This document should serve to define the role of graduate students and graduate employees and promote a more productive environment where graduate students are able to continue to produce excellent work, research, and scholarship.

Because the University of Houston purposely seeks out students who they believe will become the leaders and innovators of the future, and those students have contributed a great deal to this institution, this document will outline potential concerns voiced by current graduate students, define the roles and responsibilities expected of the graduate student community, and promote a productive climate, where University of Houston students can continue to flourish, innovate, and supplement the academic community.

¹ <https://www.uh.edu/dos/resources/student-handbook/>

² <http://www.utexasgsa.org/tag/bill-of-rights/>

³ <https://ogaps.tamu.edu/>

⁴ <http://gsa.ucsd.edu/governance/bill-of-rights/>

⁵ <https://rsg.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/Grad-Student-Bill-of-Rights.pdf>

⁶ <http://gpsa.psu.edu/>

Summary

This document has been adopted by both the Graduate and Professional Student Association, and the UH Student Government Association. Its purpose is to provide a statement of the academic and professional rights that graduate students are entitled to while pursuing any advanced degree at the University of Houston.

We, the graduate students of The University of Houston, claim the rights enumerated below:

- I. The right to be considered members of a scholarly and academic community, and to be treated fairly and respectfully by members of both the administration and the faculty, including access and authorship to scholarly output
- II. The right to perform scholarly activities, work, teach, and conduct research in an environment free from exploitation, discrimination, harassment, or unreasonable expectations or conditions
- III. The right to compensation that meets the standard of a fair and reasonable living wage, and access to accurate information regarding availability and likelihood of support in the form of finances and resources within their program
- IV. The right to access affordable and comprehensive health insurance
- V. The right to fair, honest, and objective evaluations regarding their performance in all capacities in which they may perform duties relegated to them by the university
- VI. The right to specific and clearly stated degree requirements, which are to be communicated to them in a timely manner, including advising guidelines and accurately representative information regarding the selection of advisors and committee members
- VII. The right to due process and access to community advocacy in matters concerning employment in both teaching and research environments
- VIII. The right to representation and shared governance of their department, college, and university, and the right be notified in a timely manner and be given the opportunity to participate in discussions about university-wide changes that affect their day-to-day lives, including changes in pay structure or amounts, changes in insurance policies or costs, and any alterations in degree or program expectations, requirements, or structures

Graduate students at the University of Houston have the following Responsibilities:

- I. Graduate students admitted to the University of Houston have the responsibility to conduct themselves in a professional manner, which is appropriate for an academic environment, and supported by the University Student Code of Conduct⁷
- II. Fulfilling both teaching and research responsibilities placed upon them by the University, to the best of their ability
- III. To provide accurate and honestly attained research results, and to uphold the commitment of ethical conduct in research
- IV. To participate in building a healthy campus community to the extent that each is able, and to leave the campus enriched in whatever ways they are able
 - a. To contribute to the academic development and the social environment of the department or program in which he or she is pursuing the advanced degree.
 - b. To contribute to administration of the graduate program, student government and/or the university.
- V. Graduate students are expected to seek feedback on their academic and professional progress

⁷University of Houston – Student Code of Conduct

Graduate students have the following Rights:

- I. The right to be considered members of a scholarly and academic community, and to be treated fairly and respectfully by members of both the administration and the faculty, including access and authorship to intellectual and scholarly output
 - a. Upon a student's acceptance into any graduate or professional program, expectations for timelines, milestones, and estimated date to completion shall be communicated to them prior to their entrance into said program
 - b. This academic community shall include access to an intellectually stimulating and diverse academic environment
 - c. New policies regarding expectations enacted during the course of a graduate student's studies shall not negatively affect those who were admitted prior to the change
 - d. Access to all relevant information regarding their individual degree programs, including but not limited to average time to degree, the program's attrition rate, causes of attrition (if known by the department), success rates for qualifying/preliminary/comprehension exams and other milestones necessary for graduation, based on data collected during previous years shall be clearly presented to students in a timely manner upon their entrance into the program
 - i. PhD students shall have the option to pursue a masters' degree during the pursuit of their PhD
 - e. Students should have access to an updated, well-advertised and widely distributed repository of information regarding degree requirements
 - f. Faculty and grad students should agree as soon as possible about authorship positions commensurate with the amount of intellectual contribution to, and work done, on an academic project
 - i. Graduate students who have contributed significant content, research, or work (consistent with generally accepted standards in their respective fields of study) should receive co-authorship to publication utilizing these works or ideas
 - ii. Graduate students should be informed of authorship order and requirements therein as soon as possible
 - iii. Authorship positions and rights shall be periodically and discussed and reviewed during the course of all collaborations between faculty and graduate students
- II. The right to perform scholarly activities, work, teach, and conduct research in an environment free from exploitation, discrimination, harassment, or unreasonable expectations or conditions

- a. Graduate students have the right to academic freedom (as defined by the university)
 - i. The university shall not curb graduate students' right to exercise this freedom, or use it as grounds for disciplinary action, including dismissal from the university
- b. Academic environments in which graduate students work or perform research shall be free from discrimination and harassment of any kind
 - i. This shall include discrimination based on race, gender, religion, beliefs and family status (or changes in family status)
 - ii. Students shall be afforded freedom from discrimination based on personal ideas and free speech, in accordance with university policy
- c. Students shall expect professionalism and respect from administrators, staff, and faculty, including, but not limited to their faculty mentors
 - i. Graduate students should expect that the vulnerability associated with lesser experience or lesser status than their faculty mentors shall not be exploited
- d. Graduate students shall be treated with professionalism and given a reasonable amount of confidentiality in their communications with professors and faculty mentors
 - i. A student's performance should not be discussed by a professor or faculty advisor with other students, without express consent from the student being discussed
 - ii. Discussion regarding students among faculty should remain of a professional nature, and should be limited to issues relevant to their academic or employment-based performance

III. All graduate and professional student employees, as defined by the University of Houston Graduate Catalog, share the right to compensation that meets the standard of a fair and reasonable living wage, and access to accurate information regarding availability and likelihood of support in the form of finances and resources within their program

- a. Departments and faculty mentors shall provide accurate and informed information to students regarding financial and resource support within the program which the student belongs to
- b. Compensation rates should be reassessed periodically by relevant faculty, staff, and administrators, and should keep up with trends that are commensurate with livable wages within the city of Houston
 - i. Should costs associated with attending graduate school (student insurance plans, parking permits, housing options) continue to rise, compensation rates should be reevaluated

- c. Prospective and currently enrolled graduate students will be provided a thorough and comprehensive description of the requirements and qualifications required by the university to obtain and maintain academic employment or financial support
- d. At no point should graduate student compensation fall below a fair and livable wage, as defined by city level wage and cost of living data
 - i. This should be regarded as the baseline for compensation, not as the average or standard wage
 - ii. Part time (defined as under twenty hour) employment stipends should be proportionate to the standards met for full time appointments

IV. The right to access affordable and comprehensive health insurance

- a. The university shall provide stipends for health benefits to all PhD-seeking graduate students who receive Graduate Tuition Fellowships (GTF) from the university
- b. Graduate students shall be provided opportunities for spousal and dependent insurance buy-in options, as do other university employees
- c. Graduate students who become parents during the course of their education are eligible for parental leave reflective of the rights afforded to employees under the Family and Medical Leave Act.
- d. This period of parental leave should be considered as separate from the 2 semesters of leave allowed by the university during a degree program. Terms of parental leave must be taken consecutively and any unused terms may not be taken at a later date. Graduate students on parental leave will retain their university ID cards and access to their university email accounts, the university's electronic resources, and university libraries

V. The right to fair, honest, and objective evaluations regarding their performance in all capacities in which they may perform duties relegated to them by the university

- a. Graduate and professional students have a right to be evaluated by the faculty of their program in accordance with fair procedures, in matters of both employment and academic success, solely on the basis of the graduate or professional student's professional qualifications and conduct, and previously agreed upon criteria for evaluation
- b. Evaluations shall be objective, fair, specific, and based on criteria understood by the graduate students, faculty mentors and supervisors, and university administrators
- c. Graduate students have the right to feedback on their progress toward the completion of their desired degree

- d. Graduate students are protected from arbitrary removal from any program in which they are enrolled at the university
 - i. Any reasons for unsatisfactory performance or examination of a student's continued enrollment in a program should be stated clearly to the student in a written evaluation
 - ii. A description of the processes for removal shall be readily available to both students and faculty
 - iii. Removal or dismissal from the program (based on failure to meet specifically stated academic requirements) shall follow a one semester long probationary period, before which the student is provided adequate notice of failure to meet specified degree requirements
 - iv. Students recommended for dismissal shall be given a fair opportunity to remedy issues communicated to them prior to removal
- e. Students should not receive any kind of punishment, penalty, or retribution should they decide to change faculty advisors, dissertation/thesis supervisors, or committee members

- VI. The right to specific and clearly stated degree requirements, which are to be communicated to them in a timely manner, including advising guidelines and accurately representative information regarding the selection of advisors and committee members
 - a. Upon entrance into their graduate programs, students will have degree requirements clearly communicated to them
 - i. These requirements will also be clearly stated in writing on their department website, and will be easily accessible to students, faculty, and administrators
 - ii. Students should have access to a current and widely-distributed repository of information regarding their degree requirements
 - b. Changes, including those to degree requirements, shall not affect students accepted into the graduate program prior to said alterations, except at the option of the student
 - i. Students should have ready access to both previous and current requirements, and should be given the opportunity to choose whether to apply the changes or not
 - c. Both prospective and currently enrolled students shall be given access to information regarding their pursued program or academic focus
 - i. Students have the right to knowledge about the average and normative time to degree completion within their graduate program
 - ii. Students should have access to information about degree attrition rates and common causes of degree attrition (if this information is available)

- iii. Students should have access to information regarding success rates for qualifying/preliminary/comprehensive exams and other tests and milestones required for completion of their degree
 - iv. All information given to students should be based on data collected from previous years, when available
- d. Graduate students have the right to accurate information regarding the selection of faculty advisors or committee members
 - i. Students have the right to responsive supervision throughout their program's course of study at the university
 - ii. Upon departure of a graduate student's faculty advisor from the university, their department shall strive to provide the graduate student with alternative supervision quickly, and in a way that does not significantly hinder their degree completion
- e. Students shall expect and receive access to professional development and dedicated career advising services provided by the University to pursue post-graduate career opportunities
- f. Graduate and professional students shall be given access to information regarding expectations about job placement and time expectations regarding the availability and expectations about careers upon completion of their degree, prior to entry into the program

****(CAMERON'S ECON DEPT LINK) ****

VII. The right to due process and access to community advocacy in matters concerning employment in both teaching and research environments

Graduate students, as members of the university staff and as students of an academic institution, have the right to due process in matters regarding both academic- and employment-based grievance procedures within and outside of their departments. As employees of the university, graduate students deserve to be protected by the same rights given to other university employees.

Grievances Related to Employment and Academic Matters:

- a. Graduate Student TAs, AIs, RAs, and GAs have the right to clear requirements outlining their duties as employees, and have the right to refuse work assignments not directly related to their academic duties or clearly communicated to them as part of employment expectations
- b. Graduate Students have the right to a detailed description, communicated to them in a timely manner, of workload sharing between student workers and professors

- c. All departments with graduate programs should provide detailed information regarding a formally stated process for dealing with employment disputes
- d. Graduate students have the right to a university-wide Graduate Student Grievance Committee, comprised of faculty and graduate students (TA, AI, GRAs or other graduate students in good academic standing). The Committee shall contain at least 50% graduate students. The graduate student representatives shall be appointed by the current president of the Graduate and Professional Student Association.
- e. Students have the right to file grievances for employment-based concerns, and the right to remain free from retribution for exercising these explicit rights

A list of grievance policies, delineated by department can be found here:
<http://publications.uh.edu/content.php?catoid=30&navoid=11040>

- VIII. The right to representation and shared governance of their department, college, and university
 - a. The graduate student population has the right to maintain the Graduate and Professional Student Association (GPSA) as their official student voice at the university level, free from coercion
 - b. Graduate students have the right to maintain representatives on all campus-wide administrative committees which make decisions that affect them
 - i. The Graduate and Professional Student Association shall be informed of the creation of new committees that will address issues directly related to graduate students, and given the opportunity to select or recommend a graduate student representative
 - c. Graduate students shall be notified in a timely manner and be given the opportunity to participate in discussions about university-wide changes that affect their day-to-day lives, including changes in pay structure or amounts, changes in insurance policies or costs, and any alterations in degree or program expectations, requirements, or structures
 - d. Department and college level committees created, or currently in place, which are used to assess, alter, or make decisions about graduate programs within that department or college should include student representatives
 - i. Communication to graduate students regarding the creation of these committees should be clear and reasonably timed regarding the students' opportunities for participation
 - ii. Significant alterations in college or departmental policies should consider graduate student input