

RESEARCH ASSISTANT (RA) MANUAL

September 2024

This document describes RAs who are paid a monthly stipend. These stipends are either funded by a Northwestern internal account or by an external research grant that is administered by Northwestern. It does not cover students with other funding who provide ad hoc research assistance for hourly payments.

1. DATES OF APPOINTMENT

The pay periods and the dates of appoint differ slightly:

Quarter	Payment Months	Dates of Work (specific dates are shown in the University Calendar)
Fall	September – November	Mid-September to early December
Winter	December – February	Early January to mid-March
Spring	March – May	End of March to early June
Summer	June - August	Mid-June to the end of August

2. APPOINTING UNIT

This manual describes RA duties in the Department of Economics. Some Economics students perform RA duties in the Kellogg School of Management, the Institute for Policy Research, and other units at Northwestern. There are many commonalities between RA work in Economics and other units, but students working for other units should also consult documentation issued by that unit.

3. HOW ASSIGNMENTS ARE MADE

The Department does not act as a centralized “match making” organization in RA appointments. Graduate students and faculty make contact privately, and voluntarily agree to enter into a RA contract. Renewal of contracts is also a mutual decision between the graduate student and the faculty member.

For payroll purposes there is an absolute deadline by which the faculty member must inform the Department of an appointment and provide information of the account number (“chart string”) that covers the financial cost.

All graduate students are sent a letter on August 1 detailing the nature of their funding in each quarter of the upcoming academic year. Some RA appointments are known at that time, but more typically appointments are made and renewed during the academic year.

The most usual situation is that a student is informed on August 1 that they will be a Teaching Assistant (TA) in a particular quarter, but they subsequently voluntarily enter into an agreement to be an RA.

The absolute deadlines for converting other funding (typically a TA) into an RA is:

Funding Quarter	Last Date for Informing the Department	First Date that Work is Performed
Fall	August 15	Mid-September
Winter	November 15	Early January
Spring	February 15	End of March
Summer	May 15	Mid-June

4. SUPERVISOR

Your immediate supervisor is the faculty member who is paying for your stipend from an account at Northwestern. This person is also known as the Principal Investigator (PI) in the case of external grants administered by Northwestern.

The Department's Director of Graduate Studies oversees the funding of all graduate students on behalf of the Department but is not directly involved in the nature of the work contract between an RA and a faculty member, except when the RA and the faculty member cannot resolve an issue between themselves.

5. WORK LOCATION

Normally all RA duties are conducted on the Evanston Campus. Some research may involve data collection in the field or attendance at off-campus conferences and meetings. Details regarding off-campus working should be agreed and understood at the start of work.

RAs and faculty should have a clear understanding on which work to be performed in-person on campus, and when that work should occur, and what work can be performed remotely.

6. DUTIES

You are expected to provide twenty hours a week of RA duties, averaged across the quarter. Some weeks may require more hours, and some may require less hours.

Your specific duties are determined in consultation with the faculty member and, if applicable, fellow RAs on the project.

At the beginning of the period of work, RAs and faculty should agree on:

- The plan of work
- Specific deliverables

- Deadlines
- Plan for which work should be performed in-person on campus (and when) and which work can be performed remotely.
- A schedule for regular meetings with the faculty member and (if applicable) other RAs on the project team.

Your duties should not exceed twenty hours a week on average. Conversely, faculty members expect that RAs do not shirk in their time commitment.

In the Economics Department, faculty and RAs voluntarily enter into contracts for RA appointments. Nevertheless, if you subsequently feel that you are overburdened, then the first step is to talk with the faculty member. If you feel uncomfortable doing so, or if a resolution cannot be found, talk to the Director of Graduate Studies.

Faculty members who feel that a RA is inattentive to their duties should in the first instance discuss it privately with the RA. If the situation is not resolved, the faculty member should bring the circumstances to the attention of the Director of Graduate Studies.

If either party feels that they do not wish to continue with the RA arrangement in a subsequent quarter, the Department must be informed by the deadlines described earlier in the document. An RA whose appointment is not continued will typically then be funded by providing TA services.

7. WORKING HOURS

The University acknowledges as a general principle that most work assignments should be primarily carried out during weekdays from 8:30am to 5:00pm. Work outside of these hours may be necessary during field work, at conferences, or prior to a deadline for paper submissions.

Nothing in this section precludes an RA from freely deciding at what hours during the day they wish to conduct some of the duties based on their preferred schedule.

While faculty have the right to expect a prompt response to their e-mails, they should only expect to receive a reply on weekdays during normal business hours even if the e-mail is sent in the evening or on a weekend.

8. RESPONSIBLE CONDUCT OF RESEARCH (RCR) TRAINING

Federal law requires that all students funded by or working on projects supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF) or the National Institutes of Health (NIH) complete a training program on responsible and ethical conduct of research (RCR). The training comprises both in-person instruction and an online practicum. There are many faculty members in the economics department who hold NSF and NIH grants and involve graduate students in the projects as RAs. Therefore in-person RCR training is given to

all incoming students at the start of our program. During Fall Quarter registration all first-year students register for ECON 519 to certify their attendance. (ECON 519 is a non-credit course graded as satisfactory/unsatisfactory. It is not counted as part of the student's grade point average.) Then, when a student is engaged in a NSF/NIH sponsored project as a RA, they will be contacted by the department's Director of Finance and Administration to complete the online portion of the training. The department believes that all graduate students will benefit from instruction in responsible and ethical conduct of research and not just those who may ultimately be funded by NSF or NIH.

9. HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH

Even though we are a social science rather than a medical science, it is possible that government restrictions on the privacy of human subjects may apply to your RA work. If the project collects new data, or is even using previously collected data, on individual identifiable people, the project must get prior approval from Northwestern's Institutional Research Board (IRB). If the project required IRB approval, please consult the guidance and policies at:

<https://irb.northwestern.edu/resources-guidance/policies-guidance/>

to compliance with human research protections.