

Mississippi State University
Mississippi Agricultural & Forestry Experiment Station (MAFES)
College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS)
Guidance for MAFES-funded Graduate Research Assistantships

PURPOSE

The purpose of this guidance is to inform of requirements for MAFES-funded graduate research assistantships (GRAs) that may be awarded to departments, units, centers, or specific faculty members.

BACKGROUND

MAFES funds several GRAs to enhance the research capacity of faculty in the organization and to support the research training of those entering the agricultural workforce with advanced degrees. However, to maximize the use of MAFES funds towards our federal match requirements for capacity funds, it is imperative that GRA funds be awarded to eligible faculty and approved projects.

GUIDANCE

Funding is provided by the MAFES Director's office for two GRAs to each CALS academic department/unit, WFA, and our four Research & Extension (R&E) Centers, and as part of MAFES SRI, often with MAFES faculty start-up packages, and via other MAFES initiatives. MAFES GRAs must be administered under the following guidance.

- MAFES Director's GRA positions must be assigned to MAFES faculty with active Hatch/Hatch Multistate projects, and projects must remain active throughout the duration of the graduate student's degree program. CALS faculty without a MAFES appointment may qualify, as approved by the MAFES Director's office, provided they have active Hatch or Hatch multistate research projects, an active research agenda, and current or planned MAFES-grants and contracts activity. The GRA must be coded with the associated, and most up-to-date, activity code in Banner by the unit's business manager.
- Students receiving a MAFES-funded GRA must be a graduate student enrolled in a CALS or CALS-affiliated graduate major/degree program. Interdisciplinary programs including Animal Nutrition, Animal Physiology, Genetics, Data Science, and Computational Biology are also permitted provided the major professor is from CALS-MAFES; and, where relevant (e.g., Data Science), they must be in a CALS-affiliated concentration. Supporting graduate students with these MAFES Director's stipends outside of a CALS major or the listed interdisciplinary degree programs is not permitted, and any exception requires prior approval by the MAFES Director.
- GRAs must be new students. These funds are intended to recruit new graduate students and these GRA lines are not intended to be used as a constant bridge among or between students in the department. These funds/stipends are also not intended to fund students that could be supported on funded grants or contracts to simply repartition resources. The goal of these MAFES GRAs is to fund additional students to add capacity rather than those that could be supported in other ways.

- Ph.D. students are preferred and should be prioritized, though M.S. students can be funded. Master's students in Landscape Architecture and Agricultural Economics are always permitted where the highest degree offered is at the Masters' level in these units.
- GRAs on these funds should be typically limited to two (M.S.) or three (Ph.D.) years for the funds to rotate back into the unit for the recruitment of new graduate students. For example, GRAs that skip the M.S. degree and matriculate straight into a Ph.D. program are discouraged from being funded for the full program time (typically 5 or 6 years) to not tie-up these GRA stipends for extended periods of time. Alternate funds through grants, contracts or other departmental sources should be used to bridge students past two or three years of funded support being provided from the MAFES Director's office. If funding is requested beyond three years, prior approval by the MAFES Director is required to extend funding.
- MAFES faculty at the R&E Centers (NMREC, DREC, CMREC, CREC) and their affiliated branch Stations are also eligible for GRA stipends that are administered by the on-campus CALS departments and department head, and the same requirements and guidance above apply. The MAFES Director's office encourages discipline department heads to consider this in GRA assignments, and to work with R&E Center Heads cooperatively where faculty off-campus may benefit from GRA support.
- Effective Summer 2024, the MAFES Director's office will provide two additional stipends to each R&E Head (two each for NMREC, DREC, CMREC, CREC) to further facilitate off-campus graduate programming, and these GRAs may be assigned in any discipline aligned with a CALS academic department's degree program and a MAFES-appointed faculty; again, the same requirements and guidance above applies. Major professors and graduate committees for off-campus graduate students are encouraged to include a majority of discipline-specific faculty on committees, follow degree program-specific guidelines, and assure communication and coordination of graduate programming with graduate coordinators and department heads. The MAFES Director's GRA, when paired with other funding, could be used to facilitate on-campus coursework at the beginning or end of the student's program, which may mean they reside on-campus for a period prior to, during, or at the conclusion of their graduate program to obtain appropriate coursework and program connectivity not feasible by distance or other means from off-campus.
- During budget, the GRA position should be funded on the unit's overhead. Upon receipt of a request for funding accompanied by the hiring EAF, with a note on the EAF identifying the major professor (name), CRIS activity code, intended degree (M.S. or Ph.D.) and degree program (degree program name), funds will be transferred to the unit's 160000 fund.

MAFES Assistance with Graduate Students Funded on USDA-ARS Non-Assistance Cooperative Agreements (NACA).

Non-Assistance Cooperative Agreements (NACA), which are typically funded to MAFES via USDA-ARS, are "a legal instrument reflecting a relationship between the [USDA-ARS and MAFES-MSU] setting forth the terms and conditions for carrying out, in detail, a jointly planned and executed research program or project of mutual interest to which all parties have committed to contribute resources. Awarded under the authority of 7 USC 3318(b)". Unfortunately, "reimbursement of tuition expenses to State cooperative institutions in connection with non-assistance cooperative agreements is prohibited. (7

U.S.C. 3319.” Specifically, “no indirect costs or tuition remission shall be charged against funds in connection with cooperative agreements between the Department of Agriculture and State cooperative institutions if the cooperative program or project involved is of mutual interest to all the parties and if all the parties contribute to the cooperative agreement involved”. This creates a conundrum among Principal Investigators with NACA funding when considering GRA support on NACA funds (i.e., the GRA stipend itself is allowable as direct costs, but tuition remission is not).

- First and foremost, unallowable tuition should be paid from other PI/departamental sources; typically, overhead or other discretionary funds or departmental revenue. Where faculty time can be supported on a NACA, the 16-fund salary release can be coordinated with the MAFES Director’s Budget office for these funds to be swapped (16 for 26) to be utilized towards tuition remission, in full or in part, depending on the extent of the release.
- As further assistance, the MAFES Director’s office will provide one-year of tuition support for one graduate student for each NACA per year that meets eligibility requirements (below) for those units that do not have the means or ability to address this internally. Tuition support will be proportional to the fund source of the stipend if not funded exclusively from the NACA. Note the second year must be funded from other PI/departamental sources or via salary release from the NACA, as noted previously.
- The NACA for which graduate tuition support is requested (one year of support per NACA per year) must be a MAFES 32-Fund or a MAFES 32-Fund child account. MAFES faculty working on NACA support for which funding flows through other units other than MAFES are not eligible for this graduate student tuition support. NACA PI, co-PI or NACA-funded/affiliated faculty serving as the major professor must be a MAFES appointed/funded faculty member embedded in a CALS/MAFES academic department ORG or MAFES R&E Center ORG (specifically NMREC, DREC, CMREC, CREC are eligible) as the major professor’s home unit. MAFES-funded projects that reside in Centers and Institutes, other than R&E Centers, will also be considered for assistance especially in cases where child accounts are implemented and fully costed to cooperating CALS/MAFES departments/units. Where awards are retained centrally by Centers and Institutes, and F&A is retained at an extraordinary level (see OP 80.12), these circumstances for graduate student support will need to be considered on a case-by-case basis and may require additional cost sharing.
- NACA PI, co-PI or NACA-funded faculty serving as the major professor must show evidence of leveraging current or prior (last two years) NACA funding towards federal competitive granting, unless they or the project is new to MAFES (e.g., within two years of either faculty hire date or project inception) for support to be considered.
- Graduate students for which one-year tuition assistance is sought must be CALS graduate students in a CALS or CALS-affiliated graduate major. Interdisciplinary Animal Nutrition, Animal Physiology, Genetics, Data Science and Computational Biology are also permitted provided the major professor is from CALS-MAFES; and, where relevant (e.g., Data Science), they must be in a CALS-affiliated concentration. Graduate students supported on NACA funding that are pursuing degrees outside of a CALS or CALS-affiliated degree programs are not eligible for this tuition assistance regardless of their major professor being MAFES funded or appointed.

Graduate Student Assistantship Emergency Bridge Funding:

MAFES-funded GRAs are not intended to serve as bridge funding. If there are requests due to extenuating circumstances, communicate those requests directly to the MAFES Director's Office. Departments or units would need to show that there are no other internal avenues for support to complete the student's program, or that this level of support creates a hardship for the unit. Cost sharing may also be required for bridge assistance.

Approved:



Scott Willard

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2/20/24
Date