

Department of Biostatistics

Policies on Practical Training Research Assistantships

This document outlines Departmental policies towards Practical Training Research Assistantships. It is intended to clarify what is expected for both faculty and students, as well as the projects that provide the training and financial support.

What is a Practical Training Research Assistantship?

A Practical Training Research Assistantship (RA for short) is offered by various collaborative research projects to give a student the opportunity to train in the application of biostatistics to significant public health research. Examples of projects include the statistical and data management centers for the Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group and the AIDS Clinical Trials Group, environmental health research projects, and statistical groups within local hospitals. The training involves part-time work for a project alongside course or thesis work, usually for a minimum of two years. A student also participates in a practical training seminar organized by the Director of Practical Training. All RA's are paid a salary by the project(s) for which they work.

What is the type of training?

The training involves a variety of aspects of applied biostatistical work. This could include work on the design of studies and study materials, such as case report forms and randomization materials, power calculations, statistical support for issues in data management and quality assurance, statistical analyses and statistical programming, report writing, and other dissemination of results.

Who supervises the training?

An RA will have a supervisor who will organize training, provide guidance, and direct the RA's work. This supervisor will be a member of the project's staff, but will not be the student's academic advisor or thesis advisor. This ensures that project training and work is distinct from thesis work and other academic activities. If there are any practical training issues which cannot be satisfactorily resolved by the student and/or the supervisor, then the RA should discuss them with the Director of Practical Training or with the Director of Graduate Studies.

How long is the training and how much time does it involve each week?

RA's are expected to commit to a minimum of two years of training. There are two major reasons for this. First, it enables a student to get involved in a broad range of activities associated with collaborative research, and so familiarize himself or herself with application of biostatistics in a real-life setting. Second, it takes time and training for an RA to contribute fully to a project and, from a project's perspective, a period of about two years of part-time work is required to make the program feasible.

The training is offered in two formats:

- Two days per week during a student's third and fourth years.
- For students with some previous training in statistics or biostatistics, the training may be taken during the first two years of study. This training period is comprised of two periods of three months of full-time work (usually taken in the summer), and 10 hours per week during the rest of the year, plus some additional work during Wintersession.

RA's receive a (pro-rated) vacation allowance for project work.

Academic Credit

Biostatistics Ph.D. students who are RAs typically register for TIME-R to indicate that the research work is being undertaken. Other Biostatistics students who register through HSPH typically register for BIO 315, Data Analysis, for 5 units per semester (pass/fail) under the supervision of the Director of Practical Training. As well as the training with the project, students attend a practical training seminar which will meet 4-6 times per semester. At these seminars, students taking the practical training will make presentations concerning various aspects of their work, including statistical and practical issues, as well as the collaborative research. Students should also attend one or more of the Department's seminar series which are relevant to their project work.

A student may also petition the Director of Graduate Studies to waive the Department's consulting requirement through participation in the practical training program, provided a substantial portion of the RA's efforts were devoted to consulting-related work with investigators.

Teaching Assistantships

In general, a student will not be able to be a Teaching Assistant at the same time as being a Research Assistant, due to the need to preserve time for course work and/or thesis work. In exceptional circumstances this may be possible but it requires the approval of the student's advisor and the Director of Graduate Studies.