



**Graduate Assistants United**  
YOUR UNION, YOUR VOICE

224 Yon Hall, PO Box 112014  
Gainesville, Florida 32611  
352-575-0366  
organizing@ufgau.org  
ufgau.org

## PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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### **University Administration Responds to GAU Letter on COVID-19, Says: “You are employees, so continue as planned”**

**GAINESVILLE, FL** – On March 13, 2020, GAU sent a letter to the Office of the Provost. The letter reflected more than a dozen questions raised by graduate employees from across the University, requesting further guidance regarding the University of Florida’s emergency measures and mandates concerning graduate assistants during the outbreak of Coronavirus (COVID-19). Today, GAU received a response from the University Administration.

GAU demands the University immediately issue a policy directive that allows research assistants to work remotely. We have been made aware that many supervisors are placing undue pressure on RAs to work from the lab. GAU also demands UF provide assurances that Graduate and Family Housing will remain open for residents, as many GFH residents are international students that have nowhere else to stay or are employees that are forced to work.

Following is the University’s response provided to GAU on March 17, 2020, with **answers bold and italicized** (emphasis original to Administration’s response):

#### **General Guidance**

- Graduate and Undergraduate Student Resources
  - Students have been directed to avoid campus, return to their homes, and remain current on their coursework via the Canvas and Zoom platforms. This directive assumes all students have access to a computer from home, stable internet access, and an up to date operating system that supports these platforms. What is being done to ensure that students who do not have all these resources will be able to stay current with their coursework?
    - ***I am addressing only GAU issues, not general. General issues are addressed through general communications.***
    - ***You are employees, so continue as planned***
  - If a student lacks one or more of these resources, what recourse will they have in the event they are unfairly penalized?
    - ***Deal with it at the appropriate time; cannot protect in advance***

- Zoom
  - Given the mandate that all instruction and student communication be moved to the Zoom platform, what steps are being taken to ensure that private communications on the platform are kept secret from potential third parties who may intercept messages between faculty and graduate students, graduate and undergraduate students, and graduate students and support staff?
    - **IT is handling that.**
- Technical Support
  - Technical difficulties are a fact of life. Which campus unit(s) is responsible for glitches and failures of the Canvas and Zoom platforms?
  - What are the phone numbers and email addresses for said units?
    - **IT**
- Miscellaneous
  - Will the University guarantee that graduate students in university housing will not be told to leave, as has happened at other universities?
    - **You are employees**
  - What will be done to ensure that no on-campus employee not covered by a collective bargaining agreement (e.g., OPS employees and employees of contractors, such as dining staff) are not penalized, financially or otherwise, for staying home if they are sick or in the event of a campus closure?
    - **Not in my purview, nor GAU.**
    - **They should pay attention to university statements**
  - The COVID-19 outbreak is frightening for a lot of employees and has left many uncertain about not only physical health, but how to effectively perform job duties with the sudden transition to online teaching. This is an entirely new layer of added stress and anxiety that may have a harmful effect on a lot of graduate assistants, graduate students, and faculty. Are there any plans in the making to address the possible uptick in mental health issues on campus?
  - Many graduate assistants would prefer to avoid potential exposure to COVID-19 on public transportation. Will parking restrictions be lifted during the emergency?
  - Other graduate assistants rely on public transportation to get to work because they lack the means for a vehicle, will UF pledge to share information regarding any changes to RTS availability during this emergency as soon as possible?
    - **For all three above University is working on; see appropriate messages from UF**

### **Guidance for Teaching Assistants and Graduate Student Instructors**

- **For all items below, they should work with their supervisor**
- Guidance for All Graduate Assistant Instructional Staff
  - If a Graduate Assistant falls ill and is required to self-quarantine, are they still required to complete teaching tasks remotely?
- Guidance for Teaching Assistants Leading Hands-On Lab Sections
  - Assignments in hands-on lab sessions often require the use of equipment accessible only on campus (e.g., microscopes.) Teaching assistants leading these types of labs are currently re-writing them to accommodate this transition to

online instruction. How should these teaching assistants proceed with lab assignments that have already been assigned?

- Will students who choose not to go home be allowed to use the labs on campus if they so wish?
- Is there a list of resources that would be helpful for transitioning lab tutorials and hands on lab assignments (e.g., in biology, anatomy, chemistry, etc.) into an online setting?
- Are these teaching assistants required to teach remotely from campus? Or can they do this from home if they have the appropriate resources at home?
- Some research labs in some departments have undergraduate researchers, are these students allowed to continue conducting research if they so wish?

### **Guidance for Research Assistants**

- There have been several e-mail communications to instructional staff, but what general guidance should research assistants follow?
- Some research assistants are assigned tasks requiring the use of equipment and specimens accessible only on campus, while other research assistants could easily and fully perform their duties from any location. Many lab spaces on campus are crowded, making it difficult to practice effective social distancing. Will the University agree to allow research assistants *whose employment tasks do not require the use of equipment or specimens accessible exclusively on campus* to work remotely from home, if they so choose, in order to minimize potential exposure to COVID-19, so long as they take responsibility for the timely submission of work assignments?

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*GAU is the official labor union representing the approximately 4,000 teaching, research, and graduate assistants at the University of Florida. UFF, FEA, NEA, AFT, AFL-CIO. For additional information, contact GAU Communication Chair Stephen C. Phillips at [communications@ufgau.org](mailto:communications@ufgau.org) or 352-575-0366.*