



Department of Physics

Graduate Student Salaries – Definitions of Ranks

Departmental Policy 20170814A – R.Sonnenfeld

Physics Department salaries are based off of a document prepared every year by the Center for Graduate Studies. These define salary ranges for different graduate ranks. Typical academic budgets assume the department will pay TAs at the low end of each rank. One could hope for future improvements.

There are only four academic ranks for graduate students, TA/RA1 – TA/RA4. There are two academic classes, MS and PhD. At each rank, salaries for MS and PhD candidates are identical. We identify which you are simply to verify, at least annually, that all parts of Tech are in agreement about which degree program a student is enrolled in.

Detailed Definitions of Ranks

Below are defined the criteria for each rank.

TA1/RA1 All entering students have this rank for their first year at Tech (August to August). The contract will say MS-I or PhD-I. This denotes which program the student was admitted to.

TA2/RA2 All students who have completed a year in good standing progress to TA2/RA2. MS-II and PhD-II appear on the contract. Both classes have the same salary.

TA3/RA3 Though a student could, in principle, progress to the 3rd rank in their third year, this is not guaranteed. The TA3/RA3 rank is reserved for *doctoral students only* and also **requires** that the student has passed the Candidacy Exam¹. Students who have not passed the candidacy exam are held at the TA2/RA2 rank indefinitely. A student who passes the exam in the Fall Semester will have their contract adjusted for the Spring Semester.

TA4/RA4 A student graduates to TA4/RA4 one year after achieving candidacy, though not before year 4 of their time at Tech. A student who became a TA3/RA3 in the spring semester will also not become a TA4/RA4 until the following spring. Once at TA4/RA4, a student maintains that rank throughout the rest of their graduate career.

¹The Preliminary Exam is NOT the Candidacy Exam.

Considerations when converting from RA to TA

It is typical for a student who begins with a TA to have an RA later in their career. This depends on the department's needs, but mostly on the availability of funds from their research advisor. It may happen that a student who had previously been an RA must return to a TA position because of an expired research grant. Though both TAs and RAs have the same defined salary range at every rank, RA salaries are, in practice, often higher than TA salaries. RA salaries are currently set at the sole discretion of the research advisor, and research grants may well have a larger budget than is available for departmental TAs.

Thus, it can happen that a student who was on an RA paid by a research grant at a relatively high rate must return to a TA with departmental funding. The change in funding source may result in lower pay. A student who has had a cut in pay because their funding source changed should not interpret the pay cut as indicative of their performance or a reduction in their perceived value to the department.