Student Funding Opportunities and Practices
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General caveat

This document explains opportunities and policies associated with student funding administered through the Institute of Transportation Studies at UC Davis (ITS-Davis). Some funds administered by ITS-Davis are available only to students in the Transportation Technology and Policy graduate program that we host, but many funds are available to graduate transportation students in any program on campus. Students in programs other than TTP may also be eligible for funding from those particular programs (such as CEE, Ag Econ, and so on). I have described the policies and practices associated with ITS-Davis-administered funds, and where I have some knowledge, I mention other programs such as CEE as well. However, students in programs other than TTP should be aware that the policies/processes for funding administered by those programs could differ from those described here.

Funding sources and associated practices

There are several potential sources of funding for graduate students in transportation at UC Davis:

• Faculty research grants: These are grants obtained by individual faculty members or researchers (generically referred to as “PIs”, for “principal investigators”), and under their control. Students are hired under these grants as “graduate student researchers” (GSRs), in accordance with the compensation plan approved for the degree program they are in. This could theoretically mean that two identically-qualified students working on the same grant could be paid differently, because they are in different degree programs with different compensation plans. However, we don’t believe this issue arises very often. In any case, it is a campus-level policy, not one we can change locally.

Unlike some programs, we do not make a GSR offer without first identifying the PI responsible for hiring and supporting you. Thus, GSR offers are made through the student and PI finding each other directly – at the program administration level we may assist in suggesting matches but do not proactively create them.

• Teaching assistant (TA) appointments: These are typically 25%- or 50%-time appointments for one or more academic quarters, to assist the instructor of a specific course (specific duties will vary from one course/instructor to the next). The appointment pays a stipend (salary) and also some of your in-state tuition. The remainder of your in-state tuition can often be paid through fellowship funds (see below). Supplemental non-resident tuition is not included.
Courses needing TAs are generally undergraduate courses. The Transportation Technology and Policy program does not offer any undergraduate courses, and thus does not control any TA positions. Regular departments (such as Civil and Environmental Engineering) do control such positions, for (some of) the undergraduate courses taught through their department. It is typical for CEE to use TA slots associated with lower-division (first- and second-year) courses for recruitment (i.e. to reserve them for funding offers to prospective new graduate students), usually for its own graduate students (i.e. it’s unlikely that a TTP student would obtain such a position).

TA slots for upper-division (third- and fourth-year) courses, on the other hand, may, sometimes, be offered to students in another program if there are no suitable students in the department offering the course. Thus, a TTP student may be invited to TA an upper-division course in another department, but this almost never happens in the student’s first year in graduate school (there have been a few cases where students transferred into TTP from another graduate program at UCD, and were able to TA for their old department). If you are interested in TAing for a course in a later year, then either (1) take that course as early as possible in your graduate program and demonstrate an outstanding performance in it; or (2) get acquainted with the instructor of that course as early as possible and convince her or him of your expertise in that area and your interest in TAing. If English is not your first language, you will also need to demonstrate sufficient fluency in it.

- **Reader (grader) appointments:** These are typically 25%-time appointments for one or more academic quarters, to assist the instructor of a specific course. The appointment pays a stipend (salary) and some of your in-state tuition. The remainder of your in-state tuition can often be paid through fellowship funds (see below). Since (as for TAs) courses for which readers are authorized are generally undergraduate courses, TTP does not control any reader appointments. To obtain such a position, it is advisable to check with the undergraduate curriculum staff person for the relevant academic department, see which courses have reader appointments, determine the process for selecting readers, and identify whether there are any openings and whom to notify of your interest in such a position.

**General information about fellowships**

Fellowships may arise from several sources, the most common of which are described below. The amounts can vary widely, from a few hundred dollars, to payment of in-state and/or non-resident tuition, to (less often) a “full-ride” offer including a stipend (the amount of which will generally match the program’s compensation plan for GSRs) as well as tuition and fees. When used to pay a stipend, any of these fellowships are considered research fellowships – that is, you are expected to conduct research, under the direction of a faculty or research mentor, with tangible deliverables produced in return for the funds.

Although the research expectations of a fellowship recipient are equivalent to those of a GSR, a research fellowship differs from a conventional research assistantship in two ways. **First,** whereas under a GSR appointment you must conduct the specific research your PI has funded, under a research fellowship you are free to develop a transportation-related project of your own in conjunction with the appropriate faculty member or research advisor of your choice. This can
be (and perhaps most often is) an extension of the advisor’s other research, but can also be an entirely new otherwise unfunded project suggested by the advisor, or a project suggested by you that an appropriate advisor is willing to direct.

**Second**, whereas a GSR appointment “belongs” to the PI funding you under her or his research, a research fellowship “belongs” to you. You are free to change advisors and/or research topics without forfeiting the award, subject to (1) mutual consent of the old and (appropriate) new advisor; (2) timely completion of expressed or implied commitments to the old advisor; and (3) suitable research progress.

Fellowships that are awarded after a student is already fully funded from other sources will generally replace an equal amount of that other funding, keeping constant the total funding to the student while freeing funds from the other source to be redeployed to benefit others (see the partial exception for extramural fellowships, below). In such cases, the main benefit of the fellowship is the associated honor rather than a financial gain. If a student is not already fully funded, however, the fellowship will augment any previous funding, up to the amount of a full ride.

- **Program-administered fellowships**: Each graduate program receives a certain amount of funding from the campus, based on a formula taking the three-year-average size of the program into account. This funding is administered by each program, according to policies and practices that vary by program. It cannot be used for summer support. In general, it is probably fair to say that most programs prioritize those funds for recruiting – i.e. they are first used to the fullest extent possible to attract prospective graduate students into the program, and only after the recruiting cycle is over will any remaining funds be distributed among current students. Specifically, we are notified in the winter of academic year $x$ that we will have $y$ in program fellowship funds for year $x+1$. We obligate most, all, or even “more than all” of that amount in funding offers for prospective students who would start the program in year $x+1$. After year $x+1$ starts and we know how many new students actually arrive, we know how much funding remains unobligated, and can begin distributing it among the current students.

At least for TTP, this process is generally an informal one, i.e. there is no formal application process (the situation may differ for other departments). Rather, faculty are expected to nominate worthy students, both prospective students during the recruiting cycle, and current students during the post-recruitment distribution process. In the latter case, the program may make one or more calls for nominations during the year – at the beginning of the year it will generally reserve funds for contingencies that may arise throughout the year. Continuing students may inquire directly of the graduate program staff for their program (Annemarie Schaaf for TTP) regarding the availability of such funds and the process for obtaining them. That person will probably look into your academic performance and check with your faculty advisor before making a recommendation.

The funds remaining for distribution to continuing students are limited, far outstripped by the number of unfunded students in the program at any given time. Therefore, they should be considered a “bonus” if they become available, but cannot be counted on as a steady source
of support. We consider both need and merit when deciding how to distribute them, so that a student with a 3.8 graduate program GPA is more likely to receive some of the limited funding than a 3.2 GPA student is.

- **University of California Transportation Center general fellowships**: As a member of the University of California Transportation Center, UC Davis receives a certain amount of funding each year to award as general fellowships. Unfortunately, only U.S. citizens or permanent residents are eligible for these funds (U.S. Department of Transportation’s rules, not ours!), but such students in any transportation-related graduate degree program are eligible. Students receiving UCTC fellowships are required to produce a report – either a research product, a capstone thesis or professional report – on a transportation or transportation-related subject that is reviewed and approved by faculty advisors.

  The distribution process for these funds is essentially the same as that described above for the (TTP) program-administered fellowships: they are prioritized for recruitment, faculty nominate worthy prospective students during the recruiting cycle, once the new academic year starts we see how much funding is left for distribution to continuing students, and seek nominations of worthy continuing students one or more times during the year.

- **Corporate Affiliate Fellowships**: ITS-Davis Corporate Affiliate members have broad ties and frequent interactions with ITS-Davis faculty, researchers and students. They also provide annual major gifts toward core support and new initiatives. To build our ties with these companies we match them with a “fellow” whose research aligns with the company’s interests. Students benefit with a grant for their research and through interactions with the company. The granted funds generally only offer partial support on a one-time basis (i.e. comprise a couple thousand dollars in total), and have eligibility requirements specific to each source. In response to a call to faculty for nominations, they are normally offered to continuing students based on eligibility and merit.

- **Campus-distributed fellowships**: The campus administers a number of different fellowship funds, each with its own eligibility criteria. You can apply for these funds by checking the relevant box(es) on your application. We then rank all such applicants at the program level, and send forward our rankings to the campus level, where applicants across all programs are considered and awards made. These awards are highly competitive.

- **University of California Transportation Center dissertation fellowships**: UCTC also awards a certain amount of funding to member campuses for dissertation fellowships. These are awarded to students through a competitive application and review process. To be eligible for these funds, you must have advanced to candidacy for the PhD (i.e. have passed the qualifying exam) before the application deadline. They are available to any transportation PhD candidate, regardless of program and citizenship status. For more information, see [http://www.uctc.net/grantsandadmin/dissgrants.shtml](http://www.uctc.net/grantsandadmin/dissgrants.shtml).

- **Extramural fellowships**: Past students have been successful in obtaining prestigious and competitive national fellowships, such as those administered by the National Science Foundation ([http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=6201](http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=6201)), the Federal
Highway Administration’s Dwight David Eisenhower Transportation Fellowship Program (http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/tpp/ddetfp.htm), and the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency STAR program (http://epa.gov/ncer/rfa/#CurrentStar). The amounts of these fellowships may vary from year, but to the best of our ability we will ensure that no student will be financially disadvantaged by obtaining such a fellowship. Specifically, if the amount of the fellowship is less than the funding otherwise available to the student, we will “top off” the fellowship to ensure that the total amount of funding does not decrease.

Diverse philosophies for funding beyond the first year

When we (that is, ITS-Davis, based on funds we administer) make a written funding offer to a student, that offer is firm for the stated time period (usually one year), “subject to normal academic and research progress”. It is important for you to know that different research advisors have different philosophies about commitments beyond the first year. Some advisors see an initial funding offer as a good-faith commitment to support the student for the duration of her or his studies, assuming continued normal progress. Others feel that they are not in a position to make such a commitment, or do not wish to do so for philosophical reasons – e.g. some believe it is important for students to have the experience of writing proposals to obtain their own funding.

We have accommodated these differences through variations in the relevant language in your offer letter. The two main variations are:

• “It is normal to continue to receive support for the duration of your currently declared degree objective, subject to the same conditions described above (satisfactory academic and research progress).”

or

• “During your first year, you are expected to work proactively with your faculty mentor to secure funding for the following year, and so on for the remainder of your studies.”

Bottom line: what do you need to do to get funding?

• Prospective students: You should indicate on your application that you want or need financial support (including checking the boxes for any appropriate campus-level fellowships). If you do, you will automatically be considered for the various fellowship funds mentioned in this memo, for which you are eligible. If applying to a program whose departmental home offers undergraduate courses, you will probably also automatically be considered for TA and reader positions controlled by that department. PIs with faculty research grants will also consider you for GSR appointments. PIs who have funding are generally proactive about identifying students who look promising as GSRs, but it doesn’t hurt for you to directly contact faculty members whose research interests you, to communicate that interest and put yourself on their radar screen.

Be aware that faculty receive many more such communications each year than they have funding to offer! As a candid and friendly word of advice, I would suggest expressing
specific (and preferably informed) interest about what a given faculty member specifically
does, when you contact him or her. As you can imagine, faculty members with limited time
and energy and money will be more interested in students who seem to love specifically what
they (the faculty) do, as opposed to the many students who are not differentiated in any way
from the large number who contact that faculty member each year.

I realize that this entails a considerable amount of work on your part, but I can only say
that there will always be students who stand out from the crowd with an informed and
apparently sincere interest in the research conducted by a given faculty member, so those
who do not stand out from the crowd in that way stand little to no chance of being funded
and/or mentored by faculty in our program. And may I comment that simply saying “I read
your website and your interests exactly match mine” (perhaps with a few phrases from that
website artfully sprinkled in), or “I came to know you through your paper titled ‘[randomly-
selected paper authored by the faculty member]’” does not qualify as “specific and informed
interest” – we do understand that you could say such things without having the slightest idea
of what we do!

• **Current students:** If your original offer letter contains language like “During your first year,
you are expected to work proactively with your faculty mentor to secure funding for the
following year, and so on for the remainder of your studies”, then be sure to raise the issue
of future funding with your PI no later than early in Winter Quarter of your first year here.
Even if your offer letter contains language like, “It is normal to continue to receive support
for the duration of your currently declared degree objective, subject to the same conditions
described above (satisfactory academic and research progress)”, it’s a good idea to check
with your PI sometime during Winter Quarter to confirm that (1) s/he thinks you’re making
satisfactory progress, and (2) s/he’s expecting to fund you the following year.

If you are currently un- or under-funded, you can check with your graduate program staff
to see if program funds might be available. You can also check with PIs doing research in
areas that interest you – it sometimes happens that a need arises unexpectedly, or that they
would welcome an additional pair of hands even if they weren’t proactively seeking it. Your
best recommendation for obtaining funding is outstanding performance in program-related
courses. Faculty are always on the lookout for stellar students, and it’s unlikely that such a
student would go unfunded for very long.