

Childbirth Accommodation Policy for Women Graduate Students at Stanford University

Rationale

Stanford University is committed to achieving a diverse graduate student body, and facilitating the participation of under-represented groups in all areas of research and graduate and postdoctoral training. To increase the number of women pursuing the advanced degrees that will prepare them for leadership positions in academia, industry, and government, it is important to acknowledge that a woman's prime childbearing years are the same years she is likely to be in graduate school, doing postdoctoral training, and establishing herself in a career. The Childbirth Accommodation Policy described here is designed to partially ameliorate the intrinsic conflict between the "biological" and the "research" and "training" clocks for women graduate students.

Nothing in this policy replaces the communication and cooperation between student and advisor, and the good-faith efforts of both to accommodate the birth of a child. It is the intention of this policy to reinforce the importance of that cooperation, and to provide support where needed to make that accommodation possible.

Summary of Provisions of the Childbirth Accommodation Policy

The Childbirth Accommodation Policy is intended to provide an accommodation for the demands placed on a woman by late-stage pregnancy, childbirth, and the care of a newborn. It is designed to make it possible to maintain the mother's full-time, registered student status, and to facilitate her return to full participation in classwork, and, where applicable, research, teaching, and clinical training in a seamless manner.

The Childbirth Accommodation Policy has four components. All women graduate students (including students in professional schools) anticipating or experiencing a birth who are registered, matriculated students (1) are eligible for an Academic Accommodation Period of up to two consecutive academic quarters around the time of the birth, during which the student may postpone course assignments, examinations, and other academic requirements; (2) are eligible for full-time enrollment during this period and will retain access to Stanford facilities, Cardinal Care, and Stanford housing; and (3) will be granted an automatic one-quarter extension of University and departmental requirements and academic milestones, with the possibility of up to three quarters by petition under unusual circumstances. In addition, (4) women graduate students supported by fellowships, teaching assistantships, and/or research assistantships will be excused from their regular TA or RA duties for a period of six weeks during which they will continue to receive support. (Students will not receive a stipend or salary if none was received previously, but are eligible for the Academic Accommodation Period and the one-quarter extension of academic milestones.)

Eligibility

The Childbirth Accommodation Policy applies to matriculated and enrolled women graduate students anticipating or experiencing a birth. Adoption, foster-care placement, and paternity leave are covered under existing policies governing Medical, Maternity, and Paternity Leave, as described in the Stanford Graduate Student Handbook. Birth mothers may opt to use Medical and Maternity Leaves in addition to or instead of the benefits provided by the Childbirth Accommodation Policy. Depending on the stage in her academic career, the timing of the birth, her funding source, and the level of assistance she will receive from others in caring for the newborn, a woman may find it more advantageous or feasible to take one or more quarters of leave of absence rather than remaining enrolled and utilizing the Childbirth Accommodation Policy. This may especially be the case for medical students because of the highly structured and sequential M.D. curriculum, particularly in the first two years.¹

Planning for the Academic Accommodation Period

The student should initiate discussions with her advisor(s) and departmental or school administrators at least four months prior to the anticipated birth in order to make arrangements for an Academic Accommodation Period. This will provide the lead time necessary to rearrange teaching duties for those students supported by teaching assistantships, or to adjust laboratory or other research schedules. Medical students will need to assess and, if possible, adjust the mix of classroom, research, and clinical activities. This planning period should also be used to reach agreement on a timeline for academic issues (e.g., class attendance and residency issues, Ph.D. qualifying exam and other academic milestones, field work, time-sensitive research reports on sponsored projects) that will be affected by the birth of a child and by the automatic one-quarter extension of academic requirements. It is essential that the student consult with the research advisor well in advance of the birth if the nature of her funding or the research grant conditions require that specific tasks be completed by specified dates, or if the P.I. will need to hire additional help to meet those conditions during a period of reduced activity by the woman graduate student. It is the student's responsibility to make arrangements with faculty and with departmental administrators for course completion and for continuation of teaching, research and/or clinical activities before and following the Academic Accommodation Period.

¹ Before applying for a leave of absence, a woman student should determine the implications of a leave for remaining in on-campus housing, continuation of Cardinal Care insurance, fulfilling visa requirements, eligibility for student loans and loan deferment privileges, and whether leave “stops the clock” with regard to University or departmental funding (see Leave of Absence section of the Stanford Graduate Student Handbook). She should also discuss with her research advisor how a leave, especially one longer than a single quarter, would affect time-sensitive research projects and reporting, and the feasibility of resuming the same research project on return from leave.

One of the purposes of the Childbirth Accommodation Policy is to make it possible for women to maintain their full-time student status, so that they continue accumulating units toward the residency requirement, and to avoid triggering any interruptions in on-campus housing, insurance coverage, eligibility for student loans, and deferment of student loan repayment. By remaining full-time students, the visa status of international students is not affected². While it is usually better for the woman student to remain enrolled full-time, in some cases, depending on the coursework appropriate to the stage of her academic program, part-time enrollment would be appropriate. This will require careful consultation, in advance, to ensure that the implications for academic progress, visa status, loan eligibility and deferment³, etc. have been thoroughly investigated. In completing the petition for the Academic Accommodation Period, the student may request up to two quarters of part-time enrollment. If part-time enrollment status is approved, the student will retain all privileges of the Childbirth Accommodation Policy. Independent of making this request for part-time enrollment, if a serious medical problem were to arise for mother or newborn, the woman student would be eligible for reduction in units under existing University policy.

Applying for a Childbirth Academic Accommodation Period and an Extension of Academic Requirements

Women graduate students anticipating or experiencing the birth of a child may formally request a one-quarter extension of University and departmental academic requirements and a childbirth Academic Accommodation Period. Such a period is intended to recognize the student's need for special consideration before and after the birth of a child. This Academic Accommodation Period is *not* a leave of absence from University responsibilities. The expectation is that the woman will be in residence, and, assuming good health of the pregnant woman or new mother and the infant, will remain engaged in classwork and research, and, if applicable and feasible, clinical activities, even if at a reduced level.

The Childbirth Policy is administered by the Office of the Vice Provost for Graduate Education (VPGE) through a petition process. In that petition, the woman student specifies the dates on which the Academic Accommodation Period begins and ends, with the requirement that it must fall within at most two consecutive quarters. A letter from the student's health-care provider stating the anticipated delivery date must accompany the petition. If the childbirth occurs prior to filing the petition, the accommodation period begins on the birth date.

The VPGE Office will notify the student, the student's department, and the relevant University administrative offices that the one-quarter extension of University and departmental academic requirements and the Academic Accommodation Period have been approved, along with the dates for the accommodation period.

² International students should discuss the intended Academic Accommodation Period with the Bechtel International Center at the beginning of the planning period to address proactively any unique visa issues and to consider current immigration regulations.

³ A student must be enrolled for a minimum of 6 units to be eligible for student loans and loan deferment privileges.

During and After the Academic Accommodation Period

Funding

In addition to being eligible for up to two quarters of academic accommodation, those women graduate students supported by fellowships, teaching assistantships, and/or research assistantships will be excused from their regular TA or RA duties for a period of six weeks during which they will continue to receive support.

For most Ph.D. students for whom a Teaching Assistantship is part of her support package, it should be possible to arrange the timing of teaching assignments to accommodate childbirth. During the six-week period, students supported by teaching assistantships may choose to continue in some limited capacity (e.g., grading, preparing course materials, or other non-intensive duties), in order to finish out an academic quarter, but cannot be required to do so. With advance planning, most Research Assistantship assignments can similarly be adjusted to accommodate childbirth. Most granting agencies provide for a short period of reduced activity due to health or personal issues. The support of students while they are writing or otherwise preparing the development or defense of a dissertation is typically an allowable expense on a research grant or contract if the student has already been funded to do the work related to that project.

Once a student files a petition, the VPGE Office will determine if the regulations of a funding agency allow a six-week period of reduced activity and occasional absence. If it does not, the student's salary and/or stipend and associated tuition for the six-week period will be paid from the Childbirth Accommodation Fund, administered by the VPGE Office. If continued funding would be allowed by the granting agency, but project deadlines require that a Principal Investigator hire a temporary replacement, the support for the mother may be charged to the Childbirth Accommodation Fund for the six-week period.

Students who are supported by fellowships internal to Stanford normally have their stipends distributed as lump-sum payments at the beginning of each quarter. Students supported in this manner who have had their petitions approved will see no change in their fellowship support.

Students who are supported by fellowships external to Stanford must adhere to the rules of the granting agency with respect to absences from academic and research work. If the granting agency requires suspension of fellowship benefits during the six-week period, the student will be eligible for substitute payment from the Childbirth Accommodation Fund.

Once it has been determined that the use of the Childbirth Accommodation Fund is necessary and approved, the VPGE Office will provide the department with the account information for charging the student's salary and/or stipend and associated tuition during the six-week period.

Students who do not have an ongoing commitment of financial support in the form of fellowships, teaching assistantships, or research assistantships may petition for an Academic Accommodation Period and an automatic one-quarter extension of academic requirements, but are not entitled to tuition or other funding from the Childbirth Accommodation Fund.

The student, her advisor, and her department should recognize that it might not be feasible to return to a regular TA or RA assignment immediately after the six-week period. In that case, arrangements should be made to move a teaching assignment to another quarter, to assign limited on-site duties to a research assistant, or to find an alternative form of support. These issues should be negotiated sensitively with the student's needs in mind. For her part, the student should work proactively with her department to make arrangements for ongoing support beyond the six-week period if she cannot return to her normal duties.

Coursework, Research, and Clinical Activities

Approval of an Academic Accommodation Period will stop the academic and research clocks with regard to assignments due, reports anticipated, or other class- and research-related requirements. It does not, however, waive class attendance requirements for students in the Law School or clinical training or other requirements in the Medical School. Students in other schools are expected to attend class and participate in seminars to the extent that the health of mother and newborn and the demands of caring for an infant allow. Faculty or relevant staff are expected to work with the student to make arrangements for submitting work for completion of requirements when the student returns, and to grade it promptly so as to remove any "Incomplete" notations as rapidly as possible. Faculty members are encouraged to assign "N" and "L" grades, where appropriate.

Coda

The Childbirth Accommodation Policy establishes *minimum* standards for accommodation for a woman graduate student giving birth. It is expected that advisors, academic staff, and departmental leaders will work with sensitivity and imagination to provide more than this minimum (as some are already doing), according to the particular circumstances of the woman student. For example, women whose research involves working with toxic chemicals or requires extensive travel to remote archives or field areas may need some form of accommodation during the entire pregnancy and during lactation. Taking care of an infant is time-consuming and sleep-depriving, so advisors need to have realistic expectations about rates of progress on research. For their part, new mothers need to keep the lines of communication with their departments open, and demonstrate to their advisors that they are academically engaged and making progress on coursework and research, even if it is at a somewhat slower pace than prior to giving birth. In other words, the Childbirth Accommodation Policy is intended to support—not replace—the open communication and good will that should characterize the relationship between student and advisor at Stanford University.