

**Title:** Academic Assistance Program

**Purpose:** UNC Asheville's Academic Assistance Program provides a tool for managers to support educational activities which are deemed beneficial to both the University and the employee, and which serve to develop the employee's competencies (knowledge, skills and behaviors) and which support the mission, vision and values of the University.

The Academic Assistance Program provides reimbursement of academic costs if funds are available and/or time off the job if the course is available only during working hours. The academic assistance program is not an employee benefit, right or entitlement; it is a management program for workplace development. Denial of participation in the academic assistance program is not grievable, except on the grounds of discrimination.

**Scope:** EPA non-faculty and SPA permanent full-time and part-time (half-time or more) employees are eligible for the Academic Assistance Program after satisfactory completion of the probationary period. Time-limited permanent full-time and part-time (half-time or more) employees are also eligible.

Permanent employees working less than 20 hours per week, intermittent employees and temporary employees are not eligible for educational assistance.

**Selective Service Requirement** – NCGS 143B-421.1 requires those eligible for selective service to be registered in order to be reimbursed for academic costs. The federal Selective Service law specifies that males, both U.S. citizens and immigrant aliens residing in the United States and its territories, ages 18 through 25, shall register with the Selective Service.

**Definitions:** **Academic Course** – a course/degree provided by an accredited college, community college or university. The course must provide academic credit as opposed to Continuing Education Units (CEU), to be listed in the college/university course catalog and charge tuition in the traditional meaning of tuition (as opposed to only registration fees). Accreditation must be via an accrediting agency authorized by the U.S. Department of Education.

**Ineligible Sources** – academic courses or degrees from colleges, community colleges or universities that are not appropriately accredited are ineligible for reimbursement under the Academic Assistance Program. Correspondence courses not accredited by the U.S. Department of Education or the American Council on Education/CREDIT for academic credit are also not eligible under this policy.

**Academic Costs** – charges assessed by an academic source to every person enrolling for the course. These charges are required of everyone and are neither negotiable nor discretionary for the individual enrolling in the course. Academic costs include in-state tuition, fees and course/lab fees. Course/lab fees must always be itemized.

**Extended Academic Leave** – leave the University may provide with or without pay for certain types of academic courses.

**Policy:**

UNC Asheville provides training and development for its employees designed to:

- Improve productivity, effectiveness and efficiency by development and better utilization of talents, abilities and potential of employees.
- Help employees develop their knowledge, skills and abilities so that they might become better qualified to perform the duties of their present jobs and advance to more responsible positions.
- Provide for the development of managers and supervisors capable of organizing and developing effective management systems for the accomplishment the University's goals and objectives.
- Accelerate the development of culturally disadvantaged employees whose abilities and aptitudes are underutilized because of inadequate education and training.
- Alleviate labor market shortages and reduce personnel turnover.
- Prepare employees to deal more effectively with growing social, scientific and economic problems faced by government and making use of advances in professional and vocational knowledge and technology.

**Employee and University Responsibilities**

Ensuring an employee receives adequate training and development is the joint responsibility of the University and the employee.

- The employee has an obligation for his/her own development and education, and it is expected that the employee will advance his/her own career through self-education and self-improvement.
- The University has a responsibility for training and developing its employees. It is responsible for ensuring that training programs geared to specific agency needs are planned, budgeted and established and that the employees participate in these programs. Programs may be developed with other agencies, combining programs and resources to offer training opportunities. The University will also utilize the State's universities, community colleges, and public instruction to the fullest degree possible in securing professional, management and vocational education to meet personnel development needs.
- Managers and supervisors have the initial responsibility for training and developing their employees. In fulfilling this responsibility, managers and supervisors should identify the individual training needs of their employees, and work with employees to prepare and implement plans for their development. Such plans should make use of on-the-job training that includes individual and group instruction by supervisors, formal training and educational activities, and rotational assignments to provide greater depth and a wide base of experience.

**Approved Courses**

In addition to ensuring that the academic courses/degrees are from an accredited source and provides academic credits (as opposed to CEU's), Management, when making the determination whether to provide educational assistance to take a specific course, must consider whether the course meets the criteria of being "beneficial to both the agency and the employee."

Completion of the course should have a direct benefit to the organization. The improved knowledge, skills and abilities gained by the employee should benefit the individual in completion of his/her current and/or potential job duties. Management should consider

workforce planning, succession planning and career development in approving employees to receive academic assistance.

Guidelines to consider in course selection are:

- Courses which provide knowledge and skills directly related to maintaining or improving current job skills; and also courses mandated by law or regulation as a job requirement for continued employment.
- Courses directly related to the employee's current job or a documented workforce need.

When approving courses, management must consider workforce planning in developing employees who demonstrate the ability to perform at a higher level of responsibility. Hard to recruit classifications are areas in which an employee could be approved to take courses outside his/her current classification level to meet future work needs.

Academic assistance shall not be approved for courses where management has determined that neither the course nor degree is of benefit to the agency.

The chancellor or designee may approve exceptions to the approved course policy.

**Audited Courses** – Academic courses which are audited are eligible for academic assistance; however, an employee may be reimbursed for the same course or course equivalent only once. Reimbursement requires a statement written on school letterhead and signed by the instructor that the employee attended at least 85% of the scheduled class meetings during the academic term.

**Certification / Licensing (Post Employment)** – Incumbent employees who meet minimum educational requirements for employment and for whom certification or licensing is required after employment or is deemed desirable by management and approved by the Chancellor or designee is eligible for academic assistance under the following conditions:

- Certification/licensing is mandated, or
- Certification/licensing is a policy requirement of the University.

Academic assistance is authorized for certification or licensing only if the certification or license is attained via academic course work.

**Thesis/Dissertation Research Courses** – Job-related thesis/dissertation research courses at the masters/doctoral level are restricted as follows:

- All required written examinations for the degree shall be successfully completed before the course is approved
- A maximum of 15 hours leave may be approved for each academic credit hour. All leave hours shall be used during the academic term and may not be accumulated.
- A maximum total of 9 academic credit hours are allowed for any one employee.

**Courses Taken at University Request** – Because of specific high priority skill needs of a department, employees may be requested by management to take specific courses or degree programs. Under these circumstances, the following applies:

- All limitations under the provisions of this policy are waived. Employees are still responsible for requirements for withholding taxes and FICA.
- All expenses to the individual should be reimbursed related to acquiring the necessary course or degree, to include: travel costs, examinations and administrative fees,

textbooks and other course materials. (Any books or materials paid for by the agency become the property of the agency.)

If courses taken at agency request exceed the credit hour per fiscal year limitations of the Educational Assistance Program, then the situation shall be administered under the policy provisions for Extended Academic Leave.

The designation “At Agency Request” can only be determined with the approval of the Chancellor or designee.

Courses specified as part of the employee’s improvement/development plan are not considered to be at agency request unless approved by the department head or designee.

### **Leave**

An approved course should be taken on the employee’s own time. If a course can be taken only during working hours, eligible employees must request academic leave prior to the beginning of the course allowing sufficient time for the academic assistance request to be reviewed. Academic leave may be granted unless the supervisor identifies work conditions that will not permit the employee to be absent from the job. Supervisors are encouraged to develop alternate work arrangements to complete the work assignments and also grant academic leave. Reasonable travel time as determined by the supervisor may be permitted to attend approved courses.

Management may approve academic leave, and, if approved, academic leave shall not be charged to the employee’s vacation leave.

Academic leave during work hours shall not exceed one course up to five hours of academic credit per academic term. Exceptions to the leave restriction may be addressed using the Academic Leave with Pay provisions of this policy.

**Extended Academic Leave** – Courses taken at agency request that exceed the credit hour per fiscal year limitation must follow the guidelines for Extended Academic Leave. The University may provide leave with pay or leave without pay for certain types of academic courses. The references to these specific policies are set out below.

- **Academic Leave Without Pay** – Extended academic leave without pay may be granted in accordance with the normal leave without pay policy as outlined in UNC Asheville’s Leave Policy.
- **Academic Leave With Pay** – Office of State Personnel approval is required for all SPA employees unless included in the university’s delegation agreement. EPA non-faculty approval is awarded by the Chancellor.

The University may consider any employee (permanent, probationary, trainee or time-limited) for extended academic leave to participate in job or career-related work-study, scholarship or fellowship programs based upon the following criteria:

- Verification that both labor market and organizational needs exist for development in the program requested.
- Equal opportunity provided in selection of candidates.
- Employees are informed of agency policies and procedures regarding:
  - Announcement and application procedures,
  - Screening and selection of employees,
  - Limitations and restrictions on academic courses,

- Leave, salary, benefit conditions, withholding taxes and FICA, and
- Reimbursement agreement

Requests for extended leave initiated by the employee which do not meet the above criteria will be administered according to the University’s policy on leave without pay.

**Reimbursement for Expenses**

**Academic Costs** – Eligible employees approved for academic assistance may be reimbursed for academic costs charged by the academic source at which the employee is enrolled. Academic costs include in-state tuition, fees and course/lab fees. Reimbursement of course/lab fees may require a written statement from the academic source justifying the fee as a required fee in addition to other fees. The Chancellor or designee may approve payment of unusual course or lab fees.

**Amount of Reimbursement** – Maximum academic cost reimbursements allowable by the Office of State Personnel are outlined in the following table:

Source	Amount
University of North Carolina Institutions and Institutions of the North Carolina Community College System	100% of academic costs for up to 20 credit hours per fiscal year.
All academic institutions other than institutions of The University of North Carolina and institutions of the NC Community College System	Up to the maximum academic cost charged by the UNC institutions for up to 20 credit hours or 32 quarter hours per fiscal year. This amount will be determined by OSP and published within 10 working days of the adjournment of the General Assembly and the meeting of the UNC Board of Governors to approve fees. Reimbursement of tuition and fees from out-of-state colleges/universities shall not exceed the amount as specified above.

The University may reimburse all academic costs (including in-state tuition, fees and course/lab fees - *course/lab fees must always be itemized*) or may reimburse only tuition and other academic-related fees. The University may not reimburse fees unrelated to registering for a course or a degree program, such as dorm, student union construction, athletic fees, student health service, cultural fees, etc. Other non-reimbursable expenses:

- Charges specifically related to processing or receiving continuing education units (CEUs)
- Application, examination and graduation fees
- Transportation costs
- Textbooks\* and supplies

\* See Section “Courses Taken at Agency Request”

The University may also, with a *bona fide* business justification, reduce the amount of reimbursement per employee to a set amount less than the tuition and fees and/or limit the number of courses for which any one employee may be reimbursed in the academic term.

If the University chooses to reimburse an amount less than the academic costs specified above, the University shall make this information available to all employees at the beginning of the fiscal year and apply this limitation in a fair and equitable manner to all employees requesting academic assistance in that fiscal year.

**Funding Availability:** The University manages professional development activities through a fund managed by Human Resources. A calculated amount of money is allocated annually for this program based on several factors, including the usage in prior years. Eligible employees may request academic assistance through the Human Resources Department by following the procedures outlined below.

**Tax Status** – Congress enacted the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001 that allows an employer to offer its employees up to \$5,250 in tax-free (job related and non-job related) educational assistance for undergraduate and graduate level courses begun after December 31, 2001.

*Note: University tuition waiver programs are different from academic assistance in both state law and the IRS Code. However, the withholding provisions of the IRS Code are applicable to tuition waiver programs.*

When employees of the University are granted free tuition and non-negotiable fees, the value of this tuition and non-negotiable fees must be considered a part of the allowable academic costs. Tuition Waiver programs at The University of North Carolina, including UNC Asheville, are authorized by both state law (NCGS 116-143) and governed by IRS regulation (US Code Title 26, IRS Section 117(d)(2)).

**Requirements for Reimbursement** - Management may consider any current disciplinary action for job performance or personal conduct prior to approval of the application for reimbursement.

If funds are available, the applicant shall receive reimbursement of approved academic costs upon submitting receipts and evidence of satisfactory completion of a pre-approved course. Completion is defined as “Satisfactory,” “Pass,” or a grade of “C” or better for undergraduate courses, and a “B” or better for graduate courses. An “Incomplete” shall not be reimbursed until a final grade is issued.

Requests for reimbursement should be submitted within 30 days of completion of the course or receipt of grade.

**Employee Transfers and Separations** – If an employee transfers to another state agency, and subsequently completes and approved course, the employee should submit a request for reimbursement to the employing agency. The employing agency is responsible for processing the request per the provisions of this policy, and providing reimbursement if funds are available. Employees who separate from State service, except by reduction in force, are not eligible for reimbursement.

## **Procedures:**

The *Academic Assistance Application* must be approved prior to the start date of the course.

### **I. To request academic assistance, the employee will:**

Complete Part I (first page) of the PD-136 *Academic Assistance Application* form and the *Checklist for Taxability of Tuition Waiver & Academic Assistance Reimbursement* form and submit the forms to his/her immediate supervisor prior to enrollment or in accordance with University schedules to allow time for review, approval and notification to the employee. The application must be approved prior to the start date of the course. The application must include:

1. The course title(s), institution and location, class schedule, and whether the course is for academic credit, audit or certification/licensing.
  2. A description of the course(s) and how the course(s) meets the criteria under the approved courses section of this policy.
  3. The amount of academic cost reimbursement, specifying tuition and/or fees, and any course/lab fees requested.
  4. A specification of requested time off from work for academic leave, including travel time.
  5. If time off from work is requested, a statement demonstrating unavailability of the course except during work hours.
- B. The *Academic Assistance Application* form is first reviewed and approved by the supervisor. This form must also be signed by the department head (if different than the supervisor) and the Vice Chancellor. The *Academic Assistance Application* and the *Checklist for Taxability of Tuition Waiver & Academic Assistance Reimbursement* are forwarded to Human Resources. The Chancellor, or designee, may approve an application received after class begins if circumstances warrant.

## **II. Approval of Application**

Employees applying for academic assistance must receive a written response from management regarding approval/disapproval of academic assistance requests, which notes any changes in the application or conditions of approval. The response must also indicate whether reimbursement for the course is subject to withholding taxes or budgetary restraints. Management may consider overall job performance or any current disciplinary action prior to approval of the application.

## **III. Maintaining Records**

The Department of Human Resources is responsible for retaining records, on a fiscal year basis, of academic assistance activity. This information shall be reported annually to the Office of State Personnel upon request and shall include the following:

- Number of employees participating in the program,
- Amount (tuition and fees) reimbursed
- Number of employees granted Educational Leave
- Number of employees taking courses at agency's request
- Number of employees granted Extended Educational Leave
- Number of employees taking courses for mandated/required certification/licensing.

Source Document: NC Office of State Personnel Policy Manual, Section 9

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