

Academic Leave of Absence (ALA) Accommodation for Graduate Students

University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (UWM) Graduate School’s Academic Leave of Absence (ALA) policy allows graduate students to temporarily suspend pursuit of their degree goals in order to take care of certain life events. The policy may be most useful for dissertators subject to the continuous registration requirement, but it can stop the clock on time limit to degree for all students in doctoral, master’s, and certificate programs. The main goal of the ALA policy is to facilitate retention to graduation, without unduly prolonging time to degree.

Students may request ALA as early as six months prior to the semester the leave is to start. A leave may be granted to students for illness (either physical or mental) or injury, to enable them to provide care or assistance for child, family or dependents, for military leave, or for other personal reasons. Based on the reasons, there are five different types of ALA.

- *Medical*: For illness or injury.
- *Parental*: Birth, foster or adoption of a child.
- *Family*: In accordance with State of Wisconsin guidelines, family includes spouses, domestic partners, minor children, adult children with disabilities that require care, parents, parents-in-law, and domestic parents-in-law.
- *Military*: to accommodate members of the military called to active duty or other service.
- *Personal*: Personal needs not covered by the above four types, such as other family or financial crises, or special unusual circumstances.

Students who are on an approved ALA suspend their active study for a semester or more, during which they do not make progress toward their degree. During an approved ALA, the student is considered to meet the Graduate School’s continuous enrollment requirement, and the Graduate School’s and the respective program’s minimum credit requirements for the semester. For doctoral students in coursework, an ALA will not be counted as an interruption of continuous residency.

Students are expected to return from an ALA. They do not need to be re-admitted and they are not charged a fee to return to active status. However, they must complete a simple re-entry process to request a return to active status. Students return from an ALA with the same academic standing as they started their ALA. Their time limit to doctoral milestones and their time limit to degree will be extended by the length of their ALA.

Students with prior funding commitments from UWM, such as Research Assistants or Teaching Assistants, should discuss with their programs whether their funding will continue upon return. During a student’s ALA programs are encouraged to pause the clock on any time limits related to the period of funding. After a student’s ALA programs are encouraged to continue funding at the same level whenever possible.

When a student is on ALA, they will not pay segregated fees. As a result, UWM may limit their access to facilities supported by segregated fees, such as recreational facilities, child care services, and Norris Health Center.

UWM also may limit access to non-public areas of other UWM buildings, research laboratories, or libraries. However, the student will have access to basic services such as email privileges in order to remain connected to their program.

Process to Request an Academic Leave of Absence

Students should ask and plan for an academic leave of absence as early as possible. The graduate program must be involved in the planning process. Students are required to meet with the respective graduate program representative or their designee to plan for a leave of absence. The student and the graduate program representative should discuss possible alternatives to a leave of absence. The program will issue a positive or negative recommendation for approving the ALA through a procedure designed and maintained by the Graduate School.

Once a student decides that they need to take a leave and has received a recommendation from their graduate program, the student submits a formal request to the Graduate School using the standard Request for Exception form and process. The request must specify the type of leave and the period of the leave. The request for leave must contain the following supporting documents appropriate to the type of leave requested, collected and evaluated by the program before it issues its approval:

- *Medical*: A recommendation from a licensed health professional.
- *Parental*: Basic information/documentation about the child and childcare responsibilities.
- *Family*: Basic information/documentation about the affected family member and care responsibilities.
- *Military*: Official documentation of call to active duty or other service.
- *Personal*: A brief documentation of the need.

International students must also submit a written recommendation from the Center for International Education's International Student and Scholar Services office (ISSS). Students with a UWM issued F-1 or J-1 visa must consult with ISSS to determine how immigration regulations may impact their ability to take a leave of absence. International students are strongly encouraged to discuss their return to UWM with CIE before beginning an ALA.

A student may switch their type of leave if the need changes. In this event, the student may contact their program and the Graduate School to update the terms of their leave by submitting a new request form.

Roles and Responsibilities

- **Student**: A request for an ALA is initiated by the graduate student. Students are required to meet with the graduate program representative or their designee to plan for a leave of absence. Whenever possible, students must discuss tentative plans for re-entry prior to requesting the leave. Students are responsible for understanding the implications of taking an ALA, and for carefully considering the possible impact on non-academic matters such as financial aid, visa status, health insurance, or campus employment. Students are responsible for compiling the documents and submitting first to the program and then to the Graduate School.

- **Faculty Advisor:** The student's faculty advisor will assist the student in requesting an ALA. The advisor also will assist with planning for re-entry. Other advisors, such as the Principal Investigator of a project employing a Research Assistant seeking an ALA, also may be involved.
- **Graduate Program Representative or designee:** The graduate program representative or designee is responsible for making recommendations to the Graduate School regarding the student's requested ALA.
- **Dean of Graduate School or designee:** The Dean of the Graduate School has final authority on the approval of the requested ALA. The Dean or designee reviews the supplemental information and the recommendation from the program in making this decision. Decisions will be made in a timely way, normally within two weeks.

ALA Timing and Limits

Students are not eligible to request an ALA until they have completed one semester of study in their program. A newly admitted student who has registered may seek an admissions deferral, rather than a leave of absence, if the request and approval occur before the end of the third week of classes in the initial semester of the program.

Leaves should be requested for the shortest time needed to ensure progress to degree. The time limits for the different types of leaves are as follows (only academic year semesters are counted).

- *Medical:* A maximum of two consecutive semesters to be granted at a time, including the semester in which the leave begins.
- *Parental:* A maximum of two consecutive semesters to be granted at a time, including the semester in which the leave begins.
- *Family:* A maximum of two consecutive semesters to be granted at a time, including the semester in which the leave begins.
- *Military:* The duration of the active duty assignment.
- *Personal:* A maximum of two consecutive semesters to be granted at a time, including the semester in which the leave begins.

Students who have extreme situations may request an extension for additional semesters during an ALA by submitting a second request form to the Graduate School after program approval. If the duration of leave extends beyond three consecutive academic year semesters, the students will be discontinued and required to apply for readmission when they return.

Prior to requesting an ALA in the middle of a semester, students should be encouraged to explore options with their graduate program to remain registered for the current semester. If it is not possible for students to remain registered, students may request to begin an ALA in the middle of a semester.

In order to begin an ALA in the middle of a semester, students may need to withdraw from their courses for the semester. Withdrawing from a semester may have implications on a student's visa status, tuition payments, loans, fellowships, employment and benefits. Please consult appropriate campus units and staff regarding these implications. A student who requests an ALA

mid-semester may also request Incomplete grades in each course if they have done satisfactory work in a substantial fraction of the course requirements. Such requests are not granted automatically, and the decision lies with each course instructor.

Return from an ALA

Students are expected to remain in contact with their programs while on leave and resume their studies as soon as possible. **Prior to return, students must notify the Assistant Dean of the Graduate School at gradschool-staff@uwm.edu of their intent to return at least 4 weeks prior to the start of the semester.** In the case of medical leave, the program or the Graduate School may request a recommendation from a licensed health professional.

Students on F-1 or J-1 visa must consult CIE's International Student and Scholar Services and get their authorization prior to returning.

Appendix 1:

Other Considerations for Students Requesting ALA

The following addresses frequently encountered issues for students requesting an ALA. This guide will be maintained and updated by the Graduate School to help students considering an ALA make informed decisions. This Appendix is a sample of a guide that will change over time, and not part of the policy itself.

Medical Documentation

Please do not submit detailed medical records with your request for an ALA for medical reasons. A brief letter from a doctor affirming that a leave is justified and endorsing the requested period will usually suffice.

UWM email and network access

Students on an ALA retain email and network access for two semesters.

Financial Aid

Students considering an ALA should contact UWM's Financial Aid office to consider the possible implications. For instance, students who have an outstanding loan balance and take an ALA may no longer be able to defer monthly payments. Students who take an ALA in the middle of a semester may need to pay back some of the Financial Aid they received for that semester.

Health Insurance

Graduate students receive health coverage from several different sources, including health insurance benefits from Teaching or Research Assistantships, and access to Norris Health Center available to all students who pay segregated fees. Graduate Assistants who have employee health insurance may be able to retain their coverage for three months by paying out of pocket their portion of the UWM subsidized premiums. After three months they may be able to retain their coverage by paying the full premiums out of pocket. Students planning an ALA should consult the UWM Benefits Office in advance.

Segregated Fees

While on an ALA students will be exempt from paying segregated fees, and denied access to services and facilities supported by those fees, including recreational facilities, child care services, and Norris Health Center. Students must be enrolled in order to pay segregated fees and make use of the services supported by those fees.

University Housing

Students living in university housing who intend to request an ALA should contact the UWM University Housing Office to determine eligibility for residence during the leave.

Fellowships

Students on Advance Opportunity Program fellowships normally can defer the stipend and tuition remission provided by the award until they return from their leave of absence. Recipients of the general Graduate School Fellowships cannot defer their awards. All fellowship recipients

who begin an ALA in the middle of the semester can draw the remainder of the stipend and benefits for that semester only.

Libraries

Remote and online library access is controlled by the campus identity management system. Students who are not enrolled in classes typically lose ePanther access, including access to library services. Academic programs can sponsor an ePanther account for students who are on ALA: <https://www-ssl.uwm.edu/uits/ePanther/sg/>. Students who are not enrolled while on ALA will also lose regular access to the library's circulating collection and Interlibrary Loan service. While on ALA they can access the circulating collection and ILL for a small fee by joining the library's Community Borrowing Program.

Graduate Assistantships

Leaves of absence from employment for Teaching or Research Assistants fall under different policies than leaves of absence from enrollment as a graduate student. A student may remain enrolled in courses but arrange a leave of absence from teaching. However, a student may not take an ALA and remain employed as a Teaching or Research Assistant. We encourage programs that have renewable Teaching or Research Assistantships to extend the remainder of the support for their students on approved ALA. However, we recognize that employment depends on the availability of positions, and that this might not always be possible. For instance, Research Assistants who take an ALA might return after the grant that funded their employment has expired. We encourage programs to try to arrange other employment, while recognizing the challenges involved. For leaves of absence from Teaching or Research Assistantships, please contact the Human Resources administrator in your school or college. Individual programs and individual schools or colleges may have their own policies governing leaves of absence from employment.

International Students

Leaves of absence involve special complexities for international students. All international students must consult CIE before requesting an ALA, as described above, and should consult with CIE about re-entry well in advance of returning.