

## Academic Assistance

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### Purpose

The purpose of the academic assistance program is for workforce planning and development. It provides a tool for managers and employees to support academic activities that directly relate to the organization's identified knowledge, skills, and behaviors (organizational competencies), and which support the mission, vision, and values of the organization. The academic assistance program **is not** an employee benefit, right or entitlement; it is a management program for workforce development. Denial of participation in the academic assistance program is not grievable, except on grounds of discrimination.

Utilization of the academic assistance program shall be identified, described, and documented in the employee's individual development plan. This provides a measurable link between the employee's increased competency and the agency's workforce planning efforts.

The academic assistance program provides reimbursement of academic costs if funds are available at the agency level, and/or time off the job if the course is available only during working hours.

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### Eligibility

Full-time and part-time (half time or more) permanent, probationary and time-limited employees are eligible for Academic Assistance.

Probationary employees are eligible after satisfactory performance for a period of not less than six months as determined by management.

Temporary and part-time (less than half time) are not eligible.

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### Selective Service Registration

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

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### Origination of Request

Requests for academic assistance may be initiated by the employee or management.

Employee initiated to:

- Maintain/enhance current skills
- Develop new skills/competencies for career development within the agency

Management initiated course to:

- Ensure employees have mandated licensure or certification
- Address a shortage of skilled workers in specific classifications
- Develop a pool of employees for workforce planning
- Build specific high priority skills
- Address performance expectations of the employee as specified in the performance management improvement plan.

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Agency:

The designation, "management initiated," can only be determined with the approval of the agency head (at Departmental/University level), or designee.

Job-related degrees and corresponding non-work related courses within a degree program may be approved at the discretion of management.

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### Academic Sources

Academic courses/degrees from accredited community colleges/colleges/universities via traditional classroom, video-based, distance learning, web-based, e-Learning and certain correspondence courses (see Ineligible Sources below) are eligible for approval.

Academic courses are defined as a course/degree provided by an accredited community college/college/university. The course must provide academic credit (as opposed to CEUs), 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 recognized by the US Department of Education.

**Ineligible Sources** - Correspondence courses **not** accredited by an accrediting agency recognized by the US Department of Education or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation for academic credit are not eligible under this policy.

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### Approved Courses

Management, when making the determination whether to provide academic assistance to take a specific course, must consider the basic principle: "deemed 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

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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. Examples of this are:

- technicians working on a college degree to fill professional engineering positions or
- health care workers participating in a nursing program, and
- courses included in an academic program which are necessary to complete a management approved degree program.

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 agency head 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

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and signed by the instructor that the employee attended at least 85% of the scheduled class meetings during the academic term.

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### **Certification/Licensing (Post-Employment)**

Incumbent employees who meet minimum educational requirements for employment and for whom certification/licensing is required after employment or is deemed desirable by management and approved by the agency head or designee are eligible for academic assistance under the following conditions:

- Certification/licensing is mandated or
- Certification/licensing is a policy requirement of the employing agency.

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

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### **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. A leave of absence with or without pay may be approved in compliance with the Educational Leave Policy located in Section 5 of the State Human Resources Manual.

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### **Reimbursement**

**Academic Costs** - Eligible employees approved for academic assistance may be reimbursed academic costs charged by the academic source at which the employee is enrolled. Academic costs are defined as 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. 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.

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**Amount of Reimbursement** - Eligible employees may be reimbursed academic costs charged by the academic source where enrolled. Agencies/universities may reimburse all academic costs as specified in the paragraph "Academic Costs," or reimburse only tuition and other academic-related fees, but not fees unrelated to registering for a course or a degree program, such as dorm, student union construction, athletic fees, student health service, cultural event fees, etc.

Agencies 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 an academic term.

Agencies/universities choosing to reimburse an amount less than the academic costs specified in the paragraph "Academic Costs" shall make this information available to all employees at the beginning of the fiscal year and at the beginning of each semester, and apply this limitation in a fair and equitable manner to all employees requesting academic assistance in that fiscal year.

<b>Source</b>	<b>Amount</b>
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 OSHR 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.

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**Special Graduate Programs** - Graduate professional programs (medicine, veterinary medicine, business, etc.) with unusual course/lab fees, tuition or other fees will be considered on a course by course basis. The agency head or his/her designee may approve payment of these academic costs.

**Non-reimbursable Expenses** - Reimbursement shall **not** be made for:

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

**Other Financial Assistance** - Financial assistance from any other financial aid program shall not be duplicated under this program. However, the difference, if any, between such aid and the allowable costs under the Academic Assistance program may be reimbursed.

**Free Tuition** - When employees of an educational institution or any other State agency are granted free tuition and non-negotiable fees, the value of this tuition and non-negotiable fees must be considered as part of the allowable academic costs.

Advisory Note: Tuition waiver programs at institutions of The University of North Carolina are authorized by both state law (NCGS 116-143) and governed by IRS regulation (US Code Title 26, IRS Section 117 (d)(2)). The state academic assistance policy is not applicable to tuition waiver programs.

**Tax Status** On January 1, 2013, Congress passed the American Taxpayer Relief Act that permanently extends employer provided education assistance (Section 127 of the Internal Revenue Code). This allows an employee to exclude from income up to \$5,250 per year in educational assistance at the undergraduate and graduate level.

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**Requirement 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 evidence of satisfactory completion of a preapproved 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 an 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.

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### 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.

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### Courses Taken at Agency Request

Because of specific high priority skill needs of the agency, 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 academic 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 agency head (at Departmental/University level), or his/her designee.

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

### Administration Responsibility

Each-State agency is delegated responsibility for, and authority to administer the program within the provisions of this policy in a fair, consistent and equitable manner.

The agency should designate an agency coordinator to assist with the delegation and consistent implementation of this policy throughout the agency.

State Equal Employment Opportunity policies and procedures are applicable.

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### Procedures

To receive academic assistance, an employee shall:

- Complete the application (PD-136 or agency equivalent) and forward it to the immediate supervisor
- Submit the form prior to enrollment or in accordance with agency schedules to allow time for review, approval and notification to the employee. Agency heads, or a designee, may approve an application received after class begins under the following circumstances.
  - Funding for the academic assistance program was delayed and enrolling in the class was contingent upon the program's approval.
  - Employee was asked by management to enroll in the class after its inception.
  - An administration error was made by the educational institution or the agency.
  - There was an unforeseen, unavoidable major crisis.
- Provide written notice to the agency as to the reason an application is being submitted after a class begins. The written notice will become part of the employee's academic assistance file.

The application must include:

- The course title(s), institution and location, class schedule, and whether the course is for academic credit, audit or certification/licensing.

A description of the course(s) and how the course(s) meets the criteria under the approved courses section of this policy.

- The amount of academic cost reimbursement, specifying tuition and/or fees, and any course/lab fees requested.
- A specification of requested time off from work for academic leave including travel time.
- If time off from work is requested, a statement demonstrating unavailability of the course except during work hours.

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### 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 should consider overall job performance, including active documented coaching, performance improvement plans, letters or any other current disciplinary action prior to approval of the application.

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### Maintaining Records

Each agency 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 Human Resources upon request and shall include the following:

- Number employees participating in the program,
- Amount (tuition and fees) reimbursed,
- Number employees granted educational leave,
- Number of educational leave hours granted with pay and without pay,
- Number employees taking courses at agency's request,
- Number employees granted extended education leave,
- Number of extended educational leave hours granted with pay and without pay,
- Number of employees taking courses for mandated/required certification/licensing