Guidelines for Award Offer Letters for International Graduate Students

Notes about Award Offer Letters for International Students:

All awards that originate from graduate school general funds – University Graduate Awards (GAS, UGA and/or GIA) — require that the student receiving the award be provided an offer letter each academic year the student receives the award (whether the student is new or returning).

This guide is tailored to international student letters. International students have very specific requirements that must be fulfilled to obtain all documents needed to apply for student visas. Because of this, it is absolutely crucial that all guidelines are followed. Some guidelines are reiterated from the “Important Information about the Admission/Application Process for Graduate International Students” document previously issued by International Services. This guide is meant to assist you in drafting award offer letters. Be sure to refer to all documents and training materials provided from International Services for the full international admissions process. It is also very highly recommended that you attend the International Admissions Training sessions offered by International Services in November.

Your department must meet the guidelines outlined here. Your department is free to use the templates the Graduate School has provided, which meet all guidelines. However, you may provide your own letter offering acceptance to new students to your graduate program as you see fit or you may add additional information, requirements or restrictions beyond those imposed by the graduate school. You may only need one of the following letters, depending on the kinds of awards your unit dispenses. We do not dictate letters for awards dispensed from within your own college or unit.

Prior to sending any offer letters to students, you should email Colleen O’Connell (colleen.oconnell@uc.edu) to notify her as to whether you are using the provided templates in their entirety or to provide her a copy of the modified template you will be using for each award type your department will be offering.

*** Note: Do not combine letters for tuition awards with letters for stipend awards, as this doing so may cause the tuition award to be seen by the IRS as taxable income to the student. ***

From the previously referenced “Important Information about...” document:

The International Services Office also emphasizes that it is important that admission decisions and financial awards be made as early as possible for international students. The visa application process for many students can take 90 days or more to complete. If your admission decision for Fall Semester is not sent to the student until March or April, chances are good that the student will not get a visa in time to reach the University before classes begin. In addition, many times a student’s decision to attend one school over another is determined by which school gets the I-20 to him/her first. Departments must update the ADMISS-DECISION screen in UniverSIS showing admission and confirmation and the INTL-FIN-AWARD screen reflecting type and amount of financial awards being offered. The ADMISS-DECISION screen MUST be updated prior to entering data into the INTL-FIN-AWARD screen or the award data will not be reported properly.
Items or Notes that Must be Included in the Admissions Offer Letter for International Students:

1. You must identify the specific degree level (Masters or Doctoral) and field of study. Just stating the name of your program is not sufficient.
2. It is extremely important for International Students that you include the combined total worth of all awards provided by the university. The combined total worth will need to be in exact dollar amounts.
3. You must include “International students must document financial support for all years of study to be issued a “Certificate of Eligibility” (Form I-20 or DS-2019) for a student visa. The amount of support you must document annually is $42,811. The (combined) total worth of (Award Name/Names) can be counted as a source of financial support as funds from the University of Cincinnati.”
4. You must also include “Enclosed you will also find four documents from UC International Services. They are: (1) a “Dear Prospective Student” Letter; (2) an “Estimated Annual Expense” Form; (3) a “Financial Certification Form”; and (4) an “I-20 Inquiries” form. Please complete the “Financial Certification Form” and return it to UC International Services with the required supporting documents.”
5. The student must be informed of any required orientations or tests necessary for admission.
6. Include a note directing students to follow up with International Services for questions about the “Financial Certification Form.”

Guidelines for the Three Awards Types:

University Graduate Assistantship Appointment (UGA) Letter

1. The language to be used in the offer letter for a University Graduate Assistantship needs to be “stipend” for clarity and accountability, as this is the term used by the State of Ohio. However, you may equate this term with a more suitable descriptor in the letter. In addition, for international students, you must identify the specific degree level (Masters or Doctoral) and field of study. Just stating the name of your program is not sufficient.
2. In describing the amount of the award, you must explicitly state the total worth of the stipend for the whole academic year in exact dollar amounts, with the per semester amount following this in parentheses. You must also note that it will be paid in bi-weekly increments throughout the semester. Then you should give the amount the student will receive each bi-weekly pay period. University Graduate Assistants must receive an award that equates to a minimum hourly rate of $14.93 per hour. If you have questions about how to ensure this rate is met with the stipend amount, contact your College’s Business Office.
3. Assistantship responsibilities need to be detailed.
4. A graduate assistant (teaching, research or administrative) receives a stipend that obligates the awardee to no more than 20 hours per week of services (50% FTE). If the award is less than 50% FTE, the awardee obligation is prorated (i.e. 10 hours for 25% FTE). International students cannot work more than 20 hours/week while school is in session.
5. Continuation of the award is based on the awardee maintaining a GPA of 3.0 or above. Graduate Assistants are required to enroll for a minimum of 12 graduate credit hours.
6. You should also inform them about mandatory assistantship orientations they must attend.
7. Language in fifth paragraph in the template about the IRS needs to remain as written in the template.
8. Reminder – Students who have attempted 174 semester hours (or 140 if holding a master’s degree from another institution) are not eligible for a university award enrollment beginning with the semester in which said student will reach the 174 (or 140) attempted hours.
9. Last paragraph – “Please indicate your acceptance of this offer of support ...”. Per Council of Graduate School resolution, your deadline for response should not be sooner than April 15 for Fall applicants. However, for international students, you should still emphasize that returning the acceptance as soon as possible is imperative to ensure that the visa application is complete in a timely fashion. The returned signed letter is the student’s acceptance.
10. The returned letters do not need to be sent to the Graduate School for review.
University Graduate Assistant Scholarship (GAS) Appointment Letter

1. A University Graduate Assistant Scholarship (GAS) is only for students who are graduate assistants. The award covers all or part of a graduate assistant’s tuition and general fees.

2. For international students, you must identify the specific degree level (Masters or Doctoral) and field of study. Just stating the name of your program is not sufficient.

3. In addition, it is extremely important for International Students that you include the exact worth of the scholarship in actual dollar amounts (including any fees that are covered) and expressly state any fees that are not covered and the cost of the fees that must be paid by the student.

4. Programs should detail what the tuition scholarship does (credit hour range and general fees) and does not cover (i.e. ITIE fee, student health insurance, program fees). Please note the tuition award can cover any fees other than the ITIE fee. The colleges have the option to cover no fees, all fees (except ITIE), or some of the fees.

5. Continuation of the GAS award is based on the awardee maintaining a GPA of 3.0 or above. The program may stipulate higher GPA requirements.

6. Because the students are graduate assistants, and therefore receiving a University Graduate Assistantship, they are required to enroll for a minimum of 12 graduate credit hours. NOTE: Students funded by outside grants (and the funding is therefore not provided by the Graduate School or the University) do not need 12 credit hours. Be aware of special requirements for international students.

7. Reminder – Students who have attempted 174 semester hours (or 140 if holding a master’s degree from another institution) are not eligible for a university award enrollment beginning with the semester in which said student will reach the 174 (or 140) attempted hours.

8. Last paragraph – “Please indicate your acceptance of this offer of support ...”. Per Council of Graduate School resolution, your deadline for response should not be sooner than April 15 for Fall applicants. However, for international students, you should still emphasize that returning the acceptance as soon as possible is imperative to ensure that the visa application is complete in a timely fashion. The returned signed letter is the student’s acceptance.

9. The returned letters do not need to be sent to the Graduate School for review.
University Graduate Incentive (GIA) Award Letter

1. A University Graduate Incentive Award (GIA) is for students who are not graduate assistants. For international students, you must identify the specific degree level (Masters or Doctoral) and field of study. Just stating the name of your program is not sufficient.

2. Additionally, because the award is for students who are not graduate assistants, no service is required in return for the award.

3. The award covers all or part of a graduate assistant’s tuition and general fees. Programs should detail what the tuition scholarship does (credit hour range and general fees) and does not cover (i.e. ITIE fee, student health insurance, program fees). Please note the tuition award can cover any fees other than the ITIE fee. The colleges have the option to cover no fees, all fees (except ITIE), or some of the fees. It is extremely important for International Students that you include the exact worth of the scholarship in actual dollar amounts (including any fees that are covered) and expressly state any fees that are not covered and the cost of the fees that must be paid by the student.

4. Continuation of the GIA award is based on the awardee maintaining a GPA of 3.0 or above. The program may stipulate higher GPA requirements.

5. Students receiving Graduate Incentive Awards are required to enroll for a minimum of 10 graduate credit hours.

6. Reminder – Students who have attempted 174 semester hours (or 140 if holding a master’s degree from another institution) are not eligible for a university award enrollment beginning with the semester in which said student will reach the 174 (or 140) attempted hours.

7. Last paragraph – “Please indicate your acceptance of this offer of support ...”. Per Council of Graduate School resolution, your deadline for response should not be sooner than April 15 for Fall applicants. However, for international students, you should still emphasize that returning the acceptance as soon as possible is imperative to ensure that the visa application is complete in a timely fashion. The returned signed letter is the student’s acceptance.

8. The returned letters do not need to be sent to the Graduate School for review.