



**EPA**  
**STAR and GRO Fellows**

**Handbook**

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## INTRODUCTION

Congratulations!

Welcome to the EPA competitive graduate fellowship programs. If you are receiving this handbook, it means you are either an active Fellow or you are a finalist for either the STAR or GRO Graduate Fellowship. “STAR” is an acronym for Science to Achieve Results and it reflects the Environmental Protection Agency’s commitment to excellence in science and in its use as an indispensable tool in environmental decision making. “GRO” stands for “Greater Research Opportunities,” a program through which we are working to provide to students in universities that historically have not received large amounts of federal research support. Both programs are extremely competitive. In 2005, we received nearly 2,100 applications just for the STAR program and we funded approximately 130. We are committed to your educational and professional success and we hope you will make the most of this opportunity.

We have tried to minimize the rules and paperwork burdens of this program, but we cannot eliminate them entirely. Some of the requirements are legal and are not in our power to control. Others are necessary to protect you, to enable us to manage the program effectively, or to allow us to comply with the reporting requirements imposed on us. We compiled this short handbook to help you understand how the program works, what you can expect from us, and what we expect from you throughout the program. Most of the questions that you will have during the life of the fellowship are answered here, so we urge you to read it and refer to it first when you are seeking answers about the program. Of course, we are always happy to assist you if the handbook does not answer your questions.

### **A. Purpose of the Program**

The purpose of both the STAR and GRO graduate fellowship programs is to encourage promising and committed students to obtain advanced degrees and pursue careers in environmentally related fields. This goal is consistent with the mission of EPA, which is to provide leadership in the nation's environmental science, research, education, assessment, restoration, and preservation efforts. Both the public and private sectors will need a steady stream of well-trained environmental specialists if our society is to meet the environmental challenges of the future. While there is no obligation to EPA beyond performing to the best of your ability in your studies and research, we sincerely hope that you will dedicate yourself to a meaningful environmental career.

### **B. Administration of the Program**

The STAR/GRO Fellowship Program is administered in EPA by the National Center for Environmental Research (NCER), which is a component of the agency’s Office of Research

and Development. Your primary contact in EPA, your Project Officer, works in this office. See the section below on Finding Your Way around EPA for more information about how we administer this program.

**C. Provisions of the Program**

The fellowship provides a maximum of \$37,000 per year of support, divided as follows:

- up to \$12,000 per year for tuition and academic fees;
- an annual expense budget of up to \$5,000, to be paid directly to the institution on behalf of the fellow;
- a monthly stipend of approximately \$1,667, paid directly to the student.

See “Frequently Asked Questions” for more information about these funding categories.

**D. Duration of the Program**

- We will support students in a masters program for up to 24 months.
- Students in doctoral programs are eligible for up to 36 months of support.
- Fellowships must begin in the fall term of the year after you apply.
- After the first year, we do allow deferrals for up to one year, with prior written permission from the project officer. This will require an amendment to your fellowship. Except in cases of extreme hardship, such as major illness, we do not allow first year deferrals.
- The fellowship must be terminated when the degree is conferred, even if the initial award period was for a longer duration.
- In certain rare situations, EPA may grant an unfunded extension of up to one year, to enable the student to complete the research. These “no-cost” extensions are not automatic and will only be granted on a case-by-case basis.

**MANDATORY FELLOWSHIP ACTIVITIES**

Technically speaking, anything in your award terms and conditions is mandatory, but there are a few program requirements we wish to highlight here. These requirements are all explained in greater detail on pages 13 and 14.

**STAR/GRO Conferences** – As a condition of your award, you are required to attend these conferences, which we are currently holding every other year.

**Fellows Inventory** – You are required to keep your information updated in the Fellows inventory, during the time of your fellowship and for ten years after you leave the program.

**Publication Disclaimer** – You are required to acknowledge EPA’s support on any paper, poster, or other publication or presentation you create that relies on data that was supported at least in part by the fellowship. For exact language, consult the Frequently Asked Questions section under “Publication Disclaimer.”

## **FINDING YOUR WAY THROUGH EPA**

The National Center for Environmental Research (NCER) is responsible for reviewing, recommending funding for, and managing research grants and fellowship programs. NCER is a component of EPA’s Office of Research and Development and is located in Washington, D.C.

The Grants Administration Division (GAD) is the organization within EPA that is empowered to award grants and fellowships. This division, located in Washington, D.C., is responsible for issuing, modifying, and terminating all grants, fellowships, and other assistance, except for those originating in one of EPA’s ten regional offices. GAD is responsible for developing all Agency assistance policies and for enforcing compliance with those policies.

The Financial Management Center in Las Vegas, Nevada (FMC-LV) is responsible for the financial administration of contracts, grants, cooperative agreements, and fellowships issued by EPA headquarters. This is the office that disburses your money.

## **ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

Within EPA, there are three individuals who play key roles in managing your fellowship. You may be confused about who does what, but it is your responsibility to know who these people are and what they can and cannot be expected to do for you.

### **Project Officer (PO)**

The PO is located in NCER. This is probably the person who notified you that you were a fellowship finalist. The PO is your primary contact for all matters except those relating directly to the process of issuing checks and is the first person you should contact if you have questions. The PO recommends approval of all changes that require an amendment. The Grant Specialist will not grant any amendments without written approval from the PO. Any other changes to your fellowship must be approved in writing by your PO *before* you undertake them. The PO is the one who should tell you when it is time to submit renewal paperwork, abstracts, or other technical or programmatic information during your fellowship.

### ***What You Can Expect From Your Project Officer***

PO's are assigned somewhat at random, so it is likely that your PO will have no expertise in your area. Some PO's have technical backgrounds and some do not, but all are expected to be expert in the workings of the fellowship program. The PO should think of you as a customer, an individual whose education is important to them. Because most PO's manage many fellowships and some have other responsibilities as well, it may not be realistic to expect them instantly to recognize your project title or to know without prompting the details of your situation. However, they should immediately recognize your name and have quick access to the particulars of your curriculum, research, and fellowship. You can expect them to alert you to impending due dates and give you sufficient guidance to accomplish necessary administrative activities. You can expect them to provide immediate answers to basic questions (that are not already covered in this handbook) and to get back to you within a reasonable time if a particular question requires additional research. It is fair to expect a PO to answer your calls or e-mails within 24 hours if they are in town and on duty. If they are not available when you call, you can expect them to answer within 48 hours after their return. You can expect them to process your renewals within six weeks of submission or to provide a reasonable explanation for any delays. PO's should maintain complete and up-to-date files that include records of all relevant conversations or mail exchanges, as well as official records. You can expect them to behave professionally and respectfully at all times.

At any time, if you do not believe that your PO is serving you adequately, please bring it up first with the PO in a collegial manner. If you remain unsatisfied, please go to the NCER web site ([http://www.epa.gov/ncer/contact\\_us.html](http://www.epa.gov/ncer/contact_us.html)) and express your complaint, using specific examples. Your PO's supervisor will receive your complaint and address it with the PO. You may also use this method to commend your PO.

### ***What Your Project Officer Can Expect From You***

Your PO can expect you to provide required documentation in a timely way. If you plan to be out of the country or otherwise difficult to reach for an extended time, you should notify your PO and provide an alternative contact, in case problems arise or information is required. Your PO can request periodic informal updates on the status of your research and expects an annual written status report from you and your advisor. If you are having difficulties, your PO needs to know about them as soon as possible so that he or she can assist you in solving them. Your PO can expect you to read and remember the requirements of your award and to comply with them at all times. Your PO expects that you will consult this handbook for information first before calling to ask questions. You are expected to maintain a file of your fellowship materials, including this handbook, and to be certain that you understand all relevant rules and limitations before you take action, such as purchasing equipment or traveling abroad. You are expected to attend the periodic STAR Fellows Conference unless you are specifically excused. Should your name, address, or fellowship status change, you are expected to notify your PO as soon as possible. At the end of your fellowship, you are expected to provide a complete and accurate final report, as directed by the terms of your award and any clarification provided by your PO.

### **Grant Specialist (GS)**

Although it is likely that you may never have any direct contact with your GS, this person is important to you. The GS is the one who processes your application, submits the award offer, issues all modifications to your fellowship, and notifies you, the PO, and the finance office of relevant actions.

### ***What You Can Expect From Your Grant Specialist***

Your GS is assigned based on the state shown in the permanent address block on your application. When communicating with your GS, you must always refer to your award number, as the GS will not recognize you by name and their automated files are stored and sorted by award number. Each GS is an expert in the workings of grants and fellowships; they manage hundreds of projects, though, so do not be disappointed if they do not know who you are when you call. You can expect the GS to process your award and modifications efficiently, to retain official records, and to notify appropriate individuals of actions taken. Your GS should be respectful at all times and if your question is one that should properly be directed to them, they should be expected to provide an answer in a reasonable amount of time and convey it to you in a helpful manner.

If you ever have trouble obtaining information from your GS, please contact your PO.

### ***What Your Grant Specialist Can Expect From You***

The GS expects you to read your award and accompanying documents thoroughly before signing and returning them. You are expected to follow all instructions given in the award and modification packages and to comply with all conditions of the award. The GS expects you to consult first with your PO on questions pertaining to the fellowship before asking them for assistance. Should your name, address, or fellowship status change, your GS must be notified as soon as possible.

### **Financial Specialist (FS)**

Unless otherwise notified, your FS is Luis (“Rick”) Rivera, of the Financial Management Center in Las Vegas, Nevada. Rick issues the checks for all of the STAR fellowships. In addition, you will submit your Completion of Studies Notice (EPA form 5770-9) to Rick when you complete the fellowship. Whenever you have to contact Rick, you must include your fellowship number, to help him locate your file. Rick can be reached by e-mail at [rivera.luisE@epa.gov](mailto:rivera.luisE@epa.gov) or by phone at 702-798-2495.

### ***What You Can Expect From the Financial Specialist***

The FS is responsible for the financial management of over 300 fellowships, as well as numerous other activities, it is not reasonable to expect the FS to know who you are when you call or to look up your fellowship number. You may, however, expect him to be an expert on financial management and to have sound advice about how to handle any funding difficulties that may arise. You can expect him to respond to your inquiries in a timely way

and to correct any funding anomalies that arise. Once he receives the proper paperwork, he should issue all checks by the fifth of the month in which they are due. He should also notify you of any problems that he encounters. You can expect the FS to conduct his work in a responsible and efficient manner.

### ***What the Financial Specialist Can Expect From You***

You must notify the FS immediately of any changes in address, name, or other status in your fellowship that might affect issuance of checks. If we have overpaid or underpaid your stipend, tuition, or fees, you should notify the FS and your PO as soon as possible. If it is necessary to contact Rick regarding a funding problem, you are expected to provide all of the necessary information in a coherent and effective way and to treat him with respect as he attempts to solve your problem. You are expected to send Rick the Completion of Studies Notice, as described in your award package.

### **University Personnel**

Each university operates differently, but someone at the institution should be responsible for receiving your tuition and fee payments and coding them to the proper account. Someone should establish an expense account in your name and manage it on your behalf.

If at all possible, the university should NOT mix your tuition and fee money with your expense account. This complicates reporting and can result in an overexpenditure from your expense budget, for which you would be responsible.

## **KEY PHASES OF THE FELLOWSHIP**

### **Application Phase**

What you first submitted to EPA was a pre-application. We used this document and supporting paperwork to review your qualifications. By now, you know that you are a finalist for the award. This status means that you have passed the merit review process and that NCER has decided to recommend funding for you. Because of a quirk in the laws pertaining to assistance such as fellowships, you do not receive any “official” notification that you will be a fellow until EPA sends you the fellowship agreement. However, being a finalist is the closest possible thing to being a fellow until you have the official paperwork in hand.

***You may not notify anyone that you are an EPA STAR or GRO fellow until you receive the fellowship agreement in the mail.***

### **Submitting your Application**

To begin the process of making the fellowship official, you must submit an application. The application package consists of the following items:

- C EPA Form 5770-2 – Fellowship Application (two pages, plus two pages of instructions). Your package may also include a “Certification Regarding Debarment, Suspension, and Other Responsibility Matters.” This form is no longer required.
- C Questionnaire for Potential New STAR or GRO Fellows
- C Tuition and Fees for the Upcoming Year, attested by the university
- C A statement of tenure
- C Request for Clearance of Foreign Travel, if applicable
- C Project Abstract (limited to one single-spaced page with one inch margins)
- C Project Synopsis (limited to 595 characters, including spaces)
- C Status letter from your advisor
- C Transcripts from all institutions you have attended

With this handbook, you should receive instructions for completing and returning this package.

### **Processing your Application**

The application has a fairly long journey ahead of it, once you submit it. Here are the minimum stops along the way:

1. Your Project Officer prepares a recommendation for funding and forwards that through the NCER chain of command for approval.
2. NCER sends the request to the Grants Administration Division (GAD), where it is assigned to a Grant Specialist to process.
3. The Grant Specialist processes the fellowship agreement and gives it to the Award Official, who is the only one authorized to make a formal offer.
4. Once the award offer is signed, EPA is required by law to hold it for five working days in case your congressional representative wishes to notify you of the offer.
5. After the five day congressional hold, GAD mails the award package (including the fellowship agreement) to you to review, accept, and sign.
6. The award is not official until GAD receives your signed acceptance and an Activation Notice, which is included with the award offer.

At any point in this process, you may be asked for additional information.

### **Contents of the Award Package**

Your award package contains seven important documents. They are:

- 1) ***Offer Letter:*** This letter provides instructions for completing the award and contact information for the financial specialist and the grant specialist.
- 2) ***EPA Form 5770-8: Fellowship Assistance Agreement:*** This is the official offer of award. It is not official until you sign where indicated, make a copy to retain, and return the original to EPA, as directed in the package. Please review this document carefully

for correctness. *Should you find any mistakes, include an explanation as a cover note, making your acceptance contingent upon the correction of those items.* We provide two copies of this document, for your convenience. The front page of the fellowship agreement contains several useful pieces of information:

- a) The Assistance ID Number – See below under “Frequently Asked Questions” for more information about this number.
  - b) Name and Phone Number of Project Officer. Please note and record these. Your Project Officer is your primary contact and you will need to know how to reach him or her. The Project Officer retains your official project file.
  - c) Name and Phone Number of Grant Specialist. Note and record these. The grant specialist is the individual in the Grants Administration Division who maintains your official administrative file. Should you need official information about your award and amendments, you will need to contact this individual.
- 3) ***Fellowship Assistance Agreement Terms and Conditions*** – This document lays out reporting requirements, legal limitations, and other conditions of the award. You must understand these conditions before you accept the award. Signing the award obligates you to abide by these terms.
  - 4) ***EPA Form 5770-7: Award Activation Notice*** – EPA’s Financial Management Division needs this document to release your funds. To complete the Activation Notice, follow the instructions in the offer letter and the terms and conditions. Consult your Fellowship Agreement and type or neatly print the Payee Title and Address that appears there on the Activation Notice in the block, “Mailing Address for Institution Checks.” EPA cannot send payment for Tuition and Fees to the educational institution until this information is provided. This Notice must be signed by the same “sponsor” whose name appears on the Fellowship Assistance Agreement, usually your graduate advisor. You must ensure that the Activation Notice is also sent to the Grants Specialist referenced on the notice in Washington DC.
  - 5) ***Completion of Studies Form (EPA Form 5770-9)*** – You will need to submit this form to the financial specialist at the end of your fellowship, to close out your award. You can fax this document to the following number: 702-798-2423.
  - 6) ***Direct Deposit Form***– Complete and return this form to enable EPA to deposit your stipend money directly to your account each month. This is the fastest and safest way to handle your stipend money. For more on direct deposit, consult the “Frequently Asked Questions.” For most assistance activities, EPA uses a standard form called ***ACH Vendor Form (SF-3881)***. Beginning with the entering class of 2006, EPA will use a special form for STAR and GRO fellows. This form does not have a form number.
  - 7) ***Fellowship Regulations (40 CFR, Part 46)*** – These are the Federal rules that pertain to all fellowships managed by EPA.

### **Initial Award Phase**

When your Grant Specialist receives the Activation Notice and the signed Fellowship Assistance Agreement, he or she will notify the Las Vegas Finance Center and your funds will be released. This is when you officially become a Fellow.

*The single most common reason for missing fellowship payments, either for tuition & fees, stipends, and expenses is that students have failed to return their signed awards and Activation Notices. Don't let this happen to you!*

### **Renewal Phase**

In late winter, you will be notified by your PO that you must submit updated information to renew your fellowship. This information consists of a renewal questionnaire similar to the one you filled out with your initial application, updated transcripts, financial information, a progress and status report from the advisor, and additional data. Once you submit this information, your PO will prepare a recommendation for funding and submit that to the Grants Administration Division. You can expect to receive your renewal offer within eight to twelve weeks of the time it is submitted to the PO. *You must sign and return this offer before it can take effect.*

### **Completion (or “Close-Out”) Phase**

At the end of your agreement, it is necessary to close out the award. If you are due to graduate before the end of your fellowship award period, it is you who must initiate the process of closing out your agreement. You may not receive or spend any funds after your graduation date, even if funds remain in your account.

There are three steps to the close-out process:

#### ***Completion of Studies Form (EPA Form 5770-9)***

You must complete this form and submit it to the address given in your award package. EPA prefers you to submit the Completion of Studies form either immediately before or after the termination date of your fellowship, but by regulation you must submit it within 90 days or you are in violation of the terms of your agreement.

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#### ***Final Technical Report***

At the same time that you submit your Completion of Studies form, you must also send a final technical report to your Project Officer. At present, this report consists of the following information:

- a. A short report that includes:
  - i. The title of your dissertation
  - ii. Up to five keywords associated with your research interests to assist in internet searches
  - iii. The specific degree (such as Ph.D. in Marine Science)
  - iv. The degree award date and the name of the awarding institution
  - v. Your final transcript, if you are completing the fellowship before receiving your degree
  - vi. Any academic or professional honors or awards you have won or patents you have received
  - vii. A bibliography of publications that are completed or in press as well as invited presentations, testimony, quotes in major publications or other exposure related to your work
- b. An electronic copy of your dissertation, if available. If it is not yet available, include an outline, a progress report cosigned by your advisor, and any information that is available. If you will not be graduating when your fellowship ends, explain why and when you estimate that you will graduate. If you are leaving the program without completing your degree, explain why. In addition, your advisor must submit a letter stating whether you left the program in good standing. Please do NOT submit a hard copy of your dissertation unless we specifically ask for it.
- c. A bibliography and electronic copies of all publications that resulted at least in part from the fellowship
- d. A brief electronic summary report for us to post on our website.
- e. Plans for future employment, including the name and address of your prospective employer, the position you will occupy.
- f. Post-fellowship personal contact information, if available.
- g. (Optional) An alternate contact, in case we lose track of you. This can be a parent, sibling, or other person who is likely to be in permanent contact with you.
- h. Personal contact information after the termination date

### ***Updating the Fellows Inventory***

See below under “Fellows Inventory” for more information on this action.

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### **Award Number**

This is also known as your “Assistance ID Number” or your “Fellowship Number.” This number can be found on the front of your initial award and on your amendments. It looks something like this: “FP-#####-01-0.” The prefix may also be “GR.” Older fellowships include the prefix “U.” Please remember to include this number on every piece of correspondence regarding your Fellowship. Only the prefix and the next six digits apply. The “01” means that you are in the first budget period. This number will not change during the life of the Fellowship. The “-0” at the end means that the agreement has not been amended. As we add funds to your agreement or modify it in other ways, this number will reflect those actions.

### **Changes in Address, Name, or Contact Information**

Fellows are responsible for notifying EPA of any change in their contact information as soon as possible. Because there is no automated way to ensure that all necessary parties receive the updated information, it is best if you simultaneously notify your PO, the grant specialist, and the financial specialist of the changes when they occur. Also, you must update the information in the Fellows Inventory.

### **Changing Advisors**

A change in advisor is taken seriously by EPA. Any request to change advisor will be studied carefully. We require a written request from the student and a statement from the advisor as to the advisability of the proposed change before we will make a decision to approve. If EPA refuses to approve a change and you change anyway, you will forfeit your fellowship.

### **Changing Institutions**

To justify a change in institution, EPA requires several items, including these:

1. a detailed explanation of the change being requested;
2. the proposed new advisor and program of study;
3. proof of acceptance into the new program and institution,
4. the address, phone, and e-mail address for your new advisor;
5. the effective date of the change;
6. the new payee address;

7. a statement from the original advisor about why you are leaving the program and whether you left in good standing;
8. an explanation of any delays that the transfer would cause in the expected date of graduation.

Approval is granted on a case by case basis.

### **Changing Projects**

Although Fellows are selected in part on the basis of the project and program area in which they apply, EPA understands that on occasion it may be in the student's best interest to make a change. With an appropriate and sufficient justification and concurrence from the project officer in advance, we may agree to approve such a change. Approval is not automatic, however, and is granted on a case by case basis.

### **Computer Purchases**

See below under Purchases Over \$1,500.

### **Deferrals**

EPA does grant deferrals of up to one year so that you can avail yourselves of other opportunities without losing your fellowship. Except in cases of extreme hardship, such as illness, we do NOT allow deferrals in the first year. Anyone who accepts the STAR Fellowship must be prepared to begin in the fall term of the year in which they are accepted. Deferrals are not granted automatically. Fellows who wish to obtain a deferral must obtain prior written permission from their PO. Your request must include the reason for the request, the exact dates you intend to be gone from the EPA fellowship program, and a statement from you and your advisor about the impact of the deferral on your educational and professional goals and progress. If you are planning to attend another program in the interim, such as a Fulbright Scholarship or internship, you must provide the name of the program or employer, the position you will occupy, and a contact.

### **Direct Deposit of Stipends**

EPA strongly urges fellows to sign up for direct deposit of their stipends. A direct deposit form is included with your original award package. Stipend amounts are usually credited to the account on or about the fifth of the month. If your account does not reflect the stipend deposit by the tenth of the month, contact Rick Rivera in Las Vegas (702-798-2495 or [rivera.luisE@epa.gov](mailto:rivera.luisE@epa.gov)). Be certain to have your award number handy.

### **Discrepancies in Tuition and Fee Amounts**

Often, the actual tuition and fees will be different from what EPA originally provides. Perhaps the final tuition was not yet announced by the university at the time we submitted the paperwork for your award. Perhaps you decided to take an additional course or you learned that you were not eligible for in-state tuition rates. Within the bounds of the program, EPA will provide any necessary funds for tuition and fees, ***but you must notify us immediately of the discrepancy***. If you are requesting additional funds, you must provide a statement from the bursar, a university web site reference, or other proof to justify the request.

### **Domestic Travel**

Fellows may pay for program-related domestic travel using their fellowship expense funds. Most trips do not require approval. Any single purchase, such as a plane ticket, that exceeds \$1,500 must be approved in advance. See below (“Purchases Over \$1,500”) for more information.

### **Eligibility**

If your eligibility status changes, you must notify your PO immediately. Applicants must be citizens of the United States or its territories or possessions, or be lawfully admitted to the United States for permanent residence. Resident aliens must include their green card number in their pre-application. This number may be verified with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Students do not need to be enrolled in or formally accepted in a full-time graduate program at the time they apply for a fellowship, but they must produce proof of enrollment or acceptance before the fellowship is awarded. Students must be pursuing a masters or doctoral degree in an environmentally related field of specialization (see fields of specialization below). Students who have completed more than two years in the masters program or four years in the doctoral program are not eligible. Federal employees must terminate their employment before accepting a STAR or GRO fellowship.

Students receiving a GRO fellowship may lose eligibility if they transfer to a different institution. Contact your Project Officer to discuss any potential transfers, to be certain you understand the implications of the transfer on your fellowship.

### **Expense Budget**

As part of your fellowship, EPA provides an annual expense budget of \$5,000. This budget remains available to you for the life of the fellowship. Any unspent funds from one year carry over to the next year. At the end of the fellowship, however, all unspent funds revert to EPA. Your original award includes a list of allowable expenses to serve as a guide for your use. If you have any questions about whether an intended expense is allowed, contact your PO for permission in advance. If you make purchases without permission that are later determined to be unallowable, you will held liable for these costs.

The expense budget is paid directly to the institution, to be made available to the student as needed for necessary expenses. Allowable expenses include items and activities for the direct benefit of the student's education, such as health insurance, books, supplies, equipment, assistants, and travel to research sites and technical meetings.

Institutions are discouraged from charging an administrative fee for managing this account. However, if they insist, they may charge a fee not to exceed 2% of the total expense budget. This arrangement is strictly between the student and the university.

Universities should be discouraged from mingling expense money and tuition and fee funds. At any time, they should be able to provide an exact accounting of their expenditures for tuition, fees, and expenses. Mingling the accounts complicates that process and causes confusion.

### **Fellows Inventory**

EPA is required to track the careers of the fellows we fund. NCER maintains a database that enables us to answer the necessary questions about the program (such as "How many fellowships have you given to students in <<insert name of state>> ?") and to demonstrate the effectiveness of the program, which is necessary to preserve our funding and to respond to periodic audits. The most significant demonstration of the program's effectiveness is the ability to show that we have provided fellowships only to the most deserving students and that our fellows have gone on to have important careers in environmentally related fields.

This database is only as good as the information in it. Simply put, we cannot demonstrate the success and value of the fellowship programs unless you comply with the reporting requirements.

At the start of your fellowship, NCER will give you a user name and password. We request that you assist us by entering and updating your information periodically, both during your fellowship and for ten years after it ends. This information is securely kept. Besides you, no one can access this information except your project officer and the data base management staff. EPA does not sell or share any personal information with anyone. We only use it to generate reports about the program as a whole, such as the number of fellows from a certain state or the number of fellows who were funded in certain disciplines. We do keep personal information such as contact information, but we only use this to contact you for updates or to notify you of opportunities, such as the chance to review journal articles or to serve on a peer review panel.

You are not required to provide demographic information, although we strongly urge you to provide it because EPA is required to provide periodic reports on certain demographic parameters. Any demographic information we report will be in aggregate and cannot be traced to individual fellows.

### ***Mandatory Data Reporting Tasks for Fellows***

- **Enter relevant information about yourself into a secure online data base when you enter the program.**
- **Update this information as needed while in the program**
- **Update this information for 10 years after leaving the program, whenever you have:**
  - **A name change;**
  - **New contact information;**
  - **A new professional position;**
  - **New publications.**

### ***Fly America Act***

Fellows are required to abide by the provisions of the Fly America Act, as mentioned in the terms and conditions of your award. This law says that individuals who are flying on U.S. federal dollars must travel only on American carriers except in some extremely unlikely situations. Cost may not be cited as a justification for ignoring the law. Failure to comply with the Fly America Act constitutes noncompliance with the terms of your award and may result in early termination, criminal liability, or both. You will also be liable to repay the government for any illegal costs you incurred.

### ***Foreign Travel***

Foreign travel is not prohibited under this fellowship. However, EPA provides only \$5,000 per year in expense money, some of which must be reserved to attend the annual STAR Conference.

All proposed foreign travel must be cleared in advance by both EPA's Office of International Affairs and the US Department of State. You may not travel until you are assured by your PO that the project is approved. You must submit your request for foreign travel to your PO at least eight weeks in advance of the proposed trip. If you cannot provide this advance notice, we cannot guarantee that your trip will be approved before your estimated departure date. A copy of the format for requesting clearance to travel abroad is attached as Appendix B.

### ***Health Insurance***

EPA may not pay your health insurance directly, even if it is considered a mandatory fee by your university. You may use your expense budget to pay for health insurance.

### **Intellectual Property Rights**

The fellow maintains all rights to any publications that result from the research conducted under the fellowship. Fellows must acknowledge the EPA fellowship support, however, in any publications or presentations.

### **Inventions**

Consult your Project Officer if you create any new patentable devices or processes during your fellowship. Special rules apply. In most cases, you will retain all rights to the invention, as long as you allow EPA free access to the invention.

### **NSF Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grants**

Fellows are NOT eligible to receive NSF Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grants while also receiving support under the STAR or GRO fellowships. There has been some confusion about this issue in the past.

### **Other Assistance**

Students are not prohibited from receiving other assistance during the period of this award, **but you may not receive any additional FEDERAL assistance.** Grants, fellowships, or scholarships from private or other university sources are allowed, but the fellow does have to account for this additional assistance. Fellows may receive compensation while they are working as Research Assistants for their advisors, even if the advisor's funding comes from federal sources.

### **Outside Employment**

Outside employment is not specifically prohibited under the STAR Fellowship, although the primary purpose of the award is to free the student from the pressures of having to work to support themselves while they conduct their studies. Students will be expected to reveal the sources of outside employment, including the number of hours they worked, amount of payment, and source of funds.

### **Overpayment of Stipend**

You are responsible for monitoring your stipend payments. Any time you believe you have been paid a stipend that you should not have received, you must notify your PO and the Finance Office as soon as possible. If you leave the program early, but you have already received a stipend payment for the next month, you must return it to EPA immediately.

### **Overpayment of Tuition or Fees**

EPA closely budgets the fellowship account. To be certain that we have enough money to cover all of our fellowship obligations, we ask you and your institution to notify us immediately of any significant overpayments of tuitions and fees. Each year, the university must provide a statement of the estimated balance that will remain in the fellow's tuition and fee account at the end of the academic year. Except in the last year of the fellowship, any overpayment of tuition will be deducted from the next year's request. Overpayments that remain in the account at the end of the fellowship must be returned to EPA.

### **Ownership of Equipment**

Unless you purchase an item that costs more than \$5,000, any material item that you purchase under this fellowship belongs to you in perpetuity. It is not the property of EPA and cannot be claimed by the university. In the unlikely event that you buy something that costs more than \$5,000, EPA can theoretically claim it, although we rarely do. Talk to your project officer about how to handle this situation.

### **Personal Expenses**

The only personal expense you may charge to your expense account is health insurance. You may not use your expense account to pay for dental expenses, rent, insurance other than health insurance, etc. In rare cases, your PO may approve non-traditional uses of the expense budget if it is clearly related to your research and there are no other reasonable solutions. Some real-life examples include: purchasing a skiff to take deep water samples in an area where renting is too expensive; purchasing a motorcycle to travel to and from a remote research site in the third world; paying rent on a small house during a three-month research stay in an area where hotel rates are inflated.

### **Power of Attorney**

If you will be out of the country, in the field, or otherwise difficult to reach for an extended period of time, you should consider granting a limited power of attorney to someone locally, who can sign documents relating to the fellowship on your behalf. This is especially important if you plan to be away during the time in which your award or amendments are due

to arrive. Without a valid signature on the agreement within 30 days of the time we offer it, your fellowship may be rescinded. It is not difficult to grant a limited Power of Attorney.

### **Publication Disclaimer**

Fellows may publish during or after their fellowship. You are required to acknowledge the fellowship when referring to any data or research effort that was supported at least in part by the fellowship. The following standard language is usually sufficient:

“The research described in this paper (poster, presentation, etc) has been funded wholly or in part by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under the Science to Achieve Results (STAR) Graduate Fellowship Program [or Greater Research Opportunities (GRO) Graduate or Undergraduate Program. EPA has not officially endorsed this publication and the views expressed herein may not reflect the views of the EPA.”

### **Purchases over \$1,500**

EPA does not closely monitor most charges from the expense budget. We prefer instead to leave that to the student and the university to work out. However, we do require prior written approval before you purchase personal property costing \$1,500 or more, such as a computer or microscope, etc. Appendix A provides instructions for requesting permission to make such purchases.

### **Research Assistanceships**

Students may receive compensation as Research Assistants for their advisors while they are STAR or GRO fellows, even if the original source of funding for the advisor’s work includes Federal funds. Fellows must declare their RA ships in their annual renewal questionnaires.

### **Returning Funds to EPA**

At the end of the fellowship, or in the case of a single overpayment of more than \$5,000, the university is responsible for returning any unspent tuition and fee money to EPA. All unspent expense money must be returned to EPA at the conclusion of the fellowship. Fellows who receive stipend payments they are not entitled to must return them to the Agency. Send all overpayments to EPA at this address:

US EPA  
Las Vegas Finance Center Lockbox  
PO Box 371293M  
Pittsburgh, PA 15251

### **STAR/GRO Fellows Conference**

Every even numbered year, NCER sponsors a conference that provides an opportunity for Fellows to meet and exchange ideas, present their projects and results to date, grapple with real-world environmental decision making issues, and meet influential officials from EPA and other public, private, and non-governmental organizations. Fellows are expected to attend these conferences and to present posters. Attendance at the conference is mandatory. You must obtain express permission in advance from your project officer if you need to miss the conference.

### **Stipend**

Stipends are paid directly to the students on a monthly basis. The monthly amount should be credited to your bank account by the fifth business day of the month. The stipend is paid each month that the fellow is enrolled as a full time student, either taking a full course load or pursuing research on a full time basis. At its discretion, the student's institution may supplement a Fellow's stipend from institutional funds in accordance with the supplementation policy of the institution. However, fellows may not receive any additional stipend directly from Federal sources.

Stipends are taxable. For reasons that are beyond the control of NCER, EPA does not withhold these taxes and does not report the income to the IRS. Fellows are still responsible for paying them, however. At one time, the IRS had a publication (#520) that described how to handle stipends in this case, but this publication is no longer in their library. EPA cannot give tax advice: Fellows are urged to consult a tax professional about making estimated tax payments and filing for refunds.

### **Tuition and Fees**

EPA pays the tuition and academic fees directly to the institution at the beginning of each term. In cases where the annual tuition and fees exceed the allowable \$12,000, the student is responsible for the additional amounts. EPA does not pay for health insurance as an academic fee, even if such insurance is required by the institution. However, students may pay for health insurance from their expense budget.

## **CONCLUSION**

Please feel free to ask any questions you may have at any time. We are here to help you and we want your fellowship experience to be memorable and positive. We welcome your questions, comments, and suggestions about the handbook or the program. Welcome to the STAR/GRO Fellowship family!



## **APPENDIX A: Justification for Purchases over \$1,500**

Revised 6/6/05

Under the rules of the STAR Graduate Fellows program, you are required to provide a programmatic and economic justification for any proposed single purchase over \$1,500. In most cases, you must also provide estimates from at least three vendors. If you follow the guidelines herein, your project officer will have all the information necessary to make a decision to approve or disapprove a request. You may submit your request by e-mail, snail mail, courier, or fax.

1. Describe the reasons why you need the purchase, particularly in terms of your educational and research requirements.
2. In the case of computers or other equipment, lay out the specifications of the purchase you desire, in terms of your fellowship needs. Within reasonable limits, you may provide for future needs or expectations. For example, do not attempt to save money by asking for the bare minimum of memory if you have reason to believe that you may need additional memory in the next couple years. If an oversized monitor would be of practical use to you in your work and you are willing to spend your equipment money to purchase one, then ask for one. Just justify it. On the other hand, if you ask for a 20 inch plasma screen or a virtual reality headset, we are going to have questions.
3. Give us at least three estimates, with verification information such as a web site or a contact phone number.
4. If you strongly prefer a system that is not the lowest priced, you will need to justify that. Acceptable justifications might be reliability statistics, service availability, etc.
5. If you prefer an item that can only be gotten from a single source we will need a justification for the sole source purchase and a comparison of configuration options. Again, if you prefer a configuration that is more expensive, you must justify it.

We are here to help, not hinder, and your project officer's focus will be on helping you to get what you need. Feel free to contact your project officer for any additional advice or questions you may have as you prepare your request.

According to the programmatic conditions of your award, any approved purchases that cost less than \$5,000 belong entirely to you. Approved purchases costing more than \$5,000 will either be returned to EPA or kept by you, at the discretion of EPA.

## **APPENDIX B: Procedures for Obtaining Approval for Foreign Travel**

**Revised August 2005**

### ***RULES***

1. You may not travel abroad using EPA money without first obtaining written permission from your project officer and from EPA's Office of International Affairs (OIA). In some cases, OIA must also obtain permission from the U.S. Department of State.
2. Anyone who travels abroad on Federal money **MUST** abide by the provisions of the Fly America Act, no matter how tempting it may be to take that Iceland Air flight that is \$800 cheaper. No exceptions.
3. OIA requests at least six weeks lead time for an approval. Your project officer may also need some time, sometimes up to a week, depending on work load. Please plan accordingly.

### ***PROCEDURES***

As soon as you know that you may one day be considering a foreign trip that will be paid for, at least in part, with fellowship money, you must write the project officer with the following information:

1. Proposed dates of trip
2. Destination(s)
3. Purpose of trip (If you are presenting a talk or poster, please indicate the topic)
4. Estimated total cost of trip
5. Estimated cost to be paid by EPA
6. Source of other funding
7. If the trip involves research, provide a brief description of the work to be done.
8. If research involves sampling local flora, fauna (including humans), water, soils, or sludge, what permits are necessary, do you have the permits, and if not, do you anticipate any problems obtaining them?
9. In-country contact, if known
10. Web site for meetings or other documentation

Your project officer will use the information you submit to prepare a request to OIA. You may not travel unless you are notified by the project officer that the trip has been approved. The approval will be sent to the PO and the PO will notify you when the trip is approved. If the trip date is approaching and you have not heard that you may go, contact your PO for confirmation that it is okay to go.