



ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES

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TUITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

AUTHORITY

These Administrative Procedures were last amended by the Executive Committee on November 3, 2021.

APPLICATION

These Administrative Procedures apply to Merit System employees who have successfully completed new-hire probation. If any portion of these Administrative Procedures is inconsistent with the Practice or applicable collective bargaining agreements, the language in those documents shall prevail.

PURPOSE/BACKGROUND

These Administrative Procedures outline the responsibilities for the implementation of the TAP. They were originally issued by the Executive Director on October 15, 2003, to implement M-NCPPC Administrative Practice 2-31, Tuition Assistance Program (TAP). Since the Program's initial adoption, these Procedures have been amended as follows:

- July 29, 2005: Updated to clarify program requirements and the application/review process for use of the tuition benefit.
- November 17, 2006: Updated to reflect higher tuition reimbursement amounts.
- July 1, 2009: Updated to reflect higher tuition reimbursement amounts.
- Apr 26, 2016: Updated to reflect higher tuition reimbursement amounts, and to ensure conformity with current Administrative Procedures standards, by including sections that describe the authority for issuance of the Procedures and document amendments; updated terminology and references, and clearer explanations of existing provisions.
- June 19, 2018: Updated to reflect higher tuition reimbursement amounts.
- September 17, 2018: Updated to require that when TAP funds are used for colleges or universities, these institutions must be accredited by a recognized accrediting agency; Administrative Leave is not applicable for courses taken during work hours, and Department Heads may waive TAP repayment if the employee dies, goes on Long Term Disability, or in extenuating circumstances.

PURPOSE/BACKGROUND (Continued)

- November 3, 2021: Updated to increase the available assistance each fiscal year from \$1,800 to \$2,000 for full-time Merit System employees and from \$900 to \$1,000 for part-time Merit System employees; clarify that foreign language and American Sign Language (ASL) courses are eligible for Tuition Assistance; and, clarify that educational institutions for which an employee may attend with funding from the Tuition Assistance Program must be accredited by an organization recognized by the United States Department of Education.

REFERENCES

- M-NCPPC Administrative Practice 2-31, Tuition Assistance Program
- M-NCPPC Merit System Rules and Regulations

DEFINITIONS

The Commission: The governing body of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (“M-NCPPC” or “agency”) which is comprised of ten members; five from each of the agency’s two Planning Boards for Montgomery County and Prince George’s County.

Fiscal Year: The 12-month accounting and operational period from July 1 to June 30 within which M-NCPPC operates.

The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission: The organizational entity. For purposes of this Practice, the terms “M-NCPPC” or “agency” shall be used to reference the organizational entity.

OVERVIEW/ PROCEDURES

The Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) assists with the reimbursement of training and education that enables employees to perform more effectively in their current positions and allows for career development. Practice 2-31 establishes the overall program requirements for TAP. These Administrative Procedures describe the administrative aspects of those requirements including eligibility requirements, program criteria; and the application and approval process. They also describe the responsibilities of the departments and employees for the TAP.

These Procedures provide guidance in the following areas:

- I. Eligible Employees
- II. Criteria for Tuition Assistance Program Benefits
- III. Application to Participate in, and Approval of, TAP Benefits

OVERVIEW/PROCEDURES (Continued)

I. Eligible Employees

Tuition assistance is available to Merit System employees who have completed new hire probation and attained career status. The TAP benefit may not be granted for any class that begins prior to the employee's successful completion of his/her new hire probationary status.

II. Criteria for Tuition Assistance Program Benefits

A. Course Criteria

Tuition assistance funds may be used only for training and courses provided by institutions accredited by an agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, including:

- Colleges or universities,
- Vocational, technical, or trade schools, and
- Professional, scientific, or technical institutions.

Courses may not be credit by examination courses (courses in which credit is obtained solely by taking an examination).

Tuition assistance may be provided for accredited courses based on the following criteria:

1. "A" priority is assigned to courses that enable employees to perform more effectively in their present jobs. A course that meets these criteria will be funded first.
2. "B" priority is assigned to courses that prepare employees for career development or different responsibilities in the agency. A course that meets these criteria will be funded second.

Examples of courses that may qualify for priority "A" or "B" include, but are not limited to:

- Foreign language coursework to support and enhance customer service and interpretive services, and
- American Sign Language (ASL) coursework.

B. Fiscal Year Maximums

Eligible employees may request TAP benefits on a semester/session basis. Total fiscal year requests may not exceed the maximum fiscal year benefit established by the Commission. While employees are permitted to request the full fiscal year tuition in any one semester/session, such requests shall be considered in conjunction with budgetary limits established by the employee's department for the semester/session.

SECTION II(B), FISCAL YEAR MAXIMUMS (Continued)

The current fiscal year maximums that may be available to employees are as follows:

1. Full-time Merit System career employees may receive up to two thousand dollars (\$2,000) commencing for fiscal year 2023 (effective July 1, 2022).
2. Part-time Merit System career employees may receive up to one thousand dollars (\$1,000) commencing for fiscal year 2023 (effective July 1, 2022).

III. Application to Participate in, and Approval of, TAP Benefits

A. Application to Participate in the Tuition Assistance Program

1. The employee is responsible for selecting the appropriate course(s) and following the institution's admission procedures. Any commitment made to an education or training institution by an employee without prior approval of the Department Head is exclusively the employee's responsibility.
2. To apply, an employee must:
 - a. Complete the Application for Tuition Assistance form (sample copy attached), and make three (3) copies of the original, completed form (total of 4 forms);
 - b. Indicate a choice of method of payment for tuition assistance. The employee may select one (1) of the following methods for payment of tuition assistance, based on the institution's tuition assistance procedures:
 - (i) A check that is made payable to the institution for the employee to present at registration.
 - (ii) A reimbursement check that is made payable to the employee who has paid the tuition. If this method is followed, the applicant must send their Department a copy of verification of payment.
 - (iii) A letter authorizing the institution to bill the employee's department for tuition fees consistent with the appropriate fiscal year maximums, (see Section II, *Criteria for Tuition Assistance Program Benefits*), only if the applicant cannot meet the walk-in registration date.
 - c. Attach the schedule of course(s) fees and description(s) to the form; and,
 - d. Send all copies to their supervisor.

SECTION III(A), APPLICATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE TUITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (Continued)

3. The supervisor makes a recommendation to approve or not approve the request and forwards all copies of the form to the Department Head or designee.
4. Employees must allow sufficient time for the Department Head or designee to assess the application and course priority, and for preparation of the tuition check request in time for registration. Applications must be received by the Department no more than sixty (60) calendar days and no less than twenty (21) calendar days prior to the start of the class.
5. Employees will be notified by the Department Head or designee in writing if the application request has been approved or denied. See: Section III(B), *Approval of Participation in TAP*. The Department Head should make reasonable efforts to issue a decision within two work weeks of receiving the application. If the request has been denied, the employee will be informed of the reasons for denial.
6. The Department Head or designee will forward the original copy of the approved application request to the Finance Department, with supporting documentation, for processing. One copy of the approved application request will be returned to the employee, accompanied by a check or a letter of intent from the agency. One copy will be sent to Employee Records Office, Human Resources Division / DHRM, to be placed in the employee's official personnel file. One copy will be filed in the departmental file.

B. Approval of Participation in TAP

Eligible employees may be approved to participate in the program on the condition that the following criteria are satisfied:

1. The employee's educational objectives must be compatible with the purposes of the program.
2. Funds must be available.
3. If applicable, the employee must successfully complete (with proof of a passing grade) any previously department-funded TAP Courses, and repay any funds expended for incomplete or failed courses. In exceptional cases, the Department Head may waive repayment. (See: Section C, below.)
4. Courses must be taken during off-duty hours to prevent interruption to the M-NCPPC's work program.
4. Employees receiving Veterans Administration or other governmental education benefits for a given course of study are ineligible to receive duplicate benefits under the TAP. Employees eligible for governmental educational benefits are urged to use those resources. The M-NCPPC will pay the difference between the amount of benefits due from such government educational assistance programs and the total amount of authorized expenses, not to exceed the fiscal year maximum for which the employee is eligible.

SECTION III, APPLICATION TO PARTICIPATE IN, AND APPROVAL OF, TAP BENEFITS (Continued)

C. Submission of Grades to Department Head and Department of Human Resources and Management/Human Resources Division

1. The TAP participant must submit their grade(s) to his/her Department Head or designee within sixty (60) calendar days of completion of the course(s).
3. The Department Head or designee will record and maintain the grades of the TAP participant.
3. If a grade is unavailable for submission within the sixty (60) day period, the employee must submit proof of course(s) completion (e.g., a letter from the institution stating that the employee has completed the course(s) and the estimated date on which the grade will be issued). Further funds will not be granted for other courses until the student has shown satisfactory completion of the course or repaid the agency for funds expended

For exceptional cases, repayment may be waived in writing by the Department Head—unless the refund is waived in writing by the Department Head. See: Section D, Failing and Incomplete Grades and Withdrawals, below.

4. After grades showing satisfactory completion of a funded course have been submitted to the Department Head or designee, the approved Application for Tuition Assistance and course(s) grade(s) must be forwarded to the Employee Records Office, Human Resources Division, DHRM, for filing in the employee's Official Personnel File.

D. Failing and Incomplete Grades and Withdrawals

1. An employee who fails or withdraws from a TAP-funded course(s) shall be required to repay the Department for funds expended. In the case of failure or withdrawal, the Department Head may waive all, or some portion, of the repayment only if there are significant, documented extenuating circumstances. An employee who finds that it is impossible to continue in a TAP-funded course should follow the institution's prescribed withdrawal procedure and immediately notify their Department Head of this action.
2. An employee who receives an "incomplete" in a course paid for under the TAP will not qualify for subsequent funding until a passing grade is earned in the course or repayment is made to the M-NCPPC, unless such action is waived by the Department Head because of extenuating circumstances. [Note: An exception may exist in the case of an individual in graduate school preparing a thesis or dissertation. Under such circumstances, a grade of "incomplete" or an "I" may merely indicate that preparation of the thesis is ongoing, and the "incomplete" rule described above does not apply.]

SECTION III(D), FAILING AND INCOMPLETE GRADES AND WITHDRAWALS (Continued)

3. An employee who leaves the agency before completion of a TAP-funded course(s), or within one year after completion of a TAP-funded course(s), will be required to repay the agency for TAP funds expended on the employee's behalf unless waived by the Department Head. If an employee is required to repay the agency, the Department Head will initiate whatever action is deemed appropriate to recover the expended funds.
4. The tuition assistance does not have to be repaid if the employee dies or qualifies for benefits on the Agency's long-term disability benefit program due to a work-related injury or illness. M-NCPPC may waive repayment of tuition assistance in other extenuating circumstances.

E. Employee Liability for Non-compliance with TAP Requirements

Failure to comply with any or all of the provisions of Administrative Practice 2-31, these Administrative Procedures, and/or the contract agreement for the TAP may result in one or more of the following:

1. Action by the agency to recover all monies expended by the agency for unsatisfactorily completed or incomplete TAP-funded courses through payroll deduction, as appropriate;
2. Legal action by the agency to recover expended monies by the agency for employees who have left the agency under the conditions described above; and/or
4. Disciplinary action by the M-NCPPC, consistent with the Merit System Rules and Regulations and applicable collective bargaining agreements.

RESPONSIBILITIES

A. Department Heads or designees are responsible for:

1. Ensuring that use of the program is consistent with Practice 2-31, Tuition Assistance Program and these Procedures.
2. Issuing a timely decision approving or denying tuition assistance applications.
3. Assuring that tuition assistance requests are approved consistent with Administrative Practice 2-31 and these Procedures.
4. Funding the approved applications for tuition assistance.
5. Ensuring that check requests are prepared for approved applications for tuition assistance. Check requests should be submitted in a timely manner to the Department of Finance to ensure that they are processed for the appropriate fiscal period.
6. Indicating on the Application for Tuition Assistance form whether the check is to be made payable to the educational institution, or directly to the employee as reimbursement for the tuition costs already paid by the employee.

RESPONSIBILITIES (Continued)

7. Monitoring the activities of the TAP on a regular basis, including the expenditure of the program funds, to ensure individual employees do not exceed the annual fiscal year TAP limit. This monitoring shall form the foundation for an annual report to the Executive Director (see item #9, below) and include:
 - a. Name of each applicant;
 - b. Whether application was approved or denied;
 - c. Amount of approval; and
 - d. Whether the course(s) was satisfactorily completed (i.e., Pass or Fail/Withdraw/Incomplete).
 8. Reporting to the Executive Director, annually, the level of participation in the program during each fiscal year.
 9. Ensuring:
 - a. The original of the approved application request, with supporting documentation, is sent to the Finance Department for processing;
 - b. One copy is forwarded to the Employee Records Office, Human Resources Division, DHRM, to be placed in the employee's official personnel file;
 - c. One copy is forwarded to the employee; and
 - d. One copy is filed in the departmental file.
- B. Supervisors** are responsible for:
1. Reviewing applications for the TAP.
 2. Making a recommendation to approve the applications
 3. Timely forwarding recommendations to the Department Head or designee.
 4. Initiating recovery of TAP funds when repayment is required pursuant to Administrative Practice 2-31, Tuition Assistance Program and these accompanying Administrative Procedures.

RESPONSIBILITIES (Continued)

C. **Employees** are responsible for:

1. Completing the Application for Tuition Assistance form and submitting the original plus three (3) copies to their supervisor for recommendation in time to meet the required deadline dates. (See: Section III, *Application to Participate in, and Approval of, TAP Benefits*, above.)
2. Reporting grades to the Departmental Head or designee by submitting official transcripts within sixty (60) calendar days of the end of the semester or session.
3. If applicable, repayment of tuition for courses as outlined in these Administrative Procedures and as stated in the executed (signed) CONTRACT AGREEMENT contained in the Tuition Assistance Application form.
4. Understanding that tuition assistance received as authorized by Administrative Practice 2-31, Tuition Assistance Program, may have individual tax implications under the Internal Revenue Code.

D. **The Finance Department** is responsible for:

1. Receiving and processing check requests from the departments to fund the TAP.
2. Conducting internal audits to measure compliance with the TAP.

E. **The Department of Human Resources and Management, Employee Records Office** is responsible for receiving the approved Application for Tuition Assistance, along with the course(s) grades from the departments and filing these in the employee's personnel file.

VIOLATIONS

Users who violate any portion of these Procedures are subject to termination of TAP privileges and/or disciplinary action. Disciplinary actions for employees shall be handled in accordance with the Merit System Rules and Regulations; applicable Collective Bargaining Agreements; or Administrative Practice 2-31, Tuition Assistance Program.

Attachment:

- A. Application for Tuition Assistance Form and Contract Agreement

**THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION
TUITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (TAP)
APPLICATION FOR TUITION ASSISTANCE FORM AND CONTRACT AGREEMENT**

INSTRUCTIONS

- Read Practice 2-31, Tuition Assistance Program, and Administrative Procedure 03-06.
- Confirm non-eligibility for tuition assistance through other government agencies.
- Complete entire application and sign.
- Attach copy of course(s) fees and description(s).
- SEND THE ORIGINAL AND THREE (3) COPIES OF APPLICATION to Department Head/Designee for approval. Department Head/Designee will forward:
 - the original copy to the Finance Department,
 - one copy to the employee,
 - one copy to the departmental file, and
 - one copy to Employee Records Office, Human Resources Division, DHRM, for the employee's official personnel file.
- All copies must be RECEIVED BY THE APPLICABLE DEADLINE.

Applications must be received no more than sixty (60) calendar days and no less than twenty-one (21) calendar days prior to the start of the class.

- Send grade to Department Head/Designee when class is completed.

(Please Print)

I. EMPLOYEE INFORMATION

Employee ID Number _____
Name _____ Date _____
Position Title _____
Section/Division/County _____
Telephone Number _____
Name of School _____
School Address _____
Course(s) Begins _____ Course(s) Ends _____
Degree Sought (check one): _____ Job Related - No Degree _____
_____ AA _____ BA/BS _____ MA/MS _____ PhD.
_____ OTHER If other, explain: _____
(Fill in name of Major/Minor) _____ Major
_____ Minor

Please complete all sections of this form.

II. CLASS INFORMATION

Course Number(s)	Titles	Cost per Credit Hour	Total Cost of Tuition

Mandatory Fees	Cost	Total Cost of Mandatory Fees

Total Cost of Tuition Assistance Request _____

III. CONTRACT AGREEMENT BETWEEN EMPLOYEE AND M-NCPPC

I, _____, understand that financial assistance under this program is limited to payment for tuition which is not being met by government allowance resulting from military service or other scholarship aid. The amount of tuition paid by the agency is \$ _____. I also understand that if I drop the course(s) approved under this application, leave the M-NCPPC's employ prior to completing the course(s), or LEAVE WITHIN ONE (1) YEAR AFTER ITS COMPLETION, I am required to repay the Commission the cost of tuition paid by the agency under this application, if the application is approved. I understand and I agree to the provision, if deemed necessary by M-NCPPC, that the monies expended for this course(s) will be deducted from my payroll check, or, as condition may warrant, through legal action for my non-compliance with this Contract Agreement and Practice 2-31, Tuition Assistance Program.

Further, I understand that if I fail to comply with any of the provisions of this Contract Agreement and Practice 2-31, I may be subject to disciplinary action by the agency. I also agree to report my course(s) grade(s) by submitting an official transcript to the Department Head/Designee within sixty (60) days of completion of the course(s).

Signature of Applicant

Date

IV. PLEASE CHECK ONE OF THE FOLLOWING TO ENSURE PROMPT PAYMENT

Check made payable to school *(Please specify latest date that check may be issued.)* _____

Reimbursement check made payable to applicant *(verification of payment required)*

Authorization letter to school *(Please specify latest date that letter may be issued.)* _____

V. APPROVAL/NON-APPROVAL (To be completed by Department Head or Designee.)

DATE: _____

TO: _____
(Applicant's Name) (Signature of Applicant)

VIA: _____
(Supervisor/Chief) (Signature of Supervisor/Chief)

_____ Recommend Approval _____ Do Not Recommend Approval

FROM: _____
(Department Head or Designee) (Signature of Department Head or Designee)

Your request for tuition assistance has: _____ Been Approved; _____ Not Been Approved.

State reason(s) for non-approval, if appropriate: _____

TO BE COMPLETED BY SUPERVISOR OR CHIEF

Priority Recommended: *(Check one)*

_____ "A" Priority (More effective performance of present duties.)

_____ "B" Priority (Preparation for career development or different M-NCPPC responsibilities.)

CHECKLIST:

Employee must:

- _____ Complete and sign TAP agreement
- _____ Attach complete course(s) description and fee schedule to the TAP agreement.
- _____ Select a course(s) date and time that complies with approved work schedule and department policy.
- _____ Forward application package to supervisor at least one week prior to deadline shown on first page of TAP application.

Supervisor must:

- _____ Review contents of package for completeness.
- _____ Identify priority "A" or "B" (this page). Recommend or not recommend approval.
- _____ Sign this page where indicated.
- _____ Forward to Department Head (or designee) by deadline shown on first page of TAP application.