

Graduate Student Policies & Procedures

for

Department of Agricultural, Leadership and Community

Education

College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

Master of Science

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Master's Policies and Procedures

Department of Agricultural, Leadership and Community Education

Introduction

The Department of Agricultural, Leadership and Community Education (ALCE) recognizes the significant contributions made by graduate students to departmental research, teaching, and extension programs and is committed to providing the best possible opportunity for students to learn and develop as professionals in their areas of interest.

The primary purpose of this handbook is to outline policies specific to ALCE at Virginia Tech in accordance with the policies of the Graduate School. A more detailed version of the Graduate School's policies is documented in the Graduate Catalog (http://graduateschool.vt.edu/graduate_catalog/index.htm).

Admission Requirements

It is expected that applicants should have completed or near completion of a B.S. degree in agricultural and life sciences or a field closely associated with a graduate degree in this discipline. Students should have an overall GPA of 3.0/4.0 or greater and strong scientific writing and communication skills. Applicants slightly under the requirement can be admitted on provisional status at the recommendation of the department. Provisional status is permitted for a maximum of 12 credit hours of graded course work; at this time a minimum GPA of 3.0 is required for the student to continue their graduate program.

The GRE exam is helpful for all applicants, but is not required. The department strongly recommends that **international students** submit results for completed GRE examination. The results of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is also required for applicants who did not receive their bachelor's degrees from an Anglophone university and whose first language is not English. A minimum TOEFL score of 550 (paper-based test), 213 (computer-based test), or 80 (internet-based test) is required. More information on admissions can be found at (<https://www.applyweb.com/apply/vtechg/index.html>).

Financial Assistance

Financial aid is available to degree-seeking students who qualify. Students who qualify must be enrolled at least halftime (6 credit hours) to maintain eligibility for financial aid. More information on financial aid can be found on the Graduate School Website (http://graduateschool.vt.edu/financial/financial_aid/index.html).

Many graduate students in ALCE receive financial support in the form of a graduate research assistantship or graduate teaching assistantship. Since all students conduct research as a part of degree requirements and most students assist in some way with the teaching classes and/or assisting with non-formal teaching in extension programs, the Department makes no distinction between graduate research and teaching assistantships. Some students are recipients of fellowships awarded through the College, University, or Graduate School, and a few are supported by their own funds or funds from their home country. Students on a full-time graduate assistantship are considered to be half-time employees and are expected to work 20 hours per week in support of research, teaching, and/or extension programs as identified in the assistantship contract. Those individuals on a graduate assistantship are

strongly discouraged from holding outside employment during the academic year as the half-time work schedule and the full time academic schedule make it difficult to add other outside responsibilities. If it is deemed necessary to pick up an outside job, the student must consult with his/her major professor (academic advisor) and assistantship supervisor regarding the fulfillment of their assistantship and graduate study responsibilities. All funded students are expected to have regular attendance at departmental functions and fully commit to the specified contractual responsibilities. If approved, students must notify the Graduate School about any additional employment, including the period of employment, name and contact of employer, and job title or short description of duties ([Access to the Additional Employment Reporting Tool](#)).

Graduate assistantships for master's students are paid at one of two steps:

- Step 8 (\$1,674/mo for 2014-15) applies to beginning MS students; and
- Step 9 (\$1,722/mo for 2014-15) to second year MS students (specifically, students having completed 24 credit hours).

In most instances, appropriate changes in pay steps occur automatically. However, students who believe that an increase has been overlooked should see the department office manager in the departmental main office.

Payment of Tuition and Fees

The Department pays Virginia resident tuition (\$5,592.50 per semester) and academic fees (\$43 per semester) for students receiving departmental assistantships and occasionally for others as allowed by available departmental funding. Students are responsible for the University Comprehensive Fees in fall and spring semesters (\$876 per semester), and for tuition and fees during summer sessions in which they are registered. These rates are based on the 2013-14 academic year.

Full-time students receiving assistantships of \$4,000 or more per year are eligible for in-state tuition regardless of their state of residence. However, there are many circumstances in which establishing Virginia domicile is financially advantageous, both to the student and department. Eligible students are strongly encouraged to apply for Virginia residency through the Graduate School following their first year of residency. International students on J and F visas are not eligible.

Registration for summer term is not required to hold assistantship and fellowship appointments. Students must be registered full time (12 hours) during fall and spring terms. The student pays for tuition for any classes taken during summer terms, and students must be registered during any term in which defense examinations are taken.

Defending students (completing students "defending" their M.S. research work) may request registration for one hour of GRAD 6864 when the defense exam occurs during the first 20 class days of any term (see "Credit Hour Loads", below). Eligibility for benefits normally covered in the Comprehensive Fee (e.g., Health Service Fee, Bus Fee, etc.) may be a factor to consider if you elect not to register as a full time student.

Registration

Students must have a unique Personal Identifier (PID) and password if taking courses through Virginia Tech. The PID is used to register for courses, access Virginia Tech e-mail, MyVT, Scholar (course management system), some of the library databases, and more. The University will assign the PID and temporary password after the student has enrolled. The temporary password will need to be changed. Once you get your PID, you must activate it before you can access University services. To activate your PID, visit Your PID (http://www.computing.vt.edu/accounts_and_access/pid). All the information you enter into our online enrollment form is completely secure.

During departmental orientation, students will meet with their faculty advisor (major professor) to confirm courses for the semester. At that time, it is the responsibility of the student to register for the agreed upon courses. If there are problems registering or courses substitutions needed, the student should consult their major professor to make sure the course will be accepted toward the degree.

Graduate Advisory Committee

All students are assigned a faculty advisor (major professor) prior to, or immediately after, initial enrollment. Assignments should be mutually agreeable to both student and faculty member. A primary consideration for matching students with advisors is that the student's research interests match well with the advisor's research expertise.

Within the first two semesters of enrollment, each student should work with his/her faculty advisor to establish an advisory committee. A Master's committee should consist of three members. Two members should be from the department, one being their faculty advisor. The third member should be a full time, tenure track, teaching/research faculty or other qualified individual, inside or outside the university as requested by the department. Please refer to the Graduate School policies for a detailed description on the requirements and functions of the graduate advisory committee (http://graduateschool.vt.edu/graduate_catalog/policies.htm?policy=002d14432c654287012c6542e38200d8).

The committee will assist in the development of a program of study and completion of the thesis research project. Committee members are expected to provide appropriate and timely input to the academic and research programs of the student. Conversely, both students and faculty advisors are expected to assure appropriate involvement of the advisory committee in each student's program. Students should discuss any problems related to their advisory committee with their faculty advisor and, if needed, with the department head.

Credit Hour Loads

Full-time credit hour loads are 12 hours in fall and spring semesters (in addition to courses audited). Typically, students will register for 6 to 9 hours of formal course work (2 to 3 classes) during fall and spring terms (or less during the latter stages of a graduate program), and the remaining credit hours of Research and Thesis to complete the 12-hour, full-time load. Note that this is required for payment of assistantships and for progression from assistantship step 8 to step 9, since step 9 requires the completion of 24 credit hours.

The Department requires all Master's students complete a minimum of 9 credit hours in AEE and/or LDRS. These courses do not include internship (5754), research (5994), field study (5964), or independent study (5974) hours and must be included on your Plan of Study. This requirement ensures all students acquire a foundation in agricultural and extension education. In addition, students must take a minimum of 3 credit hours of seminar. The first two seminars are the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences graduate seminars in research ethics and communication skills (ALS 5324 & ALS 5334) and the remaining one must be selected from the departmental topical studies seminar series (AEE 5964).

Minimum total credits: 30 credit hours

Minimum graded credits: 20 credit hours

- May include a maximum of 6 credits of Virginia Tech 4000-level undergraduate course work
 - The 6 credits of Virginia Tech 4000-level course work may include Special Study (4984) courses but may not include Undergraduate Independent Study (4974) or Undergraduate Research (4994) courses.
- All other graded course work must be 5000 level or higher (i.e., graduate course work)
 - The 5000-level course work may include a maximum of 6 credits total in 5974, 5984, and 6984 courses and 3 credits of seminar.
- All coursework must be approved by the student's graduate advisory committee as part of a formal plan of study.

Minimum research credits: 6 credit hours of Master's Research (5994) taken at Virginia Tech.

Prior to the beginning of a semester, students who have 1) fulfilled all residency and course requirements and 2) scheduled their defense examination to take place within the first 20 class days of the term, are eligible to request registration for 1 hour as a Defending Student (exceptions to the 20 day rule may be granted by the Graduate School).

A certification form, available from the departmental office, must be submitted to the Graduate School in order to be registered as a Defending Student. Registration as a Defending Student may affect eligibility for assistantships and certain student benefits and/or loans since students so registered do not pay the comprehensive fee and are not classified as full-time students. The form can be downloaded from http://www.bursar.vt.edu/students_parents/defending_status.php.

Transfer Courses

No more than 50% of the graded credit hours needed to satisfy the requirements for a Virginia Tech graduate degree may be transferred in from a regionally accredited university. All such credits must have earned grades of "B" or better, have been earned while in good standing in graduate status, and must have been graduate courses (numbered 5000 or higher) at the institution where the student took the courses. Grades of "S" or "P" are not acceptable for transfer credit. All transfer courses must be acceptable to the student's Advisory Committee and the Graduate Program Director or Department Head. For transfer course work more than five years old, a Justification of 'Old' Course Work form must be filed with the Plan of Study.

Credits from other universities are transferred to a Virginia Tech graduate degree at the time the Plan of Study that includes those courses is approved by the Graduate School. Transferred courses count only as credit hours and are not included in the calculation of the Virginia Tech GPA. Official transcripts are required before transfer course work can be approved for the Plan of Study.

Research, Project and Report, Practicum or Internship credit hours may not be transferred in from another university to meet Virginia Tech graduate degree requirements (i.e. they cannot be included on the Plan of Study). Credits taken while in undergraduate status or for an undergraduate degree cannot be used as transfer credit for a graduate degree.

Time Limits for Degree Programs

Guidelines for time to complete graduate degree programs are established as departmental policy in the interest of both the department and student. As a general guideline, it is expected that full-time students in the master's program will be completed within **two years**. The department is committed to continuing financial assistance if the student is making satisfactory progress toward their degree, fulfilling assistantship responsibilities at a level that is satisfactory to the funding faculty member, and funds are available.

Evaluation of Performance and Progress toward Degree

In an effort to foster communication between graduate students, their faculty advisor, and advisory committees, the Department and the graduate school require an **annual evaluation** and communication of graduate student performance and progress toward the M.S. degree. The process is initiated with a written report, from each graduate student to his/her faculty advisor, which appropriately details the graduate student's academic and research program progress during the preceding year.

The annual evaluation form is due by **February 1st** of each year or earlier as designated by the faculty advisor. In response, faculty advisors will, by **March 1st** of each year, write a letter that details the advisors evaluation of each graduate student's performance and progress toward a degree.

Graduate students and faculty advisors should meet at an appropriate and convenient time to discuss the student's report and advisor's evaluation, concentrating most especially on any differences in expectations or evaluation between the student and advisor. Both the student's report and advisor's letter will become a part of the student's file. It is expected that advisory committee members will be used appropriately to develop each student's academic program, in the planning and execution of the research project, and in contributing to the evaluation letter. To assist you and your advisor, the department has created a **Graduate Student Check List, Graduate Student Annual Evaluation Cover Form, and Graduate Student Annual Progress Report** (see Appendix). The **Graduate Student Professional Development Plan** should be submitted after completion of 12 credit hours. Copies of the forms (saved as Word documents) have also been sent to your faculty advisor and to you, and are available from the department's graduate director.

The annual evaluation of graduate students provides an opportunity to insure that appropriate progress toward degree requirements is occurring and to allow for adjustments in the program

of study, teaching activities, or research efforts. Clearly, it is also important to keep the advisory committees informed.

Remember your advisory committee is not likely to seek you out. It is your responsibility to use your advisory committee effectively. These members can provide excellent insight, perspective, and encouragement, but only if you engage them. Since the evaluations occur in the spring semester, your first evaluation may well be rather brief. However, the following elements are expected to be part of your evaluation documentation as appropriate:

- Signatures of the Major Advisor and Committee Members (likely not applicable during your first evaluation cycle);
- Milestones accomplished (e.g., filing of the plan of study);
- Documentation indicating that a regular meeting of the student advisory committee was held and a brief written summary of major conclusions from the meeting (may not apply with initial evaluations).
- List of publications;
- List of professional presentations;
- Documentation of teaching activities;
- Listing of service activities;
- Awards and other honors;
- General academic progress (i.e., satisfactory progress in class work as well as research activities);
- Comments by the student; and
- Signature of Student – to indicate that he or she read and understands the document.

Student Hints and Advice!

To assist you and your major professor in staying on track with your program, some major milestones you need to keep in mind are listed below. Remember that your advisor has several advisees. It is a good idea to re-cap where you are and what stage you want to discuss. Ultimately it's your career and your future that is at stake – take the responsibility to keep on top of the details and keep a copy of your records.

- Form an advisory committee and prepare your formal plan of study by the end of 12 credit hours.
- A thesis proposal should be submitted and approved by your Advisory Committee as soon as practical (e.g., no later than the end of the second semester. [Clearly, this depends on close communication with your major professor.]
- All plans of study, research proposals, and thesis drafts require approval of the faculty advisor prior to submission to the student's committee.
- The M.S. thesis should be completed – defended, approved, and turned into the graduate school no later than 5 semesters into your program [see previous regarding support expectations]. If you go beyond the two-year guideline you may be without financial support during the semester that you defend your thesis (see defending student status).
- Publications of research findings in professional journals are critically important to the department, your major professor, and for you professional development. Keep this in mind as you prepare your thesis.
- Prior to the submission process, graduate students are expected to verbally disclose to their faculty advisor any plans for publication of any academic body of work,

including but not limited to: professional publications (e.g., newsletters), abstracts for posters, abstracts for presentations, abstracts for conference proceeding papers, journal manuscripts, books or book chapters, and grant proposals. This includes single and co-authored work. If the aforementioned bodies of work are encouraged as part of a graduate course, students should also disclose intentions of these submissions. This is to ensure high quality work, guidance for the submission process, and transparency of any conflict of interests.

- Take advantage of opportunities to teach class, give presentations, and make reports to hone your written and oral communication skills.

Departmental Graduate Seminar

Scholarly writing and the dissemination of information are critically important skills in many careers, and one that can be perfected through practice. The primary objective of the departmental graduate seminar is to give students the opportunity to explore thematic topics lead by faculty within the department in order to broaden the students' base of knowledge. Students are required to take a minimum of one semester-long seminar, but are encouraged to take more based on their interested in the topic being discussed.

Scholarly Ethics and Integrity Requirement

All graduate students who were accepted into the program starting Fall 2014 are required to complete ethics training in accordance with the Virginia Tech Graduate School mandate. The courses that will fulfill this requirement are:

- ALS 5324 – Research Ethics in Agriculture and Life Sciences
- GRAD 5004 – GTA Training Seminar
- AEE 5964 – Graduate Professional Seminar
- Departmental Research Methodology Course (AEE 5104 or AEE 5804)

Completing Student Interview

All graduate students are requested to complete a graduate program evaluation and to schedule an exit interview with the department head or graduate director prior to leaving the university. Information provided by students, which is confidential with respect to source, contributes significantly to the evolution and improvement of departmental graduate programs.

Publication Expectations

From thesis research, graduate students are expected to co-author at least one peer reviewed journal article with their faculty advisor **PRIOR** to graduation or completion of degree requirements. The choice of an appropriate journal format for your draft paper is to be agreed upon between you and your faculty advisor. For some perspective, it is anticipated that a M.S. program would lead to at least one publication, but depending on the specific circumstances 1-3 publications are often possible. Unless otherwise arranged, the MS and PhD student will take first authorship.

Graduate students are required to submit their theses electronically. Procedural details are available on the ETD Project home page (<http://www.graduateschool.vt.edu/current/etd.htm>).

ETD workshop schedules and access to support materials are also available from the above address. Graduate students are expected to provide one bound copy of thesis work for their committee chair(s) and one for the department library. It is also common for students to provide a copy of their work to committee members.

Graduate Honor Code

All graduate students are expected to abide by the standards of academic integrity and ethical behavior established in the Virginia Tech Graduate Honor Code. Details of the Code, including penalties for violations are included on the website for the Graduate Honor System (<http://ghs.graduateschool.vt.edu/>). Because some aspects of appropriate conduct are course-specific (e.g., collaborative work with other students on assignments), the syllabus for each course should be examined carefully to determine instructor expectations.

Use of Departmental Equipment, Facilities, and Supplies

Graduate students are afforded the use of departmental equipment, facilities, and supplies on the same basis as faculty and staff; that is, if an activity is departmental business, use of departmental facilities and supplies in support of that activity is appropriate. This includes use of phones (long distance), university mail, and office supplies. Use of the departmental copier should be arranged initially through the student's faculty supervisor. (An access code is required to operate the copier; operational training is required to receive an access code.)

The copier should **not** be used to copy theses, dissertations, or materials related to classes taken by graduate students. Items related to the student's research or participation in teaching or extension programs may be copied at departmental expense on the main printer or printers available in student offices. Mass copying of journal articles or book chapters is **not** allowed. You should make use of electronic files to the greatest extent possible.

Copy facilities for personal materials are available at the University Library on a charge basis. Limited clerical assistance is available to graduate students through the student's faculty supervisor. Equipment assigned to clerical staff (e.g., computers) should be used only with prior permission of the clerical staff member responsible for the equipment. The departmental conference rooms (1220 and 250 Litton Reaves) are available to graduate students for meetings and should be scheduled on the calendars in the main departmental office.

Extended sessions (e.g., all day or longer study sessions) are acceptable so long as the room is not needed for meetings by faculty, staff, or other graduate students. Students should obtain keys to the building and appropriate work areas from the department secretary in the departmental main office. Graduate students, along with faculty and staff, are responsible for the security of offices and facilities.

Travel Funding for Research Conferences

The Department encourages graduate student travel to present research at conferences and professional meetings. Where appropriate, student travel can be supported by grants and projects in which students are engaged. Students are also encouraged to seek funding from the Graduate Student Assembly (<http://www.gsa.graduateschool.vt.edu/funding>) and leverage other resources for travel.

The Department will support student travel up to \$500 per fiscal year (July 1 – June 30) for full-time graduate students in good academic standing and making satisfactory progress toward their degree to present a research paper or poster. The eligible student must submit the travel request and research abstract (or manuscript) to his or her faculty advisor who will forward it to the department.

Computing Support

The University provides computing support for graduate education and research. Access to computer workstations is remote (from Litton-Reaves Hall) via microcomputers. Graduate students are assigned user ID's which allow access to remote servers. All students should receive a PID (personal identification) at the time of initial check-in to the University. Students have access to wireless internet in Litton Reaves Hall.

The department has a limited number of computers available for student use on a short-term basis. Students working in assistantships that require computer technology to complete their assignment will be provided with access to departmental computers.

Participation in Professional Development Experiences

All qualified graduate students are given the opportunity to work with faculty members in the preparation and delivery of instructional material for departmental classes, extension programs or other opportunities. Students may also find similar opportunities to work with teams or individuals outside of ALCE. Participation in these activities provides extremely valuable experience for students and is regarded highly by potential employers. In all cases, at the earliest possible date, graduate students are expected to disclose to their faculty advisor all professional development activities being performed. This conversation should include: the nature of the professional development activity, individuals involved, and funding that may be attached to this activity. The purpose of this conversation is to ensure professional practice, quality work, and transparency of any conflict of interests. Your advisor is your guide to good practice.

Professional Associations

The department strongly encourages graduate student membership in professional associations. Students should consult with their advisor to determine appropriate professional affiliations. Many professional societies are available for students and offer student membership rates.

Collegiate Student Organizations

The Department encourages students to be involved in student organizations at the department, college, and university level.

If you have any questions or concerns about the graduate program, don't hesitate to contact the program director for assistance.

APPENDIX A: Graduate Student Professional Development Plan

This plan is provided to assist in facilitating a conversation with your faculty advisor. The plan should be completed within the first 12 credit hours of coursework. Submit a copy to the graduate director after it has been discussed with your faculty advisor for inclusion in your student records.

Student name: _____

Degree and Concentration: _____

Expected graduation date (semester and year): _____

Student professional goals upon graduation:

In the area of research, if any:

In the area of teaching, if any:

In the area of extension, if any:

Proposed Thesis / Dissertation topic:

Assistantship responsibilities:

Professional development goals during the program:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

What do you need to do or provide to accomplish these goals?

What resources, materials, or support do you need from me to assist you in accomplishing your goals?

What is a realistic timeline for accomplishing your goals?

Student Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B: Graduate Student Annual Evaluation Cover Form

This form should be submitted with a copy of all of the student’s annual review documents to the Departmental Graduate Director for inclusion in the student file.

Student Name: _____ ID #: _____

The above named student’s academic progressed for _____ is:
Calendar Year

_____ Satisfactory

_____ Unsatisfactory

Signatures of the Faculty Advisor and Graduate Director:

Faculty Advisor

Graduate Director

Assessment of Progress toward the Degree
(Please list the documents that have been included in this evaluation.)

Student Written Acknowledgement:
(Additional materials may be attached as needed)

Student Signature: _____ Date _____
(Indicates the student has read and understands the document but does not necessarily indicate agreement)

APPENDIX C: Graduate Student Annual Progress Report

ALCE requests completion of this form so that faculty and staff can better support students based on expressed needs. ALCE also needs to comply with the Graduate School requirements to provide evidence regarding student progress in the chosen degree program. This form should be completed in January and submitted to your faculty advisor by February 1. Please attach an up-to-date program of study, including grades earned for courses that have been completed and intended courses for the following year. You can expect a written response from your academic advisor by March 1. This document will be kept in your student file.

Student Name: _____

Degree and Concentration: _____

Expected graduation date (semester and year): _____

Current GPA: _____

Proposed Thesis / Dissertation topic or project title:

Professional Goal(s) upon Graduation:

Assistantship Activities during the Previous Year (if applicable):

Other Research Activities during the Previous Year:

Other Extension Activities during the Previous Year:

Other Teaching Activities during the Previous Year:

Other Professional Development Activities during the Previous Year:

Professional Development Goals for this Calendar Year:

Other Comments:

Student Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

APPENDIX D: Graduate Student Check List

MS Student in Department of Agricultural, Leadership and Community Education

This checklist is provided to assist in tracking progress toward the degree. The form will become a part of the student's permanent record and should be updated annually. A final version should be submitted to the graduate director prior to submitting thesis manuscript to E.T.D.

Student Name: _____ **ID #:** _____

Date Completed:

_____ Enrolled

_____ Formation of advisory committee

_____ Submit plan of study¹

_____ Advisory committee meets and submits progress report.

_____ Anticipated thesis defense date^{2,3}

_____ Submission of draft journal article from the thesis to faculty advisor

¹The Plan of Study is due by the end of the second academic semester for all Master's degree students (based on full time enrollment of 12 credits per semester). For Bachelors/Masters students, the Plan of Study is due by the end of the first full semester of graduate study.

²The thesis defense normally must be held during regular academic semesters or sessions and must be scheduled through the graduate school. Requests to schedule the defense must be received by the Graduate School (with a copy to the Graduate Director or your Major Professor) at least two weeks before the defense.

³ Financial support is normally limited to 2 years.

Student Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Faculty Advisor Signature: _____ **Date:** _____