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Earth, Environmental and Planetary Sciences

Graduate Student Handbook

Academic Year 2024 – 2025

College of Arts & Sciences

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Welcome from the Department Head

On behalf of our faculty, staff, and students, I am very pleased to be able to welcome you to the graduate geology program in the Department of Earth, Environment, and Planetary Sciences (EEPS) at the University of Tennessee (UT). We have nearly a century of geological education and research at UT. Our graduates have successfully pursued careers around the world, in just about every aspect of the earth, environmental, and planetary sciences, including tenure-track faculty positions at top-ranked universities, staff scientists at national research laboratories, research and management positions in hydrocarbon industry, positions in government agencies, investigators in the environmental and mineral industries, and directors of a variety of educational and outreach activities. I hope that you have an enjoyable and productive stay as a graduate student at UT. I look forward to meeting you, first as a student and later, as one of our alumni.

Regards,



Head of UT Earth, Environment, and Planetary Sciences

1.2 Purpose of this Document

The Graduate Handbook outlines the procedures for graduate education in the Department of Earth Environment, and Planetary Sciences. It aligns with the Graduate School policies found in the [Graduate Catalog](#), the [Graduate School's website](#), and the [Hilltopics Student Handbook](#), and supports the Graduate School's mission at the University of Tennessee. Department regulations adhere to and supplement those of the Graduate School.

Graduate students must be aware of and comply with all university regulations. This handbook is an internal "living document" detailing departmental policy implementation and is made available to you directly when you are accepted as a graduate student to EEPS. As you read, remember that our policies can change as faculty respond to changes within the college, the university, the broader landscape of higher education, and our graduate population. Our aim is to provide you with a useful, rigorous program that you can take confidently to the next stage of your career. So always check the manual as you reach each milestone on your journey. Questions regarding policies as laid out in this handbook should be referred to the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS).

For information regarding departmental personnel and their roles, visit the [EEPS departmental website](#). For information regarding broader departmental policy, review the [EEPS Bylaws](#).

2. GENERAL PROGRAM INFORMATION

The Department of Earth, Environmental and Planetary Sciences offers research-based Master of Science (M.S.) and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degrees in Geology. Both degrees require original research presented in the form of a thesis or dissertation that must be found acceptable by a committee of faculty. We expect all graduate students to familiarize themselves with the policies, expectations, and timeline of their degree as laid out by the Graduate School. Departmental requirements, as laid out in this handbook, are aligned with, and meet or exceed those of the Graduate School. Critical policies are excerpted within this handbook. Additional details pertaining to the Graduate Program, including financial aid, scholarships, and fellowships, can be found in the list of web pages identified below:

- UT Graduate School: <https://gradschool.utk.edu/>
- Graduate Catalog: <https://catalog.utk.edu/index.php>
- Graduation deadlines: <https://gradschool.utk.edu/graduation/graduation-deadlines/>
- Theses & Dissertations: <https://gradschool.utk.edu/thesesdissertations/>
- Forms: <https://gradschool.utk.edu/forms-central/>

2.1 Master of Science (M.S.) Degree

In the Department of Earth, Environmental and Planetary Sciences, students are expected to complete a M.S. degree within their guaranteed funding window, which is two calendar years (i.e., 4 academic-year semesters and 2 summer semesters) assuming the student maintains adequate progress toward their degree. To maintain full-time status as a graduate assistant within the department, students are expected to complete 66 hours of graduate credit (15 hours per fall and spring semesters and 3 hours during each summer semester to maintain full-time status).

GTA extension requests beyond the support period are considered individually but are not guaranteed, as the department prioritizes new students. Near the end of each semester (June and November), the DGS solicits extension requests from students nearing the end of their support. Students must discuss their request with their advisor and submit a request and justification for an extension via email to the DGS. The student's primary advisor must also submit an email to the DGS that explains their level of support for such an extension. The DGS then convenes a meeting of the Graduate Admission and Program Committee (GAPC) to review requests, which are then approved by departmental faculty. The DGS will then notify students of their status. Priority is given to Ph.D. students, especially those without a previous M.S. degree, those with no prior extensions, and those with health or research-related delays or internships.

To earn a M.S. degree in EEPS as student must adequately complete the following milestones:

- Complete EEPS course requirements (section 2.1.1)
- Form a thesis committee (section 2.1.2)
- Submit a committee-approved thesis proposal (section 2.1.3)
- Apply for admission to candidacy (section 2.1.4)
- Prepare Thesis (section 2.1.5)
- Schedule thesis defense and apply for graduation (section 2.1.6)
- Defend thesis (section 2.1.7)
- Submit thesis to TRACE (section 2.1.8)

2.1.1 Course Requirements (M.S.)

All course requirements must be fulfilled, or in progress, at the time of Admission to Candidacy.

A Master's degree candidate must complete at least 30 hours of graduate credit in approved courses. Non-traditional students (i.e., students without a background degree in the earth, environmental, or planetary sciences) may be required by their committee to take specific 300-level courses. These courses do not count toward the graduate degree. Additionally, some 400-level courses may be taken for graduate credit, but no more than 6 hours of 400-level courses may count toward the degree.

At least two-thirds (20 hours) of the required credits must be from courses at the 500- or 600-level. In our program, students must earn 6 credits in EEPS 500 (thesis) while conducting research and preparing their thesis. Only 6 thesis credits count towards the 30-hour requirement, although most students will accrue more than this number of credits of EEPS 500 and additional credits count toward their expected 66 total credit hours. Credits can be entirely from EEPS or distributed across UT Departments; the student's primary advisor or committee should approve all coursework. For coursework taken at other institutions, refer to the section of the University Graduate Catalog on [Transfer Credits](#).

Additionally, M.S. students must enroll in EEPS 595 (Departmental Seminar) every semester unless they are enrolled in EEPS 596 (Scientific Presentations) or have course, internship, research, or teaching conflicts. Students must take EEPS 596 once during their residency, preferably during or prior to, their 3rd semester. A maximum of 2 credits from GEOL 595 and 1 credit from GEOL 596 can be applied towards graduation.

Course Requirements for the M.S. degree		Credits (<i>minimum</i>)	Details
EEPS 500	Master's Thesis Research Hours	6	Conducting research and preparing thesis documents.
EEPS 595	EEPS Seminar	2	Must be taken every semester. Two credits may be applied toward M.S. degree.
EEPS 596	Scientific Presentations	1	Must be taken once, preferably during, or prior to, the 3rd semester.
400-500-600 Level	Advisor or Committee-approved Courses	21	20 credits must be at or above the 500-level; no more than 6 hrs. at the 400-level.

Additionally, all M.S. students must complete a committee-approved "field experience" demonstrating proficiency in field-based earth and environmental sciences. Many M.S. students will have already fulfilled this requirement with their undergraduate field camp course. Students who have not previously had field camp must have field experience that is deemed acceptable by the student's full committee. Acceptable alternatives include participating in a traditional field course, participating in a field experience tailored to research goals (e.g., specialty hydrogeology, astrobiology, or planetary science field courses), field work associated with M.S. thesis research, or participation in a variety of short field excursions.

2.1.2 Form a Thesis Committee (M.S.)

The thesis committee should be formed during the student's first semester, and no later than the end of the second semester.

A M.S. thesis committee consists of a major advisor and at least two other tenure-track faculty members or other personnel (e.g., lecturers, adjunct personnel) that have been approved by the college. More than 3 faculty members are permitted. Although a committee may include personnel from outside of EEPS, the majority of the committee should be internal to the Department of Earth, Environmental, and Planetary Sciences.

Students are responsible for scheduling their committee meetings and are encouraged to meet with their committee frequently, ideally once a semester. Committee members may also request meetings at any time. This ensures regular supervision of the student's academic progress and thesis development. Students should feel free to schedule meetings at any point with individual committee members to assist with research execution. The committee for the thesis defense must match the committee listed on the [Admission to Candidacy form](#). Any changes to the committee require a [revised form submission](#).

Please note: Sometimes students find their interests or personalities incompatible with the advisor assigned at the start of their degree. In such a case, students should contact the DGS or department head and talk through the process of changing projects or advisors and exploring the potential impact on their degree.

2.1.3 Submit a Committee-Approved Thesis Proposal (M.S.)

To remain in good standing, the thesis proposal should be completed, presented to the committee, and approved by the student's thesis committee by the end of the student's second semester.

M.S. degree students must conduct independent original research leading to a thesis for graduation. A proposal outlining the project must be submitted and accepted by the thesis committee. Students should begin collaborating with their advisor(s) on the proposal process by the end of the first semester. Failure to meet this deadline may result in disciplinary action from the GAPC.

The proposal should be concise, no longer than 10 pages of single-spaced text (including figures but excluding references and appendices). A proposal, at minimum, should include a well-referenced background section that delineates the need for investigation, a statement of the question being asked, the methods by which the question will be investigated, and an exploration of the potential outcomes. All students should also include appendices that provide an expected semester-by-semester timeline for completion and a list of completed, in progress, and proposed coursework. Proposal style may vary by sub-discipline, so students should consult their advisor/committee for any additional requirements (e.g., some faculty may ask that the student include a budget for their proposed project). The student should expect to proceed through multiple drafts of the proposal with their primary advisor before it is ready for committee review.

Once approved by the advisor, the student should circulate the thesis proposal to committee members and schedule a meeting for discussion of the proposal. The meeting should occur at least 10 days (2 business weeks) after the proposal has been circulated to the committee. At this meeting, the student should construct a 20-30 minute presentation that explores their project, their proposed timeline, and their coursework. The committee will provide feedback on the proposal (potentially asking for revisions), the methods (to ascertain proposed methods are appropriate), the timeline (to ascertain timely completion),

and coursework (to recommend specific courses, to aid in choosing appropriate courses, and to approve a plan for a field experience).

At the time of this meeting, your advisor should direct all committee members to complete [SACS forms](#) including both the SACS Core Knowledge Assessment form and the SACS Research Skills form.

After the proposal is revised and accepted by the committee, the major advisor submits the proposal to the DGS along with an email that lists the committee members, states that the proposal has been approved by all committee members and acknowledges approval and timing of field experience completion. The DGS then forwards the proposal to the GAPC for evaluation. The student and advisor will receive feedback via email from the DGS.

Please note: A thesis proposal is a proposal for future work; it is not a binding contract of the work to be completed for the degree. It is not uncommon for research to shift directions as the project moves forward, and often exciting lines of potential research hit snags or become untenable. In other cases, external forces can sometimes completely change the direction of research. Under such conditions, there is no requirement for the student to revise their proposal. Changes to the research, however, must be discussed with, and agreed upon by, the student's committee.

2.1.4 Apply for Admission to Candidacy (M.S.)

Admission to Candidacy Form must be submitted the semester prior to completion of the degree program.

Admission to Candidacy indicates the student's ability to perform satisfactory graduate work and demonstrates satisfactory progress (completion of any required prerequisite courses and at least 9 hours of graduate coursework with a GPA of 3.00 or higher) towards the degree. The [Admission to Candidacy form](#) must be signed by the student's committee and the Director of Graduate Studies, and lists all courses used toward the degree, including transfer credits and courses still in progress. Committee signatures must match those on final defense forms. Any changes to the committee require a [Revised Admission to Candidacy form](#).

The Admission to Candidacy form must be submitted to the Graduate School by the last day of classes one semester before the degree is conferred (see [Graduation Deadlines](#)). The Graduate School verifies all requirements are met and contacts the student and the Director of Graduate Studies if there are any problems.

2.1.5 Prepare Thesis (M.S.)

An advisor-approved thesis should be presented to the committee at least 10-14 days prior to the thesis defense.

Before graduating, a student must write a thesis presenting independent original research, which must be presented in public, defended, and approved by the thesis committee. Students should collaborate closely with their advisor throughout the research and thesis preparation process. Whereas the format of the thesis is ultimately determined by the major advisor and committee, research for the M.S. degree should aim to result in publication and thesis formatting that follows journal guidelines is often the best choice. Students can also use one of the [Graduate School's templates](#). Thesis documents are routinely checked for plagiarism using [iThenticate](#).

Students are required to submit a draft of their thesis via [TRACE](#) to the Thesis Consultant 1-2 months prior to defense scheduling to avoid unnecessary formatting revisions (see [Graduate Deadlines](#)). Submissions for formatting are not required to be complete, but should include the cover page, a table of contents, and multiple sections, as well as initial references, figures, captions, and tables.

2.1.6 Schedule Thesis Defense and Apply for Graduation (M.S.)

See Graduate School Deadlines for the timeline to graduation.

Before scheduling a defense, students must get approval from their advisor(s) and committee, typically done by arranging a committee meeting in the semester prior to the defense (e.g., the 3rd semester). It's important to first have an open discussion with your advisor to fully discuss the Graduate School's [Guideline to Graduation](#). Defenses can occur at any time during the semester. See [Graduate Deadlines](#) for latest possible dates. The written thesis will typically undergo 2-4 rounds of revision with the student's advisor(s) prior to being sent to the committee. Once the major advisor and committee determine sufficient progress on the thesis, the student schedules an oral defense. Scheduling the defense requires: (1) Determining a date and time suitable to the committee; and (2) scheduling a room with EEPS office staff to ascertain that the defense will be held in Strong Hall and will avoid conflict with classes and other defenses. Once the defense date is set, the student should apply for graduation through [MyUTK](#). It is important to discuss readiness for defense with your advisor to avoid multiple graduation fees.

The defense comprises a public presentation followed by a question-and-answer session, which typically lasts an hour, then a private session with the committee to determine pass or fail, which should last no more than two hours.

2.1.7 Defend Thesis (M.S.)

See Graduate School Deadlines for the timeline to graduation.

The student should regularly check the [Graduate Deadlines](#) to ascertain that they meet all deadlines for the thesis defense. To allow for revisions after the defense, the student should schedule the defense at least a month before the thesis submission deadline. The student's completed written thesis should be submitted to their committee at least 2 weeks before the defense and scanned for plagiarism using [iThenticate](#); your advisor must confirm the results of this plagiarism scan when the final thesis is submitted to the Graduate School. An electronic copy of the thesis should also be circulated by your advisor to EEPS faculty and students at least one week before the defense. Failure to meet deadlines may result in postponement of the defense.

The thesis defense consists of a public presentation followed by a question-and-answer period from a general audience of students and faculty; family and friends are also welcome to attend. The audience is then invited to leave while the student and committee remain to conduct the private defense, which consists of more in-depth questions and discussions about how the thesis may be improved. The committee then excuses the student for a few minutes while they confer, and then invites the student back to the room to announce the results of the defense and to provide guidance regarding any required revisions. At this point, the student and committee should determine how forms will be handled.

Required forms can be found at [forms central](#). The student should make sure they have the correct forms downloaded at the time of their defense. The first form is the [Report of Final Examination](#), which is typically signed by all committee members at the end of the Defense, and submitted by the faculty advisor. The second form is the [Thesis Approval](#) form. Typically, your committee will decide at the end of your defense

how to handle this form. Sometimes, committee members will withhold signatures until they have seen your revisions. Often, committee members will sign the form immediately, and your primary advisor will withhold their signature until revisions have been completed, at which point they will sign the form. If you and your advisor desire time to get the manuscript to publication before it becomes public, there is also an [Embargo Request](#) form. Committee signatures on final defense and thesis approval forms must match those on the Admission to Candidacy form. If your committee has changed you need to complete a [Revised Admission to Candidacy](#) form.

At the time of this meeting, your advisor should ask the committee to complete the [SACS Research Skills](#) form.

The committee has the right to reject a thesis before submission to the Graduate School, even if the oral examination is passed. Missing graduation deadlines requires reapplication for the next semester and missing the second deadline may necessitate registering for thesis credit the following semester. If you applied to graduate but miss the deadlines for that semester, by not defending your thesis or not submitting the final thesis document to TRACE, then you will need to submit a new application for graduation the next semester. Missing deadlines can also result in you needing to register for thesis credit (3 hours) for the following semester. All students are encouraged to reach out to the graduate school specialists at gradspec@utk.edu who can help to ensure that delays are properly processed.

2.1.8 Submit Thesis to TRACE (M.S.)

See Graduate School Deadlines for the timeline to graduation.

Once all revisions to the Thesis have been approved by the thesis advisor(s) and committee members, the student must submit the thesis to [TRACE](#), which is an open repository for UT's published theses, dissertations, and creative work. The major advisor must confirm the thesis has been checked using the university-approved plagiarism detection software, [iThenticate](#). Note that the thesis deadline is considered met when the document is approved on TRACE, not when the Thesis Approval Form is submitted. To ensure timely approval, submit the thesis to TRACE at least 24 to 48 hours before the deadline. All incomplete or NR grades also must be complete by the submission deadline ([Graduate Deadlines](#)). Students will receive email notification when their thesis has been approved on TRACE.

2.2 Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) Degree

In the Department of Earth, Environmental and Planetary Sciences, students can enter a Ph.D. degree either with or without a prior M.S. degree. Students who enter without a prior M.S. degree have [additional course requirements](#) and are encouraged to consider a [Concurrent M.S. degree](#). Students are expected to complete a Ph.D. degree within their guaranteed funding window, which is four calendar years (i.e., 8 academic-year semesters and 4 summer semesters) for students who enter with a prior M.S. degree, and 5 calendar years (i.e. 10 academic year semesters and 5 summer semesters) for students who enter without a prior M.S. degree, assuming the student maintains adequate progress toward their degree.

To maintain full-time status as a graduate assistant within the department, students are therefore expected to complete either 132 hours (for Ph.D. students entering with a M.S. degree) or 165 hours (for Ph.D. students entering without a M.S. degree) of graduate credit (15 hours each fall and spring semester, and 3 hours over each summer semesters).

[GTA extension requests](#) beyond the support period are considered individually but are not guaranteed, as the department prioritizes new students. Near the end of each semester (June and November), the DGS solicits extension requests from students nearing the end of their support. Students must discuss their

request with their advisor and submit a request and justification for an extension via email to the DGS. The student's primary advisor must also submit an email to the DGS that explains their level of support for such an extension. The DGS then convenes a meeting of the Graduate Admission and Program Committee (GAPC) to review requests, which are then approved by departmental faculty. The DGS will then notify students of their status. Priority is given to Ph.D. students, especially those without a previous M.S. degree, those with no prior extensions, and those with health or research-related delays or internships.

To earn a Ph.D. degree in EEPS as student must adequately complete the following milestones:

- Complete EEPS course requirements (section 2.2.1)
- Form a dissertation committee (section 2.2.2)
- Submit a committee-approved dissertation proposal (section 2.2.3)
- Complete preliminary examinations (section 2.2.4)
- Apply for admission to candidacy (section 2.2.5)
- Prepare dissertation (section 2.2.6)
- Schedule dissertation defense and apply for graduation (section 2.2.7)
- Defend dissertation (section 2.2.8)
- Submit dissertation to TRACE (section 2.2.9)

2.2.1 Course Requirements (Ph.D.)

All course requirements must be fulfilled, or in progress, at the time of Admission to Candidacy.

For students entering the Ph.D. program with a prior M.S. degree, course requirements include 24 hours of graduate credit beyond the M.S. degree. Non-traditional students (i.e., students without a background degree in the earth, environmental, or planetary sciences) may be required by their committee to take specific 300-level courses. These courses do not count toward the graduate degree. Additionally, some 400-level courses may be taken for graduate credit, but no more than 6 hours of 400-level courses may count toward the degree. If a course is cross-listed as both a 400- and 500-level course, graduate students should take the 500-level option.

At least 12 of the 24 required credit hours must be graded coursework. Additionally, a minimum of 9 of these hours must be courses at the 600-level (excluding dissertation hours). Candidates must also complete 24 hours of EEPS 600 (Doctoral Research and Dissertation). Once enrolled in EEPS 600, students must continue to register for it every semester, including summers. Credits can be entirely from EEPS or distributed across UT Departments; the student's primary advisor or committee should approve all coursework. For coursework taken at other institutions, refer to the section of the University Graduate Catalog on [Transfer Credits](#). Additionally, Ph.D. students must enroll in EEPS 595 (Departmental Seminar) every semester unless they are enrolled in EEPS 596 (Scientific Presentations) or have course, internship, research, or teaching conflicts. Students must take EEPS 596 once during their residency, preferably during or prior to, their 3rd semester. A maximum of 3 credits from GEOL 595 and 1 credit from GEOL 596 can be applied towards graduation.

Course Requirements for a Ph.D. Degree (with prior M.S.)		Credits (minimum)	Details
GEOL 600	Doctoral Research and dissertation	24	Once enrolled, must continue to register in every semester, including Summer.
GEOL 595	EEPS Seminar	3	Must be taken every semester. Three credits may be applied toward degree.
GEOL 596	Scientific Presentations	1	Must be taken at least once, preferably during, or prior to the 3rd semester.
400-500-600 Level	Advisor or Committee-approved Courses	11	No more than 6 hours at the 400-level.
XXXX 600	Advisor or Committee-approved Courses	9	EEPS requires a minimum of 9 hours at the 600-level.

Additionally, all Ph.D. students must complete a committee-approved “field experience” demonstrating proficiency in field-based earth and environmental sciences. Many Ph.D. students will have already fulfilled this requirement with their undergraduate field camp course, or field work during their M.S. degree. Students who have not previously had field camp must have field experience that is deemed acceptable by the student’s full committee. Acceptable alternatives include participating in a traditional field course, participating in a field experience tailored to research goals (e.g., specialty hydrogeology, astrobiology, or planetary science field courses), field work associated with M.S. thesis research, or participation in a variety of short field excursions.

For students entering the Ph.D. program without M.S. degree, course requirements include 48 hours of graduate credit beyond the B.S. degree. Non-traditional students (i.e., students without a background degree in the earth, environmental, or planetary sciences) may be required by their committee to take specific 300-level courses. These courses do not count toward the graduate degree. Additionally, some 400-level courses may be taken for graduate credit, but no more than 6 hours of 400-level courses may count toward the degree. If a course is cross-listed as both a 400- and 500-level course, graduate students should take the 500-level option.

At least 24-30 of the 48 required credit hours must be graded coursework. If you plan to pursue a concurrent M.S. degree, 6 hours can be M.S. level research hours (EEPS 500). A minimum of 9 of the total credit hours must be courses at the 600-level (excluding dissertation hours). Candidates must also complete 24 hours of EEPS 600 (Doctoral Research and Dissertation). Once enrolled in EEPS 600, students must continue to register for it every semester, including summers. Credits can be entirely from EEPS or distributed across UT Departments; the student’s primary advisor or committee should approve all coursework. For coursework taken at other institutions, refer to the section of the University Graduate Catalog on [Transfer Credits](#).

Course Requirements for a Ph.D. Degree (no prior M.S.)		Credits (minimum)	Details
EEPS 600	Doctoral Research and dissertation	24	Once enrolled, must continue to register in every semester, including Summer. EEPS recommends taking EEPS 500 prior to completing Qualifying Exams.
EEPS 595	EEPS Seminar	3	Must be taken every semester. Three credits may be applied toward degree.
EEPS 596	Scientific Presentations	1	Must be taken once, preferably during, or prior to the 3rd semester.
400-500-600 level	Advisor or Committee-approved Courses	35	No more than 6 hours at the 400-level.
600-level	Advisor or Committee-approved Courses	9	EEPS requires a minimum of 9 hours at the 600-level.

2.2.2 Form a Dissertation Committee (Ph.D.)

The dissertation committee should be formed during the student's first semester, and no later than the end of the second semester. For students without a prior M.S. degree, the dissertation committee should be formed no later than the end of the fourth semester.

A dissertation committee consists of a major advisor and at least three additional tenure-track faculty members or other personnel (e.g., lecturers, adjunct personnel) that have been approved by the college. More than 4 committee members are permitted. At least two committee members must be from within UT, and one member must be from outside the student's department. External members can come from other UT departments or other institutions but must be approved in accordance with the procedures outlined by the [Graduate School](#).

The dissertation committee should be formed in the student's first semester, and no later than the end of the second semester. Once the committee is formed, the student is responsible for submitting a [Ph.D. Committee form](#); any change in the dissertation committee must be accompanied by a [Revise Ph.D. Committee form](#).

Students are responsible for scheduling committee meetings and are encouraged to meet with their committee frequently, ideally once a semester. Committee members may also request meetings at any time. This ensures regular supervision of the student's academic progress and thesis development. Students should feel free to schedule meetings at any point with individual committee members to assist with research execution. The committee for the dissertation defense must match the committee listed on the [Admission to Candidacy form](#). Any changes to the committee require a [Revised Admission to Candidacy form](#).

Please note: Sometimes students find their interests or personalities incompatible with the advisor assigned at the start of their degree. In such a case, students should contact the DGS or department head and talk through the process of changing projects or advisors and exploring the potential impact on their degree.

2.2.3 Submit a Committee-Approved Dissertation Proposal (Ph.D.)

The dissertation proposal should be completed, and presented to and approved by the committee, by the end of the student's third semester. For students without a prior M.S. degree, the dissertation proposal should be completed, and presented to and approved by the committee, by the end of the student's fifth semester.

All students pursuing a Ph.D. degree must conduct independent, original research leading to a dissertation. To remain in good standing, the proposal should be completed, presented to, and approved by, the student's thesis committee by the end of the student's third semester. This timing will permit the student to complete the Preliminary Examination (see Section 11.2.5) by the end of the fourth semester. Ph.D. students entering the program without a prior M.S. degree should strive to complete their proposal during, or prior to, their fifth semester, so that they may complete the Preliminary Examination (see Section 11.2.5) by the end of the sixth semester. Because the proposal writing process can take considerable time with revisions, students must plan ahead to ascertain that they meet this deadline. It is always a good idea to complete the proposal stage as early as possible, to leave sufficient time for completion of the dissertation research. Failure to meet these deadlines may result in disciplinary action from the GAPC.

The proposal should be concise, no longer than 15 pages of single-spaced text (including figures and excluding references and appendices). A proposal, at minimum, should include a well-referenced background section that delineates the need for investigation, a statement of the question being asked, the methods by which the question will be investigated, and an exploration of the potential outcomes. All students should also include appendices that provide an expected semester-by-semester timeline for completion and a list of completed, in progress, and proposed coursework. Proposal style may vary by sub-discipline, so students should consult their advisor/committee to any additional requirements (e.g., some faculty may ask that the student include a budget for their proposed project). The student should expect to proceed through multiple drafts of the proposal with their primary advisor before it is ready for committee review.

Once approved by the advisor, the student should circulate the thesis proposal to committee members and schedule a meeting for discussion of the proposal. The meeting should occur at least 10 days (2 business weeks) after the proposal has been circulated to the committee. At this meeting, the student should construct a 20- to 30-minute presentation that explores their project, their proposed timeline, and their coursework. The committee will provide feedback on the proposal (potentially asking for revisions), the methods (to ascertain proposed methods are appropriate), the timeline (to ascertain timely completion), and coursework (to recommend specific courses, to aid in choosing appropriate courses, and to approve a plan for a field experience).

At the time of this meeting, your advisor should direct all committee members to complete [SACS forms](#) including both the SACS Core Knowledge Assessment form and the SACS Research Skills form.

After the proposal is revised and accepted by the committee, the major advisor submits the proposal to the DGS along with an email that lists the committee members, states that the proposal has been approved by all committee members and acknowledges approval and timing of field experience completion. The DGS then forwards the proposal to the GAPC for evaluation. The student and advisor will receive feedback via email from the DGS.

Please note: A dissertation proposal is a proposal for future work; it is not a binding contract of the work to be completed for the degree. It is not uncommon for research to shift directions as the project moves forward, and often exciting lines of potential research hit snags or become untenable. In other cases, external forces can sometimes completely change the direction of research. Under such conditions, there is no requirement for the student to revise their proposal. Changes to the research, however, must be discussed with, and agreed upon by, the student's committee.

2.2.4 Complete Preliminary Examinations (Ph.D.)

The preliminary exams should be completed prior to the end of the fourth semester. For students without a prior M.S. degree, the preliminary exams should be completed prior to the end of the sixth semester.

The Preliminary Exam evaluates a Ph.D. student's knowledge, critical thinking, and ability to communicate and defend scientific ideas. The exam includes both written and oral components, which must be passed prior to the end of the fourth semester for those with a M.S. degree, or the sixth semester for those without a M.S. degree. Preliminary exams are tailored to each student by the committee members. Students, advisors, and committee members agree on the exam format and duration. Faculty should strive to be as forgiving as possible in the scheduling of written and oral exams, so that the student's forward progress is not delayed by the exam process.

There is no strict format for the written exam, which usually consists of written questions from each committee member (typically one test per day). Students are encouraged to meet with committee members to discuss study materials and possible questions. Questions should provide committee members with information they need to assess the ability (and preparation) of the student to complete their proposed research. Questions may be open- or closed-book and may have time constraints (but should not exceed 10 hours in one day). Questions may address specific components of the proposal or topics peripheral to the proposal; they may also address the current literature, require preparation of a short proposal, or ask the student to think outside of the box defined by their proposal.

Once the written exams are completed, the committee will convene to determine (by a majority vote of "pass") whether the student is ready to move onto the oral exams. Oral exams should strive to follow the written exams by 1-2 weeks, to ascertain that the student has time to discuss the results of their written exams with each of their committee members and has time to schedule exams that can be attended by all committee members (attendance by Zoom or other electronic means is acceptable). The oral exam lasts two to three hours. Typically, the first hour is open to all UT faculty members, and the remaining time is reserved for committee members only. Room assignments for the oral exams should be arranged through the front office.

At the end of the oral exams, the committee decides if the student passes. There are three possible outcomes:

1. Pass: The student passes both parts of the exam and continues in their program. The advisor notifies the DGS that the exams have been completed.
2. Conditional Pass: The student passes and has minor gaps to address. Remedies may include additional coursework, an independent study with a committee member, a well-referenced research paper covering specific topics, or other such requirement that has been agreed upon by the committee. The committee should also place a deadline for completion of the assigned material that is no longer than 1 semester. If requirements are met, the student passes; if not, the student fails. The advisor notifies the DGS of the outcome.

3. Fail: The student does not meet the requirements.

Students can request to retake a failed exam. If it is determined that a student has failed the written exam, the committee may recommend a retake prior to determining a time for the oral exam, allowing no longer than 1 semester for preparation. A second failure will result in dismissal from the program.

2.2.5 Apply for Admission to Candidacy (Ph.D.)

Admission to Candidacy Form must be submitted the semester prior to completion of the degree program.

Admission to Candidacy signifies that a student has shown the ability to perform acceptable graduate work and has made satisfactory progress toward a degree. It typically means all prerequisites are completed, and a program of study has been approved by the committee. Typically, a student submits the Application for Candidacy once they: (1) have a committee- and GAPC-approved proposal, (2) have completed their preliminary exams, (3) have completed pre-requisite courses and all graded coursework, and (3) have maintained a minimum 3.00 average GPA in all graded coursework.

Students must file the [Admission to Candidacy form](#), which lists all graduate courses counted toward degree, including those taken at another institution before doctoral program admission. The form must be signed by the doctoral committee and the DGS, with a committee that matches the [Ph.D. Committee form](#). If the committee changes after filing, a [Revised Admission to Candidacy form](#) must be submitted to the Graduate School before the defense.

Admission to Candidacy must be applied for and approved by the Graduate School by the last day of classes one semester before the degree is conferred (see [Graduation Deadlines](#)). The Graduate School verifies all requirements are met and contacts the student and the Director of Graduate Studies if there are any problems. Students can also reach out to the graduation specialists (gradspec@utk.edu) at any point, to ascertain that the correct paperwork has been filed.

2.2.6 Prepare Dissertation (Ph.D.)

An advisor-approved dissertation should be presented to the committee at least 10-14 days prior to the dissertation defense.

Before graduating, all Ph.D. students must submit a written dissertation demonstrating significant, independent, and original research, which must be presented in public, defended, and approved by the thesis committee. Students should collaborate closely with their advisor throughout the research and thesis preparation process. Whereas the format of the thesis is ultimately determined by the major advisor and committee, research for the Ph.D. degree is expected to result in multiple peer-refereed publications and dissertation formatting that follows journal guidelines is often the best choice. Students can also use one of the [Graduate School's templates](#). Thesis documents are routinely checked for plagiarism via [iThenticate](#).

EEPS requires the publication of at least one research paper on the dissertation topic in a peer-refereed journal prior to the dissertation defense. The student must be the senior author and must have significantly contributed to the study's development, execution, and writing. This requirement ensures that the student gains experience in timely reporting their scientific efforts, the process of manuscript preparation and submission, and the receipt of professional criticism and the revision process. Prior to submission, the major advisor and dissertation committee must approve the manuscript. It is expected that this manuscript will ultimately be included, in its published form, as a chapter of the student's dissertation. The faculty and administration of EEPS recognize that getting a manuscript through the publication process is long, often

12-18 months. We therefore encourage students to try to submit their first manuscript within 2 semesters of completing their preliminary exams, so a lengthy publication time does not delay the student's final defense and graduation. Modifications of the requirement may be deemed acceptable by the student's committee. Such modifications may include review and revision, but ultimate decline of a manuscript from a premier journal, such as Science or Nature or PNAS; or review, revision, and acceptance of a manuscript that remains "in press" at the time of the student's defense.

It is the advisor's responsibility to send the DGS an email that confirms the acceptance of a peer-reviewed publication; the email should contain a PDF copy of the published manuscript, a copy of the editor's acceptance email if the manuscript remains "in press", and an explanation of any modification of the requirement.

Near the end of the dissertation program, students are required to submit a draft of their thesis via [TRACE](#) to the Thesis Consultant, usually 1-2 months prior to defense scheduling to avoid unnecessary formatting revisions (see [Graduation Deadlines](#)). Submissions for formatting are not required to be complete, but should include the cover page, a table of contents, and multiple sections, as well as initial references, figures, captions, and tables. Students should collaborate closely with their advisor throughout the research and thesis preparation process.

2.2.7 Schedule Dissertation Defense and Apply for Graduation (Ph.D.)

See Graduate School Deadlines for the timeline to graduation.

Before scheduling their dissertation defense, students must get approval from their advisor(s) and committee, typically done by arranging a committee meeting in the semester prior to the defense (e.g., the 3rd semester). It's important to first have an open discussion with your advisor to fully discuss the Graduate School's [Guideline to Graduation](#). This discussion should start in the semester before you plan to defend (e.g., 7th semester).

The written Ph.D. thesis will typically undergo 2-4 rounds of revision with the student's advisor(s) prior to being sent to the committee. Once the major advisor determines sufficient progress on the thesis, the student sends a copy of the dissertation to committee members and schedules an oral defense. Scheduling the defense requires: (1) Determining a date and time suitable to the committee; students should aim for a 3-hour block of time to complete the defense; (2) completing a [Scheduling of Defense](#) form with the Graduate School; and (3) scheduling a room with EEPS office staff to ascertain that the defense will be held in Strong Hall and will avoid conflict with classes and other defenses.

Once the defense date is set, the student should apply for graduation through [MyUTK](#). It is important to discuss readiness for defense with your advisor to avoid multiple graduation fees. Ph.D. students must submit the [Scheduling of Dissertation Defense](#) form no later than one week before the defense.

Defenses can occur any time during the semester. [Graduate Deadlines](#) are posted in advance. To graduate in a specific semester, you typically need to defend about a month before its end. The dissertation submission deadline is usually two weeks before the semester ends. To meet all requirements and allow time for revisions, defend at least one month before the final submission deadline.

Students are advised to use scheduling software (e.g., Doodle, When2Meet) to find suitable 3-hour blocks for your committee. Ideally, hold the defense in Strong Hall, avoiding overlap with class times or other defenses. Allocate approximately 45-60 minutes for the public defense and 2 hours for the private defense. These can be held in different rooms to avoid conflict with room use. The public defense should accommodate at least 20 people; the private defense room needs to fit the committee only.

The student's advisor is responsible for notifying the department (faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students) about any upcoming defense. An e-mail announcement should include the student's name, thesis title, and details of the defense (time, room, etc.). The advisor should also forward an electronic copy of the dissertation to all faculty and students, ideally at least 1 week prior to the defense. The advisor should also consider creating a slide announcement to be projected on departmental electronic notice boards.

2.2.8 Defend Dissertation (Ph.D.)

See Graduate School Deadlines for the timeline to graduation.

Typically, the defense deadline is about a month before the semester ends, while the thesis submission deadline is usually two weeks before. To allow for revisions after the defense, schedule it at least a month before the thesis submission deadline. The student's completed written thesis should be submitted to their committee at least 2 weeks before the defense and scanned for plagiarism using [iThenticate](#); your advisor must confirm the results of this plagiarism scan when the final thesis is submitted to the Graduate School. Failure to meet deadlines may result in postponement of the defense.

The thesis defense consists of a 45-minute public presentation followed by a question-and-answer period from a general audience of students and faculty; family and friends are also welcome. The audience is then invited to leave while the student and committee remain to conduct the private defense, which consists of more in-depth questions and discussions about how the thesis may be improved. The committee then excuses the student for a few minutes while they confer, and then invites the student back to the room to announce the results of the defense and to provide guidance regarding any required revisions. At this point, the student and committee should determine how forms will be handled.

Required forms can be found at [Forms Central](#). The first form is the [Report of Final Examination](#), which is typically signed by all committee members at the end of the Defense and submitted to the graduate school by the faculty advisor. The second form is the [Dissertation Approval](#) form. Typically, your committee will decide at the end of your defense how to handle this form. Sometimes, committee members will withhold signatures until they have seen your revisions. Often, committee members will sign the form immediately, and your primary advisor will withhold their signature until revisions have been completed, at which point, the advisor submits the form. If you and your advisor desire time to get the manuscript to publication before it becomes public, there is also an [Embargo Request](#) form. Committee signatures on final defense and thesis approval forms must match those on the Admission to Candidacy form. If your committee has changed you need to complete a [Revised Admission to Candidacy](#) form.

At the time of this meeting, your advisor should ask the committee to also complete the [SACS Research Skills](#) form.

The committee has the right to reject a thesis before submission to the Graduate School, even if the oral examination is passed. Missing graduation deadlines requires reapplication for the next semester and missing the second deadline may necessitate registering for thesis credit the following semester. If you applied to graduate but miss the deadlines for that semester, by not defending your thesis or not submitting the final thesis document to TRACE, then you will need to submit a new application for graduation the next semester. Missing these deadlines can also result in you needing to register for thesis credit for the following semester. All students are encouraged to reach out to the graduate school specialists at gradspec@utk.edu who can help to ensure that delays are properly processed.

2.2.9 Submit Dissertation to TRACE (Ph.D.)

See Graduate School Deadlines for the timeline to graduation.

Once all revisions have been approved by the major advisor(s) and committee members, submit the thesis to [TRACE](#), an open repository for UT's published theses, dissertations, and creative work. The major advisor must confirm the thesis has been checked using the university-approved plagiarism detection software, [iThenticate](#). For more details on formatting, deadlines, and plagiarism detection, visit the [Theses and Dissertation webpage](#). Note that the thesis deadline is considered met when the document is approved on TRACE, not when the form is submitted. To ensure timely approval, submit the thesis to TRACE at least 24 to 48 hours before the deadline. The student will receive a notification via email when the dissertation is accepted by TRACE.

2.3 Concurrent M.S. Degree

Paperwork for a concurrent M.S. degree can be submitted at any time after requirements are complete and prior to admission to candidacy for the Ph.D. program.

Students can enter the Ph.D. program either with or without having a prior M.S. degree. Students who enter the program without a prior M.S. degree may decide to apply for a concurrent M.S. degree. This option provides the student an opportunity to gain an additional degree while they work through the normal Ph.D. program. EEPS strongly encourages students who entered the Ph.D. program directly from their undergraduate degree to consider a concurrent M.S. degree. Concurrent M.S. degrees can also be received by students who enter the Ph.D. program with a M.S. degree in a field other than in the geosciences. The concurrent M.S. degree provides the student with a concrete degree that represents the early work of your dissertation (and it provides an additional bonus in funding for the department).

The coursework requirements for a concurrent M.S. degree are designed to take advantage of the departmental requirements already in place for a student who enters the program without a M.S. degree. These include:

Course Requirements for a Concurrent M.S.		Credits <i>(recommended)</i>	Details
EEPS 500	Masters Research Hours	6	No more than 6 hours can be used toward the concurrent M.S. degree.
400-500-600 Level	Advisor- or Committee-approved Courses	24	No more than 6 hours can be at the 400-level.

Additional Requirements for a Concurrent M.S. degree

1. Completion of a committee-approved field experience
2. Successful completion of a committee-approved Ph.D. proposal

3. Successful completion of both written and oral preliminary exams

4. Submission of a first-authored manuscript on current research in a peer-reviewed journal

A concurrent M.S. degree requires several forms ([Forms Central](#)) to complete the process. These include: a [Ph.D. Committee Approval](#) form, a [Request for Concurrent M.S.](#), an [Application to Candidacy M.S./Specialists Degree](#) form, a [Report of the Final Exam](#) (this is a thesis defense pass-fail form but is used here to signify that you have passed your qualifying exams and that you have submitted a manuscript to a peer-reviewed journal), and an Application for Graduation. You must submit your Graduation Application online at [MyUTK](#).

Once you have received your concurrent M.S. degree, you will use the Application to Candidacy for the Ph.D. degree to list your coursework from your concurrent M.S. These go on the last page of the form, which is also where you would place 30 hours of M.S. coursework if you received a M.S. in geology from a different university, and your remaining courses necessary to fulfill your Ph.D. on the previous page of the form.

Students should be aware that coursework can only count for a single degree. If completing a concurrent M.S., you want to note only the required number of hours on your paperwork, even if you have already completed additional course requirements.

3. EXPECTATIONS

In a productive, inclusive Department, everyone shares responsibilities to foster a scholarly environment that instills in each of us independent critical thinking, academic rigor, and intellectual honesty. It is the joint responsibility of faculty and graduate students to work together to foster these ends through relationships that demonstrate the highest levels of personal and professional integrity, and mutual respect.

As a graduate student, you play a vital role in this mission for the Department, College, and University, and contribute to a vibrant research and teaching environment through course instruction and research that is disseminated through publications and conference presentations. Below is a compilation of responsibilities for students, faculty advisors, committee members, and the Department. These expectations are modified from Duke University's "[Best Practices: Core Expectations for Graduate Education](#)"

3.1 Graduate Student Responsibilities and Expectations

Graduate students serve an important role at the University in contributing to both the teaching and research mission of the organization. As such, all graduate students should strive to:

- To adhere, at all times, to University policies outlined in the [Student Code of Conduct](#).
- To communicate regularly with faculty mentors and committees, especially in matters relating to research and progress within the degree program.
- To take responsibility for knowing the regulations and policies governing their graduate studies and to complete all required paperwork and other degree obligations in a timely fashion.
- To maintain the highest integrity in all aspects of work, especially in the tasks of collecting, analyzing, and presenting research data, as defined in [Responsible Conduct in Research](#) training.
- To contribute, wherever possible, to the discourse of scholarly discipline through conference presentations, publications, and collaborative projects.
- To prioritize time-management to avoid non-essential activities that hinder degree completion.
- To devote the same effort to undergraduate or graduate instruction that you would expect from your own instructors.

- To create, in your own classrooms and laboratories, an ethos of collegiality and collaboration.
- To assist fellow graduate and undergraduate students in their own professional and scholarly development.
- To integrate and apply feedback to research, coursework, and teaching performance.
- To develop skills to communicate to non-scientists and the general public.
- To participate in outreach activities that bring our science to the public.
- To build professional relationships and seek mentors to help with skills or job opportunities.

3.2 Faculty Advisor Responsibilities and Expectations

As teachers, researchers, and scholars, the faculty serve critical roles as advisors and mentors for graduate students. As such, all faculty should strive to:

- To be fair, impartial, and act with integrity, following University policies in the [Faculty Handbook](#).
- To meet regularly with advisees and be available when needed. Provide equitable time to all advisees and respond promptly to emails.
- To provide disciplinary knowledge to help advisees develop unique research projects, and to provide necessary research training that adheres to [Responsible Conduct in Research](#) training.
- To provide timely, constructive feedback on all aspects of work and to assure that advisees are aware of any performance issues.
- To recognize that advisees have responsibilities to coursework and teaching, and to exercise patience while helping to set clear expectations and timelines that fit a 50% FTE appointment (20 hours/week) that permit adherence to graduation timelines.
- To explore all potential pathways for funding of student research activities.
- To aid in the development of advisee communication skills for both scientific and non-scientific audiences, and to assure understanding of disciplinary practices in terms of authorship and acknowledgement, etc.
- To encourage participation in conferences, workshops, publications, grant writing, networking, and to provide monetary support for such activities when available.
- To assist advisees in achieving their research, educational, and career goals, even if different from your own.

3.3 Committee Members Responsibilities and Expectations

Thesis and dissertation committee members serve an important role at UT. Both M.S. and Ph.D. degrees are approved by committee. This means that a student cannot receive a degree from an advisor's input alone. Committee members, therefore, should have a level of expertise on a student's research topic and should be interested in actively serving on the committee. Committee service typically involves meeting with a student, providing technical and methodological advice, and in some cases, augmenting the intellectual guidance provided by the advisor and becoming a collaborator on the work. Different committee members may have various levels of involvement, based on expertise and interest. All committee members are responsible for ongoing evaluation of our graduate students' performances in academic and research activities.

Evaluation for critical milestones (e.g., proposal discussion, preliminary exams., thesis/dissertation documents and final defense) is done so as part of the Department's SACS requirements for learning outcomes. Committee members should respond promptly to a student's request to meet or to get feedback from written material. If a committee member fails to participate, even if given a reasonable timeline and

notification, then that member may be replaced. Severe problems should be reported to the primary advisor and DGS.

3.4 EEPS Department Responsibilities and Expectations

The Department has several responsibilities to ensure that graduate students, faculty advisors, and committee members have the necessary guidance and resources to maintain our productive Graduate Program and timely degree completion of our students. The Department upholds the highest standards of academic quality in all aspects of the Graduate Program, from admissions to successful degree fulfillment.

Key responsibilities include:

- To inform all students and faculty of their roles, responsibilities, and expectations, and provide feedback on performance. Provide detailed descriptions of the requirements and qualifications necessary for academic employment, training, and financial support at the University.
- To offer a range of relevant and advanced graduate courses across all subdisciplines.
- To provide guidance on degree regulations and procedures, including required coursework, qualifying exams, and thesis/dissertation guidelines, as outlined in this Handbook. The DGS and GAPC members can offer additional clarification.
- To provide professional development opportunities and strive to create a collegial, inclusive, and scholarly environment where faculty and students pursue academic and professional goals with mutual respect and collaboration.
- To establish a mechanism for concerns, or complaints, if expectations are not met. Graduate students can contact the DGS or Department Head and participate in Town Hall meetings, which are administered by the student GeoClub representatives.

4. FINANCIAL SUPPORT AND BENEFITS

At the University of Tennessee, graduate assistantships are the primary source of funding for graduate students. Assistantships are offered by academic departments and other administrative offices. An assistantship is a financial award that is paid to a graduate student for part-time work in teaching, research, or administration while the student is pursuing an advanced degree. A graduate assistant is both an employee of the University and a student. As an employee, the graduate assistant receives financial support in terms of covering a base stipend. In this position, you will work under the supervision of a faculty mentor or group of faculty mentors to contribute to the teaching and research mission of the Department and the University. As a student, the graduate assistantship includes financial support in terms of tuition, fees, and graduate health insurance. As the position as a student, your primary job is to complete your graduate coursework and research. In this dual role, graduate students have both critical [Responsibilities](#), as defined in the *Faculty Handbook*, and [Standards of Conduct](#), as defined in *Hilltopics*.

At the University of Tennessee, graduate students are provided a financial award in terms of either a Graduate Teaching Assistantship (GTA) or a Graduate Research Assistantship (GRA). Such positions typically provide 50% support for your contribution to the teaching and research mission of the department and university, as well as covering the costs of your tuition and fees. From the perspective of the student, you are paid for 0.5 FTE (i.e. Full-time Equivalent based on a 40-hour work week), which equates to 20 hours of work per week covering teaching or research activities as an employee of the university, and your remaining 0.5 FTE is used to fulfill the requirements of your graduate program as a student of the university.

When faculty have funding available, they may also provide additional pay to students during the summer months. Graduate fellowship opportunities are also offered both within and outside of the university.

Students are encouraged to look these over to see if they qualify to apply. Students receiving fellowships are supervised by their academic thesis/dissertation advisors. Graduate fellowships offered through the University are listed at: (<https://gradschool.utk.edu/graduate-student-life/costs-funding/graduate-fellowships/>).

Although graduate students are not typically required to punch a time clock, there is a general expectation that graduate students will maintain regular hours, especially with regards to teaching and laboratory activities. Flexible work hours are a privilege for graduate students but should not be abused. Graduate students should schedule absences with their advisor and the departmental lab coordinator to ensure that their responsibilities are covered; missing teaching/research responsibilities may result in loss of appointment and dismissal from the program.

International students are strictly limited to the total employment that they can have, which depends on their visa status. International students should therefore contact the [Center for Global Engagement](#), and should be aware of policies that limit acceptance of other appointments across campus that may put the student over the 50% FTE level. Work outside of the campus environment is not regulated by the university, but students should be cognizant of the impacts that carrying outside responsibilities can have on the progress of their degree.

The Department makes every effort to provide financial support for graduate students in the form of GTAs, GRAs, fellowships, and supplemental support. Assistantship offers are made to incoming students in accordance with our expectations for timely degree completion, which is 2 years for students pursuing a M.S. degree, 4 years for students with a prior M.S. degree who are pursuing a Doctoral degree, and 5 years for students pursuing a Doctoral degree without a prior M.S. degree. Students may formally request extensions to departmental assistantship funding limits, but these are not guaranteed.

The maximum amount of time a student can be supported, according to the Graduate School, is 3 years as a M.S. student, 5 years as a Doctoral student who has a prior M.S. degree, or 8 years as a Doctoral student who entered with a Baccalaureate degree only. Requests for an extension beyond the maximum terms must be made in writing by the academic unit to the Dean of the Graduate School.

4.1 Graduate Teaching Assistantship (GTA)

GTA and GRA positions differ in both the source of the funding and the primary responsibilities of the position. GTA positions are funded through the university and linked to the department's teaching mission. A 50% FTE GTA works up to 20 hours per week, teaching or assisting in lab classes for introductory or upper-level geology courses and participating in grading for lecture courses. Upper-division courses may require more effort than introductory ones, and weekly workloads may vary, but should rarely exceed 20 hours. Required training sessions are provided by the University and Department to prepare GTAs for their responsibilities. The Senior Lecturer or course instructor, who supervises GTAs, assigns courses, coordinates schedules, oversees teaching expectations, conducts training sessions, and produces a yearly evaluation of students' teaching. Continuation of GTA support depends on satisfactory performance.

Departmental GTAs receive a 12-month stipend (based on their work as a GTA for the 9 months of the academic year), a waiver of maintenance fees and out-of-state tuition, and health insurance benefits. GTA stipends may be supplemented by additional pay from faculty research funds during the summer. GTAs who are non-native English speakers are required to pass an English proficiency test that is administered through the [Center for Global Engagement](#).

4.2 Graduate Research Assistantship (GRA)

GTA and GRA positions differ in both the source of the funding and the primary responsibilities of the position. GRA positions are funded through individual faculty members and linked to their research grants. A 50% FTE GRA works up to 20 hours per week engaging in work related to the research grant from which they are funded and will also forward the degree goals of the student. The project director or principal investigator, usually the student's advisor, determines the duration of GRA appointments, and may choose to provide a salary higher than the base salary required by the University. The project director also supervises the student and oversees the research and any required training.

GRA appointments can range from a month to the entire duration of the student's program, but they are typically assigned in 6-month durations that align with Fall (August-January) and Spring-Summer (February-July) semesters. Unlike GTAs, GRAs who are non-native English speakers are not required to pass an English proficiency test. Continuation of GRA support depends on satisfactory performance. GRAs receive a waiver of maintenance fees, out-of-state tuition, and health insurance benefits covered by the grant.

4.3 Loans

Students in need of loans can find information about loan options at: <<https://onestop.utk.edu/loans/>>.

4.4 Graduate Student Health Insurance

All graduate assistants (GTAs, GRAs) with at least 25% FTE (10 hours/week) and enrolled in at least 3 credit hours (with at least 1 credit being on campus) are automatically enrolled in the Graduate Student Employee Health Insurance Program and 100% of the premiums, only, are paid by the University or Department. All international students must have local health insurance, and international students receiving GTA or GRA assistantships are also automatically enrolled. All students can elect to add a spouse and/or dependent coverage at their own expense. If a student already has insurance coverage through another carrier, then this policy functions as additional coverage. But the student will need to contact both insurance companies prior to use to determine which one will be primary.

The [UT campus Student Health Center](#) (865-974-3135) is the first point of health services provided through student health insurance and the center manages the [health insurance program](#). Full policy details are at <https://www.studenthealthprograms.com/plan-summary>.

The effective date of enrollment into Student Health Insurance is the first day of the month in which you became employed. If you have a medical emergency before enrollment is complete (which can take 4–6 weeks), please contact the Student Health Center. The termination date will be the last day of the month in which your position is terminated. If you lose your GTA or GRA appointment in the middle of a semester, then it is possible to purchase insurance for the remaining months not covered. But, if you are no longer a student, then you will need to purchase health insurance from [another provider](#). For questions about enrollment, contact Student Health, not the insurance provider. It is critical that students are enrolled during the summer to maintain their health coverage through the year.

Once enrolled in Student Health Insurance, you will receive an email from them to confirm enrollment and create an online account to access your insurance card and explanation of benefits, and to correspond about claims or in-network providers. The Student Health Insurance covers nearly all services on the UT campus by the Student Health Center at 100%, with a few exceptions, such as Rabies shots, HPV shots, foam rolls, among other items.

Referrals from the staff medical providers (for the best benefits) are needed to see providers off campus (within a 50-mile radius), but note that medical care, co-pays, deductibles, and co-insurance rates may apply. Referrals expire July 31 each year. Discounts are available for dental and vision services, as both are not included in the current student health insurance plan. Only UT students can use the Student Health Center; spouses and/or dependents on your account will need to utilize in-network providers.

Students enrolled in 9+ credit hours in any given semester retain health insurance benefits, but continuing coverage **MUST** be maintained by electing to pay a separate Student Health Fee via One Stop if enrollment drops below 9 credit hours. This is particularly relevant in the summer semester when only 3 credit hours are taken. The Student Health Fee provides the student with access to the Student Health Center clinic, and the student will receive the UT Hospital discounts in case of an emergency. However, if a student decides not to pay this fee in a semester, but then goes to the Student Health Clinic, the student will have to pay the Student Health Fee to receive services. If the student does not pay the fee and is in an accident and has to go to the hospital, then the student will not receive the insurance discounts and may have substantial out-of-pocket expenses.

4.5 Travel Authorization

Almost all graduate students will travel at some point during their graduate program: for field work, use of analytical facilities at a different institution, or to present the results of research.

Authorization for travel must be requested prior to travel in order to ensure proper liabilities for the person traveling and the university. A request for out-of-state travel is best coordinated with help of the front office staff and the student's advisor, who will provide instructions on how to make them your proxy (so they can purchase airfares, pay for conference registration, and file for reimbursements) and with [departmental travel authorization](#) forms so the front office staff has the information necessary to move your travel forward. Travel within the state of Tennessee does not need prior approval, but it is always a good idea to complete a departmental travel authorization form.

Additionally, all foreign travel requires online registration of international travel through the [Center for Global Engagement](#). Approvals for foreign travel must be granted by CGE prior to purchasing airfare or receiving department authorization, so students are encouraged to complete these forms at least 1 month prior to expected travel.

The cost of graduate student travel can be prohibitive. Students should ask their advisors about possible support prior to travel to determine the extent of support available from faculty grants. Research travel can also be supported through student grants, such as those awarded by the Geological Society of America, Sigma Xi, The Explorer's Club, and other agencies. Students that are making a presentation at a conference can also apply to receive partial support through the departmental [Student Success Fund](#) and through the [Graduate Student Senate \(GSS\) Travel Awards](#). Many conferences also have their own student travel awards, or programs that allow students to reduce their costs through volunteer activity.

4.6 Financial Implications for Withdrawing and Employment Termination

4.6.1 Withdrawing

If you wish to leave UT before the end of a term, you must fulfill UT requirements to withdrawal from all your classes. Students should be aware that withdrawing from UT is likely to have both financial and academic effects. Please see the Graduate Catalog for information on taking a [Leave of Absence](#) and at One Stop Student Services [Registration and Degree Planning](#).

You should also contact your major advisor, DGS, and/or Department Head, and alert them immediately to your intentions, as your withdrawal may affect GTA positions within the Department, financial obligations for grants if on a GRA, and research obligations for funding agencies. Please consult with a One Stop Student Services advisor regarding impact on financial aid. If possible, providing two-week notice would be the minimum customary amount of time to alert someone that you plan to leave UT. Also, all of your research products to date need to be handed over to your advisor(s) because of data and research archival requirements imposed by funding agencies. After the first day of classes, graduate students who need to drop all of their courses may totally withdraw by the deadline posted to the One Stop Student Services website, under [Dates and Deadlines](#). The word "withdrawn" will be posted on the transcript for the semester. A student who stops participating in classes, or fails to attend class, without officially withdrawing will be assigned the grade of F in each course.

Graduate students who withdraw from a program prior to the end of the semester, and/or leave the university before a semester is finished, are liable for tuition and fee payment; the amount is determined by the date during the semester the student is terminated or drops courses or withdraws from the University. Termination/withdrawal from the University may impact repayment of some forms of financial aid. Withdrawal does not cancel fees and charges already incurred. Failure to comply with UT withdrawal policy and procedures could result in a larger fee assessment.

The effective date of the withdrawal is the date the withdrawal office is notified by completion of the official withdrawal request form (either online or using an official Withdrawal Request Form). Students who officially withdraw must apply for readmission in advance of their next term of anticipated enrollment, except for withdrawal from summer term.

4.6.2 Early Termination

If a student is terminated because of unsatisfactory work performance, lack of satisfactory progress toward the degree, or for violation of the Standards of Conduct, then the student's stipend and fee waiver will be reduced pro rata from the effective date of the termination or withdrawal.

4.6.3 Checkout Process

Human Resources requires a [checkout process](#) for all regular employees and graduate students prior to leaving their employment with UT and before receiving their final paycheck. EEPS initiates the process online by entering the student's ID number and the last day the student will be physically on campus. EEPS also collects any University equipment and other items. All of the relevant University departments will be notified of the impending departure, in which case outstanding debts or issues (e.g., keys, library books, parking tickets) will need to be resolved prior to approval. The process can take as little as 2 days with minimal disruption. After approval, EEPS and the student will be notified by email and can continue finishing the form, if needed. Debts can be paid by having Payroll deduct the money from the final paycheck before release via direct deposit. Lost University items, building keys, etc., will require extra paperwork to be filed, such as a Police Report. If you leave UT without checking out, then your final paycheck will be withheld.

5. UNIVERSITY POLICIES

Some of the policies that will be most relevant to EEPS graduate students, especially those on GTA assignments, are described below for convenience. The full list of university policies can be found in the [Hilltopics Student Handbook](#).

5.1 Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

Students are notified of their [FERPA rights](#) and the procedures for limiting disclosure of directory information in Hilltopics at Orientation for new students. FERPA provides for confidentiality of student records; however, it also provides for basic identification of people at UT without the consent of the individual. Consult the website for what information can be released. If you are a GTA, then understanding how to abide by FERPA policy with your students will be important. As a graduate student, you should also be familiar with the kind of academic information that you can share about your students with others, including other GTAs, as well as their family members who may reach out to you with questions or concerns about their children. You should also be aware of the type of academic information about you that can or cannot be shared, without your consent, with others, including between faculty members, among graduate students, or with your family. If you wish to change your FERPA status, you need to fill out a Waiver of Privacy Rights and Authorization to Release Disciplinary Information form (referred to as a [FERPA form](#)).

5.2 Title XI and Mandatory Reporters

University employees are “Mandatory Reporters” and are required to report sexual misconduct, relationship violence, stalking, or retaliation to the University. The University of Tennessee is committed to creating and maintaining a safe and non-discriminatory learning, living, and working environment free from Sexual Misconduct, Relationship Violence, Stalking, and Retaliation, which is collectively referred to as “Prohibited Conduct,” and which is defined in UT’s policy on Sexual Misconduct, Relationship Violence, Stalking, and Retaliation.

All graduate students are mandatory reporters. The only university employees not considered to be mandatory reporters are those who hold a valid license in a profession for which Tennessee law recognizes a confidential relationship between them and their clients or patients. See [The Office of Title IX](#) website, for more information about training for Graduate Assistants. As a student at the University, please know there are a number of resources and options available for you. The Student Counseling Center (865-974-2196) and the Student Health Center (865-974-3135) are both confidential resources.

5.3 Inappropriate Relationships between Faculty, Staff, and Students

The University has two policies that deal with relationships between faculty and students. [The Faculty Handbook](#) outlines the Prohibited Relationships Policy, as well as the [University Policy](#) on Sexual Misconduct, Relationship Violence, Stalking, and Retaliation (Title IX). If a student is concerned about a relationship between a faculty member and a student, there are a few options to consider:

- (1) Talking confidentially. The University’s confidential resources include the Student Counseling Center (865-974-2196) and the Student Health Center (865-974-3135). These offices can help you

evaluate concerns, educate you on options, and assist with reporting if you choose. You can also talk with individuals outside the University, like a family member, friend, or therapist.

- (2) Talk with a faculty advisor, DGS, Department Head, Associate Dean or Dean for Graduate Studies, or other administrator. Speaking with a University administrator or faculty member allows the University to address your concerns. It is not your responsibility to interpret policy or manage faculty/staff behaviors. Faculty/administration will assist with your concerns and share them (as privately as possible) with appropriate administrators. This may require a "mandatory report" to the Office of Title IX or other campus resources.
- (3) Talk with the Office of Title IX or Office of Equity & Diversity. Talking with Title IX (865-974-9600) or the Office of Equity and Diversity (OED) (865-974-2498) does not require you to first report to your department. These resources exist to provide support to individual students, faculty, and staff, as well as departments. Title IX and OED can discuss resources, support, and reporting.

5.4 Concealed-Carry on Campus

In 2016, the State of Tennessee passed a law to allow full-time UT employees with valid handgun permits to carry a concealed handgun on UT property. This law *does not* extend the right to students to carry a concealed handgun on campus, which includes graduate students. Also, full-time employees enrolled in a class at UT are not allowed to carry a concealed handgun on UT property. Questions or concerns about unusual or unauthorized handgun use should be immediately directed to UT Police Department (865-974-3114), with courtesy notification to the Department Head.

5.5 Drug-Free Campus and Workplace

In 1990, the UT Board of Trustees approved the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act of 1989, ensuring a safe and healthful environment for all students and employees. The University prohibits the unlawful use, manufacture, possession, distribution, or dispensing of drugs ("controlled substances") and alcohol on UT property or during University activities. Violations of this policy may result in disciplinary action, including immediate dismissal. Federal, state, and local laws provide additional penalties for drug- or alcohol-related offenses. More information is available in the Graduate Catalog and Section 13 regarding disciplinary actions. For treatment information, students should contact the Student Affairs Office, Student Health Center (865-974-3135), or Counseling Center (865-974-2196).

5.6 Student Wellness

Graduate school can be an intellectually and emotionally trying time, but always try to remember that you are not alone in this process. You were accepted into the graduate program in the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences because we believe in your ability to successfully complete the program, and the faculty and staff in the department are here to help you achieve that success.

The first thing to do if you feel you are having problems is to consult someone. This might be a friend in the department, or your advisor, or the DGS (whose has an express responsibility to be a sounding board for all graduate student issues), or the department head. If you are concerned about talking with a faculty member, bring a friend along as a third party. The key is to get any issue out in the open as soon as possible so that the faculty can work together with you to find the best path forward.

There are a lot of options. For specific grievances with persons in the department, the DGS or department

head can step in and help find a solution. If departmental discussions fail to resolve the personnel issues, the department head can bring in an [Ombudsman](#) or someone from [Human Resources](#) to help. In addition, the graduate school offers an [Appeals Process](#) for academic issues that are not satisfactorily settled within the department; the [Office of Equity and Diversity](#) can help with issues of discrimination; and the [Title IX Office](#) can help with issues of sexual harassment or discrimination.

Finally, the [Counseling Center](#) is the primary resource for mental health care and support and can provide care for both long-term and acute issues. The Student Counseling Center (865-974-2196) is available, with walk-ins from 10 AM to 3 PM, Monday through Friday. Other helpful campus resources include RecSports, the [Office of Multicultural Student Life](#), the [Jones Center for Leadership and Service](#), and the [Student Success Center](#).

6. DEPARTMENT POLICIES

6.1 Commitment to Equitable Workspace

The Department of Earth, Environmental, and Planetary Sciences at the University of Tennessee believes in the value of an equitable, diverse geoscience community. We recognize and acknowledge that differences between people are a valued asset to a team. Emphasizing the contributions of the various groups that make up the population of the world respects individuality while fostering respect for others. We seek to train graduate students who can effectively work across differences and are prepared to live and work in a global society, while understanding the importance of people sharing their stories and learning from the stories of others. EEPS is committed to creating a vibrant multicultural, multi-ethnic, and gender-diverse community where diverse students, faculty, and staff are recruited and supported in all aspects of their personal and professional pursuits, and where diversity scholarship is expected to create a richer educational experience.

The University of Tennessee does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, or veteran status in provision of educational programs and services or employment opportunities and benefits. This policy extends to both employment and admission to the University.

The University of Tennessee does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex or disability in its education programs and activities pursuant to the requirements of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. Inquiries and charges of violation concerning Title VI, Title IX, Section 504, ADA or the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) or any of the other above referenced policies should be directed to the [Office of Equity and Diversity](#) (OED), 1840 Melrose Avenue, Knoxville, Tennessee 37996, Phone: 865-974-2498, Fax: 865-974- 0943. Requests for accommodation of a disability should be directed to the [ADA Coordinator](#) at the Office of Equity and Diversity (OED).

6.2 Laboratory Safety Training & Responsible Conduct for Research

You will have the opportunity to work with some of the Department's analytical facilities. Each of the laboratories in the Department or in other academic units across campus is administered by at least one faculty member and may be maintained and operated by a professional research staff person. The University requires mandatory safety and/or compliance training of faculty, staff, and students who use chemicals in the workplace, who use radiation, or who work with biological materials. Nearly all of the analytical

laboratories in the Department contain chemicals, which are inventoried every year. Some laboratories in EEPS and Strong Hall require special permits for people to be in them, so entering these spaces should be avoided without the proper training; similarly, showing people around these spaces on informal tours should not be done. When in doubt, ask the faculty member or staff, or senior graduate students, about a lab space.

The University Office of [Environmental Health and Safety \(EHS\)](#) provides numerous training events for chemical and physical workplace safety, and documentation is available online, including the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) "Right to Know" act. In addition to chemical safety, some of the laboratory facilities require Radiation Safety or Biological Safety training to use any instrumentation. Your advisor(s) will alert you to specific training requirements that you will need to conduct your research. Training is typically accomplished in your first semester, but refresher training occurs annually or on an as-needed basis, and it is possible that supplemental safety, chemical, etc. training will be required of you throughout your time at UT. You will need to provide the training and certification documentation, showing that you passed the courses or modules, to your advisor and you should maintain a record of your training, as well.

Under no circumstances should a student enter a laboratory without the permission of the faculty member responsible for that facility. Students should consult with the faculty member responsible for a specific instrument prior to wanting to use an instrument or the laboratory space. After suitable training and safety awareness, proficient graduate students can have direct access to research facilities. However, some of the instrumentation requires extensive training and analyzing samples is usually done under the supervision of a professional staff or faculty member. Graduate students may obtain the help of a staff person for consultation on the research, but as a general rule, research staff will not perform actual Thesis or Dissertation lab work; this is the student's responsibility. Also, use of departmental resources is not free, even if you are trained to use an instrument. Financial obligations to analyze samples and run instrumentation should be arranged (usually with or by your faculty advisor) prior to beginning any research project. University research equipment cannot be used for personal gain.

All graduate students are encouraged to take and pass an approved course in "[Responsible Conduct of Research.](#)"

6.3 Use of Equipment Off-Campus

Do not take UT property home or into the field without proper documentation. Most research and computer equipment in the Department has a UT property or inventory tag and is recorded in the inventory system. The Department keeps track of the location of all major and minor equipment annually. If an item is missing and cannot be found after inquiries, additional paperwork, including a police report, must be filed.

6.4 Rights Responsibilities and Grounds for Dismissal

A graduate student is someone officially admitted to and enrolled in the Graduate School at the University of Tennessee. Key programs, policies, procedures, and minimum requirements are outlined in the [Graduate Catalog](#). Each student must be familiar with the Graduate School and Department regulations. Both entities are responsible for maintaining current policies, with changes processed through the Graduate Council. Student rights and responsibilities, including conduct and academic integrity policies, are discussed in [Hilltopics](#). Students must meet the retention standards set by the Graduate School and the Department.

Failure to maintain academic standards or professional behavior may lead to termination from the graduate program or the Graduate School.

There are three types of academic standing: good standing, academic or financial probation, and academic dismissal. Graduate student assistants must prioritize satisfactory academic progress, maintaining a cumulative GPA of 3.00 on a 4-point scale. All courses taken for graduate credit count towards GPA calculation, and grades of I (incomplete) turn into an F if not completed on time. Students must complete course obligations with the instructor promptly.

Graduate students can be dismissed from the program for several reasons, including failing to meet deadlines, not making satisfactory progress, not meeting GTA or GRA expectations, failing to maintain a 3.0 GPA, failing preliminary exams, or engaging in academic dishonesty or other detrimental actions such as harassment, theft, or the use of alcohol or illegal drugs in the workplace. Financial consequences may also arise from dismissal. Students have the right to [appeal dismissal decisions](#).

6.4.1 Failure to Make Satisfactory Progress

Graduate assistants (GTAs and GRAs) who perform satisfactorily are typically reappointed for the duration of their degree program. If a GTA or GRA fails to meet specific appointment expectations, the process for non-renewal begins with providing notice at least one month prior to the end of the appointment, detailing the reasons for not renewing the appointment and the intention to withdraw financial support. This information must be documented in writing, and a reasonable period must be allowed for the student to address the issues before a final recommendation for dismissal is made to the Graduate School.

Unsatisfactory performance can include not working the expected number of hours per week, inadequate performance of GTA or GRA duties such as delivering lectures, grading, or holding office hours, skipping teaching assignments without prior notification, not conducting experiments or completing research and writing tasks, and refusal to work on thesis or dissertation projects after verbal and written warnings. Students may be placed on academic or financial support probation for a set period (e.g., within a semester) to achieve satisfactory performance, and faculty work supervisors may evaluate GTAs and GRAs in writing (email is acceptable) throughout the semester. If performance does not improve after the remediation period, the process of non-renewal and loss of financial support begins.

The process for non-renewal is initiated by the immediate supervisor (advisor, GTA coordinator, Department Head) after consulting the student's Thesis/Dissertation committee and/or the DGS. Written documentation is provided to the student and DGS, and the DGS notifies the GAPC and Department Head. The DGS and Head may consult with the Graduate School and Human Resources, depending on the situation. There are conditions under which immediate dismissal is warranted without a remediation period, including significant neglect of duty, unsatisfactory academic performance or progress, non-compliance with University policies, or discontinuation of the program or grant.

Students can refer to the Graduate Catalog and Hilltopics for detailed policies on academic standing and conduct. For additional guidance, students may contact the DGS, Department Head, or relevant University offices such as Student Health, Counseling Center, and Human Resources.

6.4.2 Failure to meet minimum GPA of 3.0

The academic records of all graduate students are reviewed at the end of each semester, including the summer term, to determine academic standing. For good standing, graduate students must maintain a cumulative grade point average (GPA) of at least 3.0 on all graduate courses taken for a letter grade of A-F. Grades of S/NC, P/NP, and I, which have no numerical value, are excluded from this computation. Any student whose GPA falls below 3.00 is placed on academic probation by the University. A student has one semester to raise their cumulative GPA to 3.00 or higher in the following semester (excluding summer). More information about academic standards and GPA can be located in the Graduate Catalog.

If a student on probation has another semester with a GPA below 3.00, then they will be terminated from their program of study by the Dean of the Graduate School. When the particular circumstances are deemed to justify continuation, and upon recommendation of the Department (usually in conjunction with the major advisor), and approval of the Dean of the Graduate School, then a student on probation whose semester GPA is below 3.0 may be allowed to continue on a semester-by-semester basis.

6.4.3 Failure to Pass Preliminary Exams

The maximum number of times a Ph.D. student can take a component of their preliminary exams is two. If a Ph.D. student does not pass a portion of their preliminary exams for a second time, be it a component or all of their written examinations or their oral exam, then a score of fail is registered for the student and the program is terminated by the end of that semester. A student's advisor(s) notifies the DGS who then notifies the Graduate School.

6.4.4 Violations of Academic Honesty

The Department takes all matters about academic honesty and integrity very seriously. Academic integrity is the responsibility of all members of the academic community. An honor statement is included on the application for admission form, where the applicant's signature acknowledges that adherence is confirmed. The honor statement, as printed in [Hilltopics](#), says,

"An essential feature of the University of Tennessee is a commitment to maintaining an atmosphere of intellectual integrity and academic honesty. As a student of the University, I pledge that I will neither knowingly give nor receive any inappropriate assistance in academic work, thus affirming my own personal commitment to honor and integrity."

All graduate students are expected to adhere to the highest of standards. A graduate student can, in turn, expect the same degree of integrity and honesty from all teachers, mentors, and advisors. As such, in [Hilltopics](#), there is the statement for the whole University community,

"Faculty members also have responsibilities which are vital to the success of the Honor Statement and the creation of a climate of academic integrity within the University community. Each faculty member is responsible for defining, in specific terms, guidelines for preserving academic integrity in a course. Included in this definition should be a discussion of the Honor Statement...it will be the responsibility of each faculty member, graduate teaching assistant, and staff member to act on any violation of the Honor Statement. It is also incumbent upon faculty to maintain an atmosphere conducive to academic integrity by insuring that each quiz, test, and exam is adequately proctored."

Details about academic (dis)honesty can be found at "[Academic Policies and Requirements for Graduate Students](#)" link in the Graduate Catalog. In most situations that involve violations of academic honesty, there are multiple layers and navigating the judicial process can be time-consuming, stressful, and challenging. Alleged violations are handled on an individual basis, typically with the course instructor, DGS and/or GAPC, and/or Department Head. The [Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards](#), at 409 Student Services Building (865-974-3171), can help in the process. In cases involving coursework, mostly typically for situations involving cheating or plagiarism (see below), notification is given to the student with an opportunity to respond. If the instructor concludes that the student engages in academic dishonesty, then the instructor can impose an academic penalty and/or propose stricter penalty to the DGS and Department Head. The following penalties are possible, depending on the severity of the situation:

- Reducing the grade on an assignment/quiz/test or assigning a grade of zero
- A requirement to repeat the assignment/quiz/test, or to complete an alternate assignment/quiz/test
- Reducing a student's overall letter grade in the course
- Assigning an overall letter grade of F for the course
- Dismissal from the program

Plagiarism is using the intellectual property or product of someone else without giving proper credit (unless such information is recognized as common knowledge) and can result in disciplinary action. This is why student theses and dissertations are analyzed with plagiarism detection software prior to final submission to TRACE. Similarly, falsifying or misrepresenting data can, in some instances, carry criminal charges. To learn more about responsible conduct in research, the official University-approved online course, "[Responsible Conduct of Research](#)," covers research responsibilities.

Students can appeal an allegation and/or penalty by submitting an appeal in writing to the instructor, DGS, Department Head, Graduate School, and/or Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards within 5 business days of receiving notification from an instructor. A flowchart of the process can be found at <https://studentconduct.utk.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/53/2018/07/Academic-Dishonesty-Process-flowchart-2018.pdf>.

6.4.5 Violations Related to Behavior

In addition to academic dishonesty, there are several other forms of misconduct related to student behavior that could result in being removed from an advisor's research group or, depending on the severity of the infraction, losing a GTA or GRA, or being dismissed from the University. These behavioral violations include, but are not limited to:

- misuse of information in connection with the University
- misconduct related to records or identification
- causing harm to others; harassment
- sexual misconduct; invasion of privacy
- theft or misappropriation of University or private property
- hazing
- disorderly conduct
- lewd, indecent, or obscene conduct
- inciting or producing imminent lawless action
- violating fire safety

- misusing University keys, access cards, or identification
- stealing or misusing University technology resources
- mishandling weapons
- using or giving out alcohol or illegal drugs in the workplace or during University functions
- failing to fulfill University bills or to appear to hearings or upon other requests
- obstructing or disrupting learning, studying, research, etc.
- retaliating
- attempting to commit a violation of the Standard of Conduct.

Any action taken by an advisor, the Department, College, or University will be independent of consequences that occur through the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and/or civil or criminal proceedings the student is involved with because of said actions.

As a matter of principle, the following details are provided to be clear how the Department defines harassment, sexual harassment, and privacy related issues. Harassment could include actions such as (1) verbal (slander) or written (libel) misrepresentations of a malicious nature, (2) repeatedly making other students, faculty, or staff feel uncomfortable or unwelcome in the laboratory or unable to optimally perform their duties, even after being warned by the faculty, or (3) verbal or physical abuse. Sexual harassment (as interpreted from Hilltopics, which has a much more exhaustive definition) includes unwelcomed sexual advances (i.e., physical, or verbal or non-verbal communication) that are continued after one party verbally objects. Sexual harassment also includes behavior of students who are engaged in an intimate relationship that is distracting or disturbing to others while at work.

Moreover, because students, faculty, and staff have a reasonable expectation of privacy at work, undisclosed cameras and recording devices should not be used to record audio or video or still images.

6.4.6 Grievances and Appeals

Any grievance should be brought to the attention of the student's faculty advisor, DGS, or GAPC as soon as possible. For grievances related to race, gender, religion, national origin, age, or disability, students should file a formal complaint with the Office of Equity and Diversity (865-974-2498), with a copy to the appropriate academic Department Head.

Graduate students can appeal two types of academic decisions to the Graduate Council through the Graduate Appeals Committee: (1) grievances concerning the interpretation of and adherence to University, College, and Department policies and procedures, and (2) grievances concerning grades. Detailed procedures are available [here](#).

If initial discussions fail to resolve the issue, a written appeal can be submitted to the Department Head within 30 days of the incident. If unresolved at the departmental level, an appeal can be made to the College within 30 days of the final departmental decision. Only after processing appeals through the departmental and college levels without resolution should a complaint be brought to the Graduate School. Information on the Graduate School policy on appeals and grievances is available [here](#).

For grievances concerning grades, a formal complaint should be filed with the Graduate Council through the Graduate Council Appeals Committee after processing through the instructor, Department, and College levels. Grade appeals can be made on the basis of:

- (1) A clearly unfair decision (e.g., not considering circumstances beyond the student's control, such as a death in the family, illness, or accident).
- (2) Unacceptable instruction/evaluation procedures (e.g., deviation from stated policies on grading criteria, incompletes, late paper examinations, or class attendance).
- (3) Instructor's inability to manage course responsibilities.
- (4) An exam setting that makes concentration extremely difficult.

The initial grade appeal must be filed within 30 days after the final grade has been issued.

6.5 Annual Evaluations

Every graduate student undergoes a yearly evaluation of progress, typically near the end of the Spring semester. Student evaluations are initiated by the DGS, who will send a link to an on-line evaluation form. Students fill out a simply form ([Appendix 2](#)) that notes their progress toward their degree. Once submitted, this form is automatically forwarded to the GTA supervisor (for a review of teaching performance) and the student's primary advisor (for a review of graduate performance). Once all evaluations are complete, the form is routed back to the student, who signs off on the evaluation. The student's signature does not indicate agreement with each point of feedback, but rather indicates that the student has read the evaluation, understands the feedback received, and has been given an opportunity to ask questions. There is also the opportunity for student rebuttal at this stage.

Once completed by all parties, the online evaluation is routed to the DGS, who then convenes a meeting of GAPC to go over all evaluation forms. The DGS then summarizes the GAPC discussion in an email to the student and their advisor(s). If there are problems or concerns voiced by faculty, the student, or GAPC, the DGS will request specific actions. These actions may include involving the student's committee members, or the Department Head, in the evaluation process to come to a consensus on the best path forward and a reasonable timeline for the student.

6.6 Short-term and Long-term Absences and Leave of Absence Requests

A leave of absence is a temporary cessation of study and may be granted for up to 2 years *for medical reasons or other emergencies*. A leave of absence allows a graduate student in good standing to postpone their studies for a definite period of time, in the event of unavoidable documented circumstances (e.g., medical reasons, military service). Financial hardship is not an approved reason for a leave of absence. The Graduate School policies generally refer to situations where students require leave that totals a semester (or more) in length.

Regardless of the potential absence or leave scenario from the Department and University, the student should immediately consult with their advisor(s), the DGS, GTA Coordinator, Department Head, etc. so accommodation can be made. Forms for leave of absence should be submitted *at least two weeks* before the beginning of the semester for which the leave is requested. A leave of absence will not be granted retroactively. Forms are available at [Forms Central](#). A letter of endorsement from the DGS and/or Department Head is needed when submitting the request form. Requests are reviewed and granted on a case-by-case basis. The Department will defer, in all cases, to the policies set forth by the Graduate School regarding leave.

An official leave of absence begins only after the student receives a copy of the request with the Graduate Dean's signature, which confirms approval. The time during which a student is on leave will not be counted towards time to degree, and there is a 2-year limit. The leave of absence stands in lieu of registering for a minimum of 1 credit of GEOL 600 for each semester that leave is granted. During leave, a student may not use UT facilities, resources, or services, receive an assistantship, fellowship, or financial aid in any form, or take UT courses. If a student had previously registered for courses, then the student needs to cancel any registration for the term(s) on an approved leave of absence. Failure to withdraw from courses will result in billing and assigned grade(s) for the term(s).

Students who had an approved leave of absence are eligible for reinstatement to active status and do not have to apply for readmission. However, reinstatement requires application via the Reinstatement Form, applying to the same degree program before the leave of absence, and requesting reinstatement for the term following the end of the absence. An email indicating the decision will be sent to the student after approval by the Graduate School Dean.

For students receiving Federal financial assistance, the U.S. Department of Education regulations require the University to report enrollment status as "WITHDRAWN" when students take a leave of absence for a semester or more. This results in the beginning of the Federal Stafford Loan grace period and/or the starting of repayment of the Federal Supplemental Loan for Students. Additionally, upon returning to UT, new loan applications must be submitted and an in-school deferment form must be filed.

The minimum enrollment for international students may be different, and international students *must* consult with the Center for International Education (CIE) to discuss how a leave affects their immigration status and to determine the minimum enrollment required to maintain satisfactory enrollment requirements attached to their specific visa. For leaves that would be less than a semester, there are a number of considerations.

These include:

- Short-term medical or family-related leave. The Department can work with a student to ensure that teaching duties (as well as research responsibilities) are covered (generally by a peer). "Short-term" should be < 4 weeks.
- Long-term medical or family-related leave (i.e., serious health condition, pregnancy/childbearing/child-bonding). For this type of leave, the student should consider whether a one semester leave from the graduate program is in their best interest. If a one semester leave is not desirable, then the student will work with the DGS and their advisor(s) to determine the best path forward.
- Bereavement leave. State employees are entitled to 3 days of paid bereavement leave following the death of a child, parent, spouse, sibling, grandchild, grandparent, stepchild, stepparent, foster parent, or parent-in-law.
- Jury Duty leave. Employees who are called or summoned to jury duty are often entitled to job-protected leave. In Tennessee, employers with 5 or more regular employees must grant leave to eligible employees who serve on a jury. Students should immediately contact their advisor and inform the DGS if they are summoned.
- Military leave. Student employees who are called to active military service should consider a short-term withdrawal from the program. Please consult with the DGS about this.
- Other types of leave. For students whose research requires them to be absent from the UT campus during an academic (Fall or Spring) semester, it is incumbent on the advisor and student to ensure

support for the student is arranged. Students on GTAs should plan to be off campus for no more than 2 weeks, and it is the student and advisor's responsibility (collaborating with the instructor of the course and GTA Coordinator) to arrange for a substitute *before* the beginning of a semester. For students whose off-campus work will last longer than 2 weeks, it is anticipated that they will be supported by a GRA from their advisor for the entire semester. For students traveling in a semester for scientific meetings or conferences, they should work with the course instructor(s) and their peers to arrange for a substitute for the classes they will miss. It is anticipated that a student will be absent for this type of travel for no more than 1 week during a semester.

6.7 Readmission after Withdrawal

A graduate student who did not apply for a leave of absence and who has not registered for graduate courses at the University of Tennessee for one term, other than summer, will become inactive, and may not continue in his/her program until readmitted. A readmission application must be submitted to the Office of Graduate Admissions at least two weeks prior to the first day of class of the desired term of reentry. A non-refundable Readmission Fee of \$30.00 must be submitted when applying for readmission. Upon readmission, students will also be responsible for tuition payments for retroactive enrollment for all of the missed terms during which no leave of absence was granted.

A student who has attended another institution since enrollment at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville must submit one official transcript showing all course work and any degrees earned at that institution. The student will be notified when the department/program and the Office of Graduate Admissions have taken action. A student who is permitted to enroll and is subsequently denied readmission will receive credit for courses completed successfully. Future registration will not be allowed until readmission is granted.

6.8 Change of Degree Program

6.8.1 M.S. to Ph.D.

A student who wishes to change their degree from M.S. to Ph.D. must do so after consultation with their thesis committee. The student should also have a conversation with the DGS prior to requesting a change of program. A request for a change in program should then be emailed by the student's thesis advisor to the DGS, who will then take the issue to GAPC for final approval. A student should be making exemplary progress toward a M.S. degree prior to changing to the Ph.D. program. The transition should typically be made during the first year of M.S. studies; students already in the second year of their M.S. degree are typically guided to simply complete their M.S. degree and re-apply for admission to the Ph.D. program. Acceptance into a new degree program is contingent upon review and recommendation to that department by the GAPC. If the student is not accepted into the Ph.D. program, then he/she remains in the M.S. program. With approval by GAPC, the student will be awarded a modified acceptance letter detailing additional GTA/GRA support. After notification that a student is admitted to the Ph.D. program, the student must complete a [Graduate School Change of Program Application](#), and may have to pay the small application fee online. The student must then complete all of the necessary requirements to obtain the Ph.D. degree.

6.8.2 Ph.D. to M.S.

At any point during the Ph.D. program, if a student wishes to change their degree program from Ph.D. to M.S., then the student must notify his/her advisor and Dissertation committee. Notification is sent to the

DGS and GAPC. The advisor and Dissertation committee may also request a student to change from Ph.D. to M.S. if satisfactory progress toward the Ph.D. degree is not being made. Once admitted into the M.S. program, the student's guaranteed funding on a GTA or GRA (or combination of funding) should be adjusted to 2 years, unless other arrangements are made with the GAC. After the student is notified by the GAPC, the student needs to complete a [Graduate School Change of Program Application](#) and may have to pay a small fee for the online application. To obtain an M.S. degree, the student must also complete the necessary requirements for the M.S. degree, including completing 6 credits of GEOL 500.

APPENDIX 1 – Example of Travel Authorization Form

Earth, Environmental & Planetary Sciences Travel Request Form

Please submit request to Marie Irvine at least 10 days PRIOR to your trip.

Name: Personnel Number:

Role: Faculty Staff GTA GRA UG Other

Beginning Date of Travel: End Date of Travel: *Dates of Personal Travel*

Destination (City/State/Country):

Reason for Trip (please be specific):

What is your source of funding for this travel?

Will your advisor make any purchases on your behalf? e.g. registration, meals, lodging etc.

Will any of the expenses be covered by a government research grant? If YES please give a brief description of how this travel will directly benefit the project.

Will you claim per diem for meals or actual receipts? Per diem Receipts

Will you be sharing lodging with anyone? If so, who?

If attending a conference/workshop, please attach an agenda or a brief program to this form. Please list the conference website address.

Mode of travel:

Will you need assistance with the booking? Yes No

Advisor's signature

Traveler's signature

Date submitted:

APPENDIX 2 – Example of Graduate Evaluation Form

Please close your browser completely to end this session.

Annual Graduate Student Evaluation and Checklist

Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

Part 1 - Instructions

1. Complete this form electronically and add your teaching evaluations. If you are a GRA, the form will then be sent to your advisor; if you are a GTA, the form will be sent to the GTA Director, who will add a short evaluation of your teaching before forwarding it to your advisor.
2. Meet with your advisor to discuss your progress and your path forward. If you have concerns with meeting one-on-one with your advisor, you can plan a committee meeting to discuss your progress and your path forward.
3. Your advisor will write their evaluation and send the form back to you.
4. You have an option to present a response to your advisor's evaluation; this is not required.
5. The completed form will be sent to the DGS and GAPC, who will complete a final evaluation.
6. **THIS FORM IS DUE ON OR BEFORE APRIL 30**

Part 2 - Student Information

Name of Student:	Linda C Kah
Student NetID	lckah
Student Email	*lckah@utk.edu
Degree Program	-- Please Select --
Starting Semester	-- Please Select --
Degree Prior to Entering Program	-- Please Select --
Primary Advisor	Colin Sumrall

Part 3 – Student Status

GRA/GTA Status in Fall Semester	-- Please Select --
GRA/GTA Status in Spring Semester (current)	-- Please Select --
Expected Graduation Semester	-- Please Select --
I have had a University-approved Leave of Absence If yes, when?	-- Please Select --

Save Progress Next

Part 4 - Student Requirements

Have you completed the following student requirements? Please answer Yes or No. If you have not yet completed the requirement, please leave Semester/Year blank. Please provide evidence (screenshot in jpg, pdf, or png format) of completion of required University training.

Required Activities	Yes/No	Semester/Year	Screenshot
Required safety training (first semester)	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --	Attach File
Hazardous waste training (every year)	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --	Attach File
Mandatory reporter training (every year)	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --	Attach File
Thesis/Dissertation proposal accepted	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --	
Written qualifying exams (PhD)	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --	
Oral qualifying exams (PhD)	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --	
Paper accepted for publication (PhD)	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --	
Completion of coursework (MS or Concurrent MS)	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --	
Completion of coursework (PhD)	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --	
Concurrent MS paperwork (if applicable)	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --	
Geology 596 (Scientific Presentations)	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --	
Approved field experience	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --
Application to Candidacy	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --	

Part 5 - Student Thesis/Dissertation Committee

1. Name	<input type="text"/>	Department (or Affiliation if not UT)	<input type="text"/>
2. Name	<input type="text"/>	Department (or Affiliation if not UT)	<input type="text"/>
3. Name	<input type="text"/>	Department (or Affiliation if not UT)	<input type="text"/>
4. Name	<input type="text"/>	Department (or Affiliation if not UT)	<input type="text"/>
5. Name	<input type="text"/>	Department (or Affiliation if not UT)	<input type="text"/>
6. Name	<input type="text"/>	Department (or Affiliation if not UT)	<input type="text"/>

Date of last meeting: ex: 99/99/9999

Previous Save Progress Next

Part 6 - Student Progress Report

List courses taken since your last evaluation (semester, number, topic, grade):

List teaching activities since your last evaluation (semester, number, topic, position):

List academic awards since your last evaluation (title, amount):

List grant proposals submitted since your last evaluation (agency, amount, funded/not funded):

List major research accomplishments since your last evaluation:

List scientific presentations/publications since your last evaluation (citation):

List outreach activities since your last evaluation (type, date):

List actions or goals for forward progress in your next evaluation period:

Previous

Save Progress

Next

Part 7 - Teaching Evaluation (GTAs Only)

Provide rating:

- The student is making adequate progress
- The student is making insufficient progress; needs improvement in specific areas
- The student is not making adequate progress, jeopardizing position as a GTA

Provide short justification of evaluation (strengths, weaknesses, unforeseen circumstances).

Note: Exceptional progress should be justified here.

Part 8 - Advisor Evaluation (All Students)

Provide rating:

- The student is making adequate progress
- The student is making insufficient progress; needs improvement in specific areas
- The student is not making adequate progress, jeopardizing position as a GTA/GRA

Provide short justification of evaluation (strengths, weaknesses, unforeseen circumstances).

Note: Exceptional progress should be justified here.

Part 9 - Student Response

Provide overall response to evaluations:

- I largely agree with the above ratings
- I largely disagree with the above ratings

Provide short justification of response and a plan for improvement (if necessary):

Note: Special circumstances that may have affected your progress should be noted here.