Welcome to the Graduate Program Guide (GPG) of the Department of Geography and Environmental Sustainability (DGES) at the University of Oklahoma (OU)!

The GPG is designed as a living document that DGES community members will adapt as they respond to shifting institutional, intellectual and physical landscapes.

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1. OVERVIEW OF DGES GRADUATE PROGRAM

Currently, DGES offers the following four graduate degrees, but we’re in the process of deleting the MS in environmental sustainability, changing all the degree names to “Geography and Environmental Sustainability,” and updating names of required coursework. As soon as these changes have been approved by the OU Board of Regents, we will update all DGES materials accordingly.

- **MS in environmental sustainability**
- **MA in geography**
- **MS in geography with 2 tracks:**
  - physical geography
  - geospatial technologies
- **PhD in geography**

In addition to the above degrees, DGES also offers a graduate certificate program in geospatial technologies that can be earned concurrently by DGES graduate students, as well as any other OU graduate student.

For more information on the DGES graduate program, please contact the current Graduate Liaison, Dr. Laurel Smith: laurel@ou.edu. The Graduate Liaison is the DGES faculty member who chairs the department’s graduate committee, which typically includes at least four other DGES faculty members. The Graduate Liaison also serves as the department’s point of contact with OU’s Graduate College.

The collective voice of DGES graduate students speaks through the Association of Graduate Geography and Environmental Sustainability Students (AG²ES²). To get in touch with the current representatives, please contact DGES Administrative Coordinator, Emalee Lemke: elemke@ou.edu.

Graduate students are expected to be aware of and participate in departmental events and professional opportunities. These are made available through DGES, College of Atmospheric & Geographic Sciences, and Graduate College listservs. Please ensure that arrangements are made for you to receive emails from relevant departmental listservs (see Emalee Lemke).
2. APPLYING FOR GRADUATE STUDY IN DGES

2.1 Deadlines

• For fall admission and consideration of assistantship funding: **January 15** for US and international applicants
• For fall admission without consideration of assistantship funding: **April 1** for international applicants and **April 15** for US applicants.
• For spring admission regardless of consideration of assistantship funding: **Sept 1** for international and US applicants.

NOTE that according the OU Graduate College international student deadlines only apply to international students who reside outside of the United States. If you are currently studying in the U.S., then you may work with our domestic deadlines.

2.2 OU Masters students applying for DGES doctoral program
If you are currently an OU Masters student and wish to apply for a doctoral program at OU, then you can submit one “Change of Program” application at no charge.

2.3 Materials
Applicants must apply through the OU Graduate College’s online system here. Student will be prompted to note whether they are simultaneously applying for Graduate Assistantships in this online application. International applicants: be aware of information tailored to your needs and see item 7 just below.

The required materials are as follows:
1. Statement of purpose*
2. Curriculum Vitae
3. Transcript from last degree granting institution
4. Two letters of recommendation**
5. Writing sample at least 2500 words (about 10 double-spaced pages) in length. This document can be a paper prepared for a class, published article, report, or other document that the applicant has had sole or primary responsibility for writing.
6. GRE scores
7. Additionally, international applicants who have not graduated from an accredited high school in an OU-approved native English speaking country (see list here) are required to provide evidence of English proficiency via one of the methods outlined here, unless they have completed at least 24 credit hours at an accredited college or university in the U.S. or another OU-approved native English speaking country (again, see list here). If admitted, international applicants will be asked to provide evidence of financial support (this can include a graduate assistantship offer from OU; see here).

We strongly recommend that interested individuals communicate with DGES faculty members **prior** to applying (see here for an example of an appropriate initial email). DGES
prioritizes “fit” (e.g., how well a topic matches DGES expertise and interests) as well as academic excellence. Remember that corresponding with faculty members often requires polite persistence because they are busy.

*Successful applicants craft a statement of purpose that clearly demonstrates their familiarity with our graduate program. We seek students who can articulate how a specific DGES degree and graduate study under the supervision of DGES faculty member(s) will further their educational and career goals.

** A request is generated by the online system for electronic submission. Please request letters of recommendation well in advance of the application deadlines. We recommend sharing your statement of purpose with the kind and generous souls who write letters on your behalf.

We follow the Graduate College’s guidance for the transfer of credits for graduate degrees. Details can be found in the GC Bulletin (Section 7.1.2 for Masters and Section 8.2.2 for PhD).

2.4 Decision-making
Following the deadlines, the DGES graduate committee (chaired by the Graduate Liaison) oversees the review of applications. Any DGES faculty member can access applications and share feedback with graduate committee members regarding which applicants should be admitted to the program and considered for funding. The graduate committee recommendations regarding admittance and funding are discussed and voted upon during a DGES faculty meeting. Once final decisions are made, the Graduate Liaison contacts each applicant, informing them of the department’s decision. This process usually takes 2-4 weeks.

For details regarding conditional admission (e.g. student does not meet GC minimum GPA requirement), see GC Bulletin Section 3.4.2.

2.5 Welcome to OU!
The Graduate College website is a good place to check out. Note its pages devoted to new graduate students and consider the offerings of Graduate Student Life.

The Graduate College website also features important information about enrollment. For example, full time enrollment for GAs is detailed here. If you are not a GA, then see OU’s general enrollment information here. GAs may be eligible to enroll in fewer than five credit hours during their final semester. See the details here on the GC website.

All graduate students should invest time and energy reviewing the Integrity Council’s website, which details OU rules regarding issues such as plagiarism, including self-plagiarism (e.g., submitting the same text or body of work in more than one class, see “Submitting same assignment for second class” on this page).
3. FUNDING FOR DGES GRADUATE STUDENTS

DGES can often, but does not always, offer successful applicants financial support in the form of a Graduate Assistantship (GA), which is a form of employment through the university. Not all DGES graduate students hold GA positions and admittance to graduate program is not contingent on procuring one.

The timing of GA contracts varies by degree and availability. Generally, but not always, we offer Masters students two years and Doctoral students four years of funding. GA funding is always contingent on student academic progress. Sometimes it is also subject to the availability of funds.

Be aware that most GA positions are 9-month appointments that do not provide funding for summer months. Also, international students need to plan for extra costs not covered through GA funding such as flights, visas, vaccines, etc.

In addition to a monthly stipend, 0.5 FTE GA positions include health insurance coverage and tuition waivers. Tuition Waivers do not cover the cost of student fees; OU is currently working to reduce these, but you can find the OU tuition and fee calculator here.

All graduate students – especially PhD students – are encouraged to apply for external funding, always in consultation with their advisors.

3.1 Types of Graduate Assistantships

Graduate Research Assistantships (GRAs)

The details and duration of GRA positions are dependent on the funding source(s) and supervised by a DGES faculty member. Generally, these are 0.5 FTE positions that entail a monthly stipend for an average of 20 hours a week of research-related labor determined by the supervising faculty member. GRA positions can be 9- or 12-month appointments. If you are offered an GRA position, be sure to discuss the details and duration with the supervising DGES faculty member.

Graduate Teaching Assistantships (GTAs)

TA positions are 9-month (during fall and spring semesters only), 0.5 FTE appointments. TAs earn their monthly stipend with up to 20 hours a week of instruction-related labor associated with a specific class(es) and generally one instructor. We attempt to align expertise and interests, but TAing for not-yet-familiar coursework can broaden your experience!
International students who did not graduate from a high school located in a country featured on this list of OU-approved English-Speaking countries, must have their English skills certified through the Graduate College's English Training and Certification Services (ETCS), see here for details regarding the English Certification process. Be aware that this testing process costs $100 and the department can only pay for it if the individual has been offered a TA position, although sometimes (but not always) faculty advisors are willing and able to pay for this – so be sure to ask!

Sometimes students working as GAs have the opportunity to pursue a 0.70 FTE (see GC Bulletin 4.3.4.4 here), but a special request must be made to the Departmental Chair. The Graduate College limits GA work commitments because graduate students should prioritize their studies over employment. Following the spirit of this policy, GAs are strongly discouraged from pursuing additional employment off campus.

3.2 Expectations
All GAs are expected to:
1. Become familiar with the rules and procedures contained with the GC Bulletin (Section 4.3)
2. Be available and work up to 20 hours a week throughout the academic year (August 16 to May 15) unless the OU campus is closed (e.g., public holidays, Winter Break). Absences must be approved by the assistantship supervisor.
3. Understand employee obligations under health care regulations (e.g. the Affordable Care Act).

3.3 Graduate Assistantship Applications
New applicants and students in the program apply for funding using the same deadlines above.

New applicants apply for funding during the regular online application process (see above).

Students already in the program seeking a new contract (e.g. previously unfunded or with expired contracts) need to:

1. Request that your academic advisor write a letter detailing the progress of your graduate studies, and
2. Submit to the graduate liaison by email in a single PDF:
   a) A statement of interest and progress that details: i) Any funding since starting current graduate degree program, ii) The specific semester(s) for which you are requesting funding, iii) Timeline for completing your degree, and iv) Any extra information that might be helpful for the committee to understand degree progress
   b) Transcripts for coursework completed since starting current degree program
   c) ALL annual evaluations submitted while pursuing current graduate degree
   d) A recent writing sample that is at least 2500 words long.
3.4 Additional OU graduate funding
The graduate college offers various opportunities (see here). The graduate student senate also offers various opportunities (see here). All DGES graduate students are strongly encouraged to take advantage of any and all informational sessions regarding these funding opportunities.

3.5 DGES Awards
Departmental awards are also available (see here). Faculty advisors nominate their students for these awards.

3.6 Office space, computers and other resources
Office space and computers for GTAs and GRAs are assigned by the departmental chair. The DGES front office staff handle distribution and return of related keys.

4. GRADUATE STUDIES IN DGES
All graduate students admitted into the DGES graduate program should review and abide by the policies and practices outlined in both the Graduate College Bulletin and the OU Student Handbook.

Some useful examples include
- For guidance on the use of human subjects in research, see GC Bulletin Section 1.7.
- For guidance on use of vertebrate animals in research, see GC Bulletin Section 1.8.
- Academic Leave of Absence policies and procedures are detailed in GC Bulletin Section 3.6.3.

It is the responsibility of the graduate student to retain copies of all signed forms as you progress towards your degree.

4.1 General departmental policies for all graduate students
As soon as the OU Graduate College provides you with access to an OU email, begin checking it regularly. Be on the look-out for information regarding the DGES Graduate Student Orientation just before the start of your first semester, which ALL new DGES grad students must attend. In the event that you are unable to attend, immediately advise your advisor and the DGES the Graduate Liaison and work with the latter to make alternative arrangements.

By the end of your first semester of enrollment, submit a signed copy of the Advising Agreement between Graduate Students and Faculty.

Each January, graduate students work with their academic advisor to prepare and submit an Annual Evaluation of their productivity and progress unless you have begun the program in January. Failure to undergo this assessment exercise will jeopardize your GA contract. At
present the form can be accessed by emailing DGES Administrative Coordinator, Emalee Lemke: elemke@ou.edu.

Be aware that DGES graduate students must earn an A or B grade in core required courses – GEOG 6973 and GEOG 6953. In addition, Masters students also need to earn an A or B grade in GEOG 5313 (MA) or GIS 5923 (MS).

All DGES graduate students must successfully complete a two-day Professional Ethics Training – Responsible Conduct of Research (PET-RCR) workshop before the start of their third semester. See here for information regarding this workshop.

In the event arrangements are made to provide you with an OU Travel Card, you are expected to follow through with the instructions, which includes picking up the card in a timely fashion.

4.2 Masters students
All Masters students should also locate and abide by the Graduate College’s guidance on degree completion. Note that all Masters students must complete all degree requirements within five calendar years from initial enrollment, although there is a process for requesting an extension (see GC Bulletin Section 7.1.5 for details).

An outline of the Masters process is provided here:

1. ALL students (thesis and non-thesis) must trace a suitable coursework trajectory that takes the student to the end of the degree program. This information gets recorded on a degree specific Program of Study form (see links below), which must be signed by student and graduate liaison and submitted to the Graduate College at the start of the student’s third semester.
   - MS in Environmental Sustainability
   - MS in Geography – geospatial technologies concentration
   - MS in Geography – physical geography concentration
   - MA in Geography

Note that no more than half of your coursework can be comprised of S/U graded classes. See Grad Bulletin here.

Petitions may be made to substitute alternative courses for specific required courses. A student must work with their advisor to formulate a request. The advisor then emails a request explaining and justifying substitution, which the Graduate Liaison may use to petition the Graduate College on behalf of the student.

Sometimes a petition regarding coursework requires an add/drop form. When graduate students need to submit an add/drop form, they work closely with their advisor to determine the necessary changes documented on the add/drop form, but
the DGES graduate liaison signs the form as “advisor” and the Dean of Graduate College signs the form as Dean.

Refer to GC Bulletin Section 5.3 for more information regarding grades (e.g., D grades do not count and students must maintain a 3.0 GPA).

**Thesis Masters students**

2. **Before the end of their second semester**, full-time thesis Masters students (part-time thesis students see next item for guidance) should work with their advisor to identify a thesis topic and two other faculty members who are well suited and are willing and able to serve on student’s thesis committee. The majority of the three committee members must be DGES faculty members with suitable graduate faculty appointments. It is possible to have a non-DGES faculty member as the third member of your thesis committee, but they too must hold a suitable graduate faculty appointment. To determine graduate status of a faculty member, as well as the expiration date of their status, see [here](#). If you and your advisor identify a researcher not affiliated with OU as an ideal committee member, then work with the Graduate Liaison to determine the feasibility of doing so.

This information gets recorded on a [Masters thesis topic and committee membership form](#), which must be signed by committee members, student, and graduate liaison and submitted to the Graduate College. NOTE that this form is commonly submitted at the same time as a Masters student’s Program of Study form (see section 4.1 above) – at the start of their third semester.

Should you wish to change your thesis topic, advisor, or committee, you must follow the instructions found in Section 7.2.3 of the GC Bulletin.

3. The department requires that students have their thesis proposal and a related timeline approved by their committee **before the end of the fourth week of their third semester**. Talk with your thesis advisor regarding the design and content of the thesis proposal, as well as the way(s) in which you share it with your committee. Be sure that your thesis research and writing timeline takes into account all procedures detailed in item 4 just below.

   NOTE: you are wise to have your committee together, paperwork submitted, and proposal approved **prior to undertaking fieldwork** related to your thesis research. This means that you may need to work **in advance of this requirement**.

   If you are not a full-time Masters student, but still preparing a thesis, then please work with your advisor and the DGES Graduate Liaison to determine an alternative timeline for submitting paperwork and a proposal.
4. In addition to the required steps detailed in Section 7.2.5 of the GC Bulletin, DGES requires that **two weeks before the thesis defense** student must: i) share a reading copy of the thesis with committee members, asking each member if they prefer an electronic and/or print copy, ii) make another reading copy available in the department break room (SEC 610), and iii) work with the DGES front office to reserve a room for the defense, prepare, and post public announcements of the defense.

5. While thesis defense designs differ because they depend on the predilections of your advisor and committee, most thesis defenses usually last at least two hours and begin with a short presentation. They must be attended by all committee members (electronically or otherwise, see Section 7.2.5.3 of the GC Bulletin). Public attendance is welcome. Committees can designate a time for non-committee members to ask questions. Defenses are discouraged outside the typical fall/spring semester (e.g. summer, holidays).

**Non-thesis Masters students**

2. **By the end of their third semester**, non-thesis Masters students should identify a suitable and available Chair for the non-thesis exam committee. They should work with this faculty member to select two other suitable and available faculty members to serve on the non-thesis exam committee. The majority of the three committee members must be DGES faculty members with suitable graduate faculty appointments. It is possible to have a non-DGES faculty member as the third member of your non-thesis exam committee, but they too must hold a suitable graduate faculty appointment. To determine graduate status of a faculty member, as well as the expiration date of their status, see [here](#). If you and your advisor identify a researcher not affiliated with OU as an ideal committee member, then work with the Graduate Liaison to determine the feasibility of doing so.

3. It is strongly recommended that the Masters student meet with their non-thesis exam committee members to discuss the content and format of the student’s non-thesis exam **before the start of the semester during which a student expects to take their non-thesis exam**.

4. **At the start of the semester you expect to undertake the non-thesis exam**, your non-thesis exam committee Chair must work with the DGES Graduate Liaison to request permission from the Graduate College (details can be found in the GC Bulletin [here](#)).

**4.3 Doctoral students**

All doctoral students should also locate and abide by the Graduate College’s [guidance on degree completion](#). As indicated in Section 8.2.5 of the GC Bulletin, all degree requirements must completed within five calendar years after passing the General Exam, although there is a process for requesting an extension (see Section 8.2.5.1 of GC Bulletin for details).

An outline of the doctoral process is provided here:
1. Coursework:

Before the end of the second semester, PhD students should work with their advisor to trace a suitable coursework trajectory that takes the student to the end of the degree program and prepares them to undertake research and prepare a successful dissertation. See degree check sheet for details on required courses.

- Petitions may be made to substitute alternative courses for specific required courses. A student must work with their advisor to formulate a request. The advisor then emails a request explaining and justifying substitution, which the Graduate Liaison may use to petition the Graduate College on behalf of the student.
- Sometimes a petition regarding coursework require an add/drop form. When graduate students need to submit an add/drop form, they work closely with their advisor to determine the necessary changes documented on the add/drop form, but the DGES graduate liaison signs the form as “advisor” and the Dean of Graduate College signs the form as Dean.
- Note that no more than 49% of your coursework may be comprised of transfer credit hours. See Section 8.2.2 of the GC Bulletin for details.
- Likewise, no more than half of your coursework can be comprised of S/U graded classes. See Section 8.2.4.2 of the GC Bulletin.
- You can enroll in dissertation hours (GEOG 6890) for the first time during the semester you sit for your general exam or, better yet, the semester after you successfully pass your general exam, unless your advisory committee deems it necessary for you to pursue more coursework before enrolling in GEOG 6890.
- Refer to GC Bulletin Section 5.3 for more information regarding grades (e.g., D grades do not count and students must maintain a 3.0 GPA).

2. Committee composition:

Before the end of the third semester, the student must identify a dissertation topic, a chair, and four other faculty members who are well suited, willing and able to serve on student’s dissertation committee. The majority of the three committee members must be DGES faculty members with suitable graduate faculty appointments (to determine graduate status of a faculty member, as well as the expiration date of their status, see here). At least one committee member must be from outside DGES. The GC refers to this “outside committee member” as the “Graduate College representative” because their primary role is to represent the GC’s policies and procedures (see here to learn more about the Graduate College’s representative’s role). All non-DGES committee members must also have graduate faculty status. To learn more about graduate faculty status and review a list of OU graduate faculty, see this page on the GC website. If you and your advisor identify a researcher not affiliated with OU as an ideal committee member, then work with the Graduate Liaison to determine the feasibility of doing so.
Should you wish to change your advisor or committee, you must submit a request for change form. It is the student’s responsibility to ensure that both the old and new committees are aware of changes.

3. The Advisory Conference Report (located in the section for doctoral students here) must be prepared in consultation with PhD advisor and submitted to the GC before the semester when general exam will be taken. Missed deadlines may require a petition from the Graduate Liaison. A student must work with their advisor to formulate a request for tardy paperwork to be accepted that explains and justifies the late submission. The advisor emails this request to the Graduate Liaison, who may use it to petition the Graduate College on behalf of the student.

4. General Exam: See Section 8.5 of the GC Bulletin for overview of GC regulations regarding the general exam. Our department recommends that PhD students take their general exam by the end of their fifth semester, after they have completed all essential coursework, except for dissertation hours (GEOG 6980). As indicated in Section 8.2.5 of the GC Bulletin, PhD students must successfully pass their General Exam within four calendar years from initial enrollment, although there is a process for requesting an extension (see Section 8.2.5.1 for details).

The content of General Exam is ultimately determined between the student and their committee. These general guidelines may be used to inform this discussion. Students should consult with their major advisor and committee members well in advance of the examination to clarify expectations.

The written portion of the exam consists of a series of examination questions submitted by the Advisory Committee that are answered in accordance with the directions of the Advisory Committee. These questions may be open- or closed-book and will have time limits as determined by the committee. The overall time required to complete the entire written portion of the exam typically ranges from a few days to a week.

The oral portion of the general exam is administered after the committee has evaluated the written portion of the general exam. Doctoral students sit with and respond to questions from the full committee. The questions may focus on or extend beyond the written portion of the exam. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of DGES, the specific topics covered in the oral examination will vary depending on the student’s research emphasis. The amount of time required for the oral examining is usually at least two hours, and possibly longer depending on the material covered.

5. The department requires that students publicly present and have their dissertation proposal approved by their committee. This may occur before or after the general exam. The design and content of the proposal, as well as the timing and style of its presentation, is determined in consultation with dissertation advisor. The student should inform the Graduate Liaison in writing when their dissertation proposal has
been presented and approved by the Advisory Committee. Copy all committee members on this email.

6. In addition to the required steps detailed in Section 8.7.1 of the GC Bulletin, DGES requires that two weeks before the thesis defense student must: i) share a reading copy of thesis with committee members, asking each member if they prefer an electronic and/or print copy, ii) make another reading copy available in the department break room (SEC 610), and iii) work with the DGES front office to reserve a room for the defense, and prepare and post announcements of the defense public spaces.

7. The Defense: While dissertation defense designs differ because they depend on the predilections of your advisor and committee, most dissertation defenses usually last at least two hours and begin with a short presentation. They must be attended by all committee members (electronically or otherwise, see Section 8.7.3 of the GC Bulletin). Public attendance is welcome. Committees can designate a time for non-committee members to ask questions. Defenses are discouraged outside the typical fall/spring semester (e.g. summer, holidays).