

Guide to Graduate Studies

Master of Science (M.S.) in Geography

Department of Geography, Virginia Tech

Overview

The Master of Science degree program in Geography is a 32-credit hour curriculum that is designed for completion within two years. Explicit course requirements are limited to allow for flexibility in creating an individualized program, although spatial thought and analytics are central elements. The degree is most commonly earned through the thesis option, in which coursework is complemented with rigorous research of a geographic nature that is guided by faculty advisor(s) and culminates in a written thesis that is formally defended, faculty approved, and submitted to the Graduate School. The less-common path to degree completion is the non-thesis option, which combines more extensive course work with an abridged faculty-guided geographic research project that culminates in a faculty-approved written project report. A third path for earning the degree is through the Accelerated Master of Science program. Specific to Virginia Tech undergraduate students, the accelerated degree program allows for overlap of the final year of undergraduate study and the first year of graduate study, conceivably yielding undergraduate and graduate degrees in five years. Students pursuing the accelerated degree may choose either the thesis or non-thesis option.

Coursework

Every graduate student must submit a *Plan of Study* (POS) for approval by the conclusion of the first semester in the program. The POS maps the coursework that will satisfy the degree requirements. At least 32 credit hours are required, distributed across explicitly defined learning areas. The POS must be approved by the faculty advisor(s) and members of the thesis/project committee, the composition of which is established through student-advisor(s) negotiation.

For both the thesis and non-thesis options, eight credits must come from “core” courses that include GEOG 5014 (*Geographic Theory and Research*, 3-credits), two semesters of GEOG 5004 (*Current Geographic Research*, 1-credit), and a 3-credit methods course, either selected from an established group of four courses, or approved by the student’s faculty advisor. Likewise, both thesis and non-thesis options require a minimum of six credit hours from geography courses, and a minimum of three credit hours from non-geography “cognate” courses. Lastly, the thesis option requires a minimum of six hours of GEOG 5994 (*Research and Thesis*), while the non-thesis option requires a minimum of three hours of GEOG 5904 (*Project and Report*).

The distribution of the minimum requirements totals 20 credit hours for the thesis option and 17 credit hours for the non-thesis option, out of the 32 credit hours that are required, leaving 12 and 15 credit hours, respectively, for tailoring the degree. Three restrictions apply: (1) At least 24 credit hours for the thesis option and 27 credit hours for the non-thesis option must be earned through courses taken for grade (i.e., not counting toward the 24 credits are GEOG 5004: *Current Geographic Research*, GEOG 5974: *Independent Study*, and GEOG 5904: *Project and Report*/GEOG 5994: *Research and Thesis*, which are graded as pass/fail). (2) Up to six credit hours total can come from 4000-level (post-undergraduate) courses, if approved by the faculty advisor and the thesis/project committee members, and if a 5000-level version of the same course does not exist. (3) Up to six credit hours total can come from the set of courses GEOG 5974 (*Independent Study*), GEOG 5984 (*Special Study*), and GEOG 6984 (*Special Study*) (taken for grade to count toward the 24 (thesis) or 27 (non-thesis) graded credits).

The Graduate School requires training in ethics and in diversity, equity, and inclusion. These requirements are met by successfully completing GEOG 5014 and GEOG 5004, typically during the first fall semester of enrollment in the graduate program.

Assistantships

The Department of Geography regularly allocates funding to support an array of Teaching Assistantships (TA) that are awarded competitively. Each TA includes tuition remission and an academic year stipend for a duration of two years, pending sufficient progress toward degree through year one. Also administered by the department are Research Assistantships (RA), which are funded by individual faculty research programs and may involve benefits and durations that differ from those of the TA. Any assistantship requires the student to carry 12 course credits during each semester of the assistantship. Students in the Accelerated Master of Science degree program are ineligible for a graduate-level TA or RA during the year of overlapping undergraduate-graduate study. All Teaching Assistantships require completion of GRAD 5004: *Graduate Teaching Assistant Workshop* (1 credit), which is offered by the Graduate School at the start of each semester.

Supplemental Funding

The Department of Geography typically provides students in the degree program with an annual funding allocation to support conference participation and/or field work. Travel grants are also available from the University's Graduate Student Association through competitive application.

Facilities

Within the Department of Geography's space inside Wallace Hall is the Graduate Student Laboratory, Room 237. Typically, all in-program graduate students are afforded desk space, but priority lies first with students serving as teaching assistants, and second with students supported by research assistantships. All graduate students also have access to the department's computer laboratory, 101 Wallace Hall. Additional meeting and social spaces are available within the Graduate Life Center on campus.

Student Governance

The Geography Graduate Student Alliance (GGSA) provides a self-governing structure for students in the program. One-year terms for President, Treasurer, Academic Chair, and Social Chair are filled at the beginning of the nine-month academic year, as are one-year terms for one Representative to the Graduate and Professional Student Senate, one Representative to the Department of Geography Faculty Assembly, and one Representative to both the Department's Diversity Equity and Inclusion Committee and the College's Faculty Association Diversity Committee.

Annual Awards

Each year, the Department recognizes students from within the program with single awards for Outstanding Graduate Student and Outstanding Graduate Teaching Assistant. Nominations for the awards are submitted by Department of Geography faculty, while the Department's Graduate Program Committee selects recipients after review, deliberation, and vote. Recipients are subsequently nominated by the Graduate Program Committee for the college-level award of the same type.

Task-Based Timeline

While the degree program is generally straightforward – 32 credit hours completed over two years – sequencing, progression, and deadlines are important. The idealized timelines below – one for Fall

semester program entry, and one for Spring semester entry – serves as a guide for successfully navigating a typical two-year program.

FALL SEMESTER PROGRAM ENTRY	
YEAR 1	
Semester 1 (Fall)	
Courses¹	GRAD 5004: Graduate Teaching Assistant Workshop (1 credit) (<i>required for new TAs</i>) GEOG 5014: Geographic Theory and Research (3 credits) (<i>required</i>) GEOG 5004: Geography Colloquium (1 credit) (<i>required</i>)
Activities	Plan program of study (<i>required</i>) Identify a thesis/project topic; literature review/questions/hypotheses (<i>recommended</i>) Form a thesis/project committee (<i>required</i>)
Forms	Plan of Study (<i>required, end of semester</i>) Student Appraisal (<i>required, end of semester</i>)
Semester 2 (Spring)	
Courses¹	GEOG 5004: Geography Colloquium (1 credit) (recommended; 2 total credits <i>required</i>)
Activities	Develop thesis/project topic; refine literature review/questions/hypotheses (<i>recommended</i>) Develop thesis/project proposal (<i>recommended</i>) Initiate thesis/project research (<i>recommended</i>) Defend thesis/project proposal (recommended)
Forms	Student Appraisal (<i>required, end of semester</i>) Thesis/Project Research Proposal Approval (<i>recommended</i>)
Summer Thesis/Project Research Work	
YEAR 2	
Semester 3 (Fall)	
Courses¹	GEOG 5004: Geography Colloquium (1 credit) (recommended; 2 total credits <i>required</i>) GEOG 5994: Research and Thesis/GEOG 5904: Project and Report (3+ credits) (recommended)
Activities	Thesis/project research: conclude analytical elements and begin writing
Forms	Thesis/Project Research Proposal Approval (<i>required, beginning of semester</i>) Student Appraisal (<i>required, end of semester</i>)
Semester 4 (Spring)	
Courses¹	GEOG 5004: Geography Colloquium (1 credit) (recommended; 2 total credits <i>required</i>) GEOG 5994: Research and Thesis/GEOG 5904: Project and Report (3+ credits) (recommended)
Activities	Write thesis/project report Apply to graduate ² (via HokieSpa) (<i>required by March 1</i>) Complete thesis/project report; distribute to committee members (recommended by April 1) <u>Thesis option:</u> Schedule thesis defense: room (Department), date (Graduate School) (<i>required</i>) Authenticate thesis - Graduate School access to iThenticate (<i>required</i>) Submit electronic thesis via Electronic Submission System (ESS) (<i>required</i>) Defend thesis ² (“final exam”) (recommended by May 1) (<i>required</i> by last day of final exams) Submit thesis to Graduate School (<i>required</i> within two weeks of defense)
Forms	All electronic submissions via Graduate School’s ESS (<i>required</i> of advisor and committee)

¹A logical approach is to pursue a heavier course load during year 1 (semesters 1 and 2) so to allow greater time for research and thesis/project preparation in year 2.

²For Summer graduation, the deadline to apply for degree in HokieSpa is August 1 and the thesis defense deadline is the last day of final exams for Summer Session II.

SPRING SEMESTER PROGRAM ENTRY YEAR 1	
Semester 1 (Spring)	
Courses¹	GRAD 5004: Graduate Teaching Assistant Workshop (1 credit) (<i>required for new TAs</i>) GEOG 5004: Geography Colloquium (1 credit) (recommended; 2 total credits <i>required</i>)
Activities	Plan program of study (<i>required</i>) Identify a thesis/project topic; literature review/questions/hypotheses (<i>recommended</i>) Form a thesis/project committee (<i>required</i>)
Forms	Plan of Study (<i>required, end of semester</i>) Student Appraisal (<i>required, end of semester</i>)
Summer Thesis/Project Research Work	
Semester 2 (Fall)	
Courses¹	GEOG 5014: Geographic Theory and Research (3 credits) (<i>required</i>) GEOG 5004: Geography Colloquium (1 credit) (<i>required</i>)
Activities	Develop thesis/project topic; refine literature review/questions/hypotheses (<i>recommended</i>) Develop thesis/project proposal (<i>recommended</i>) Initiate thesis/project research (<i>recommended</i>) Defend thesis/project proposal (<i>recommended</i>)
Forms	Student Appraisal (<i>required, end of semester</i>) Thesis/Project Research Proposal Approval (<i>recommended</i>)
YEAR 2	
Semester 3 (Spring)	
Courses¹	GEOG 5004: Geography Colloquium (1 credit) (recommended; 2 total credits <i>required</i>) GEOG 5994: Research and Thesis/GEOG 5904: Project and Report (3+ credits) (recommended)
Activities	Thesis/project research: conclude analytical elements and begin writing
Forms	<i>Thesis/Project Research Proposal Approval (required, beginning of semester)</i> <i>Student Appraisal (required, end of semester)</i>
Summer Thesis/Project Research Work	
Semester 4 (Fall)	
Courses¹	GEOG 5004: Geography Colloquium (1 credit) (recommended; 2 total credits <i>required</i>) GEOG 5994: Research and Thesis/GEOG 5904: Project and Report (3+ credits) (recommended)
Activities	Write thesis/project report Apply to graduate (via HokieSpa) (<i>required by November 1</i>) Complete thesis/project report; distribute to committee members (recommended by November 1) <u>Thesis option:</u> Schedule thesis defense: room (Department), date (Graduate School) (<i>required</i>) Authenticate thesis - Graduate School access to iThenticate (<i>required</i>) Submit electronic thesis via Electronic Submission System (ESS) (<i>required</i>) Defend thesis ("final exam") (recommended by December 1) (<i>required</i> by last day of final exams) Submit thesis to Graduate School (<i>required</i> within two weeks of defense)
Forms	All electronic submissions via Graduate School's ESS (<i>required</i> of advisor and committee)

¹A logical approach is to pursue a heavier course load during year 1 (semesters 1 and 2) so to allow greater time for research and thesis/project preparation in year 2.

Human Resources

Graduate Program Director
Administrative Assistant
Department Head
Graduate Ombudsperson
Information Technology

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