

Department of Environmental Studies

MS & PhD Degrees Graduate Handbook

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Contents

I. INTRODUCTION	3
II. GENERAL REQUIREMENTS (MS & PhD DEGREES).....	3
III. RESOURCES (MS & PhD DEGREES).....	8
IV. REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MS DEGREE.....	10
V. REQUIREMENTS FOR THE PHD DEGREE	13
VI. ES GA POLICIES & PROCEDURES	17

Introduction

Welcome to Environmental Studies graduate program at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF). We are delighted that you have joined our unique community of graduate students, faculty, and researchers who share a deep interest in environmental policy, communication, justice, and decision-making.

The program prepares students to critically analyze and engage with emerging issues and problems related to environmental affairs and sustainability, and is intended for a wide range of students, including those with undergraduate degrees in fields other than Environmental Studies. The program facilitates student understanding of fundamental social, political, economic, cultural, and technological forces that drive environmental degradation as well as the application of emerging approaches that can foster sustainability. It does this by drawing on a range of frameworks from the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences. Coursework combines theoretical, practical, and applied approaches to areas such as environmental policy, environmental communication, sustainable communities, human behavior, collaborative governance, public participation, environmental interpretation, and environmental impact analysis. As part of one of the world's foremost schools of environmental research, the program is enhanced by ESF's diverse expertise in the natural sciences and engineering.

The New York State Department of Education and the State University of New York establish policy for all graduate programs. At ESF, the College Faculty has adopted a comprehensive set of Graduate Policies. These are published in the [ESF College Catalog](#) (Note that information on the Environmental Studies Graduate Programs begin on page 234). **While relevant graduate program information is summarized in this handbook, students should always consult the Graduate School [website](#) for complete information.**

General Requirements (MS & PhD Degrees)

Prerequisites

There are no prerequisites for enrollment in the MS in Environmental Studies program. It is recommended, however, that students entering these programs have some academic background in the Social Sciences, Environmental Policy or Communication, and/or in Environmental Science or Ecology. An MS or equivalent degree in a related field or equivalent is generally required for admission into the PhD in Environmental Studies.

Major Professor

Each student is assigned a Major Professor (or sometimes, co-Major Professors) in conjunction with admission to an Environmental Studies graduate program. Each new student should meet with their Major Professor(s) during the week prior to the start of classes, to discuss their academic and career objectives. This will also be helpful in selecting courses for the first semester. The session also will allow the Major Professor(s) and student to share expectations for their academic relationship and establish a plan for the student's time in the program.

Degree Planning and Graduate Program of Study (Form 3B)

Planning: In their first semester, students should work with their Major Professors to draft a plan for their time in the program, specific to their degree and goals. This plan provides an opportunity for students to consider their learning, experiential, and career interests and objectives and to create a sequence of courses and research agenda to help meet those objectives. It is suggested that this plan is documented so that updates can be made as a student's program evolves. While there are no department-wide requirements on the structure of this plan, students should check with their Major Professor(s) to see if they have a specific format they would like the student to use in developing it. As part of these planning discussions, students and the Major Professor should also confirm their working styles, expectations, and goals are compatible. While rare, changing an MP is possible, but should be done as early as possible in the student's degree, and should be done in consultation with the graduate coordinator and/or the department chair.

Form 3B: Once their general plan is created, all ESF graduate students are required to prepare and submit Form 3B to ESF's Graduate School, which specifies the list of courses, seminars, and research credits necessary to meet degree requirements, as well as credits transferred in from other non-ESF programs. Note there are specific versions of the [3B-MS](#) and [3B-PhD](#). This serves as a formal record of courses the student plans to take to meet their program requirements. The *Graduate Program of Study*, developed by the student with the advice and approval of the Major Professor and other members of the Steering Committee, must be submitted no later than the end of the student's third semester; however, earlier is preferable and advised. The Graduate Program of Study can be changed, with approval from the Major Professor and Steering Committee. The student's Major Professor should have access to an updated version, and each student is encouraged to maintain an updated personal copy.

Steering Committee Formation (Form 2A)

Form 2A: Ideally, by the end of the second semester of study, the student and their Major Professor(s) should seek appointment of the student's Steering Committee, consisting of the Major Professor and at least two other ESF faculty members or other qualified persons. The latter may include faculty members from other institutions, or other recognized professionals in relevant fields. The committee is formally established by completing and submitting [Form 2A](#), which must be signed by the Graduate Curriculum Coordinator or Department Chair and submitted to the ESF Graduate School.

Student Responsibility

In addition to these aspects of advising, Major Professors will provide students with ongoing mentoring and assistance with course selection, research guidance, and job or internship opportunities to help them meet professional goals. However, the onus is on the student to understand program requirements and to research the available means of attaining them. Students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning and for meeting program requirements.

Research Proposals

MS and PhD students in Environmental Studies are required to take Research Methods and Design (EST 603). MS students take this during their first semester, and PhD students typically take this during their third semester. This three-credit course helps students conceptualize the research process and gain experience in developing a plan for successfully carrying out independent research. Students will then work to finetune the proposal with their Major Professor(s) and Steering Committee. Once the proposal is approved, students should submit a [Thesis/Dissertation Proposal Approval Form](#) to the Graduate School, signed by the Major Professor(s) and Steering Committee.

Research proposals typically include the following:

- Title
- Abstract
- Introduction
- Research question(s)
- Context of research
- Study rationale
- Literature review
- Research design
- Proposed methods for data collection and analysis
- Timeline
- Budget/funding
- Outline of the thesis

Protection of Human Subjects

Prior to any primary data collection involving human subjects, a detailed plan for the protection of all such informants involved in research must be developed and submitted to ESF's Office of Research Programs, for transmission, review, and approval by Binghamton University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Prior to submission of this application, the graduate student researcher must successfully complete the required online CITI training modules on the protection of human subjects. For further information, see the [Binghamton University IRB website for SUNY ESF Researchers](#). Following completion of data collection, a final report must be filed with the IRB to close the active file for the research project.

Instructions and Guidelines for Formatting a Thesis or Dissertation

For instructions and guidelines for formatting a thesis or dissertation, see [guidelines](#) on the ESF's Graduate School website.

Thesis/Dissertation Capstone Seminar, Oral Examination and Defense

At the conclusion of the program, each MS and PhD Environmental Studies student must present their research at a public Capstone Seminar and successfully defend their thesis or dissertation in an oral examination. The objectives of the defense examination include: (1) probing the validity and significance of the data and information presented in the thesis document; (2) assessing the

student's skills in critical thinking and data analysis; (3) evaluating the student's ability to relate research results to theory within the chosen field(s); and (4) assessing the student's effectiveness in the presentation of research results. The oral examination covers principally the material in the thesis, as well as literature and information relating to it.

When the student is ready to schedule their defense, they should submit "Request for Thesis or Dissertation Examination Committee" ([Form 5B](#)) with the ESF Graduate School for appointment of Chair and Examiner according to academic year deadlines. The Dean of the Graduate School will appoint the defense examination committee, which consists of members of the Steering Committee and at least one additional faculty member (the Examiner). Additionally, the Dean of the Graduate School will appoint an Examination Committee Chair who is not from the Environmental Studies Department. For students who intend to complete their defense in the spring semester, the Examination Committee must be appointed by early December; for the exact date, see the ESF Graduate School [website](#). The role of the Examination Committee Chair is to manage the defense, ensure its integrity, and represent the interests of the faculty and student. Any member of the faculty may be an observer. The student examinee may invite a silent student observer to attend the examination.

At least two weeks prior to the date of the defense, the student will submit the finalized thesis or dissertation to all members of the Examination Committee. Within five days of the defense, the Major Professor will confirm with the Examination Committee Chair that the oral examination should proceed as scheduled. If the Major Professor determines that the written document does not meet the standards established for the defense, it may be postponed by the Dean of the Graduate School at the recommendation of the Examining Committee Chair.

The defense typically lasts up to two hours, but its length may be extended if needed. At the completion of the examination, the candidate and observers will be excused from the room, and the Examination Committee will determine whether the candidate has successfully defended the thesis or dissertation. The Examination Committee Chair has the option to vote. Unanimous agreement is required to pass the student. Once the thesis or dissertation is approved, Form 5E should be completed and submitted to the graduate school, facilitated by the appointed defense Chair. More details are available on the Graduate School [website](#).

Program Learning Outcomes

Students who complete the Environmental Studies MS or PhD program will be able to:

1. *Demonstrate the ability to design and conduct independent research.*
2. *Effectively communicate research findings to scholarly and practitioner audiences.*
3. *Demonstrate knowledge of the social dimensions of environmental issues.*

Annual Review of Student Progress

During each spring semester, the Department of Environmental Studies reviews academic progress of all affiliated research-oriented (PhD and MS) graduate students. As input to this review, each student submits a report in response to a request sent during Spring semester outlining their accomplishments during the preceding calendar year and progress toward completing degree requirements.

Overview of Milestones, Timeline, and Forms

Milestone	Recommended Timeline	Related Form
Identify Steering Committee	End of second semester	2A
Complete Graduate Program of Study	End of second semester, no later than end of third semester	3B (MS) 3B (PhD)
Obtain Research Proposal Approval	End of second semester (MS); End of fourth semester (PhD)	Proposal Approval Form
Complete Written & Oral Candidacy Exam (PhD only)	End of fourth semester	6B 6E 6F
Obtain IRB Approval	Before research begins	IRB website
Request Examiner	Start of fourth semester (MS); Start of eighth semester (PhD)	5B
Complete Capstone Seminar & Defend Thesis; Dissertation/Thesis Approval	End of fourth semester (MS); End of eighth semester (PhD)	5E (MS) 5E (PhD) Form 8A

Resources (MS & PhD Degrees)

Departmental Staff & Communication

The Environmental Studies Office (106 Marshall Hall) maintains unofficial student records and a collection of course syllabi that are available for reference. Time-relevant opportunities may be posted on the Environmental Studies Grad Student listserv (ES-Grad-Announce) or via the departmental Instagram page (@ESF_Enviro_Studies). It is not unusual for students, at some time during their studies, to encounter problems of a personal or academic nature for which they require assistance. An early full discussion of the situation and options is often the key to their resolution. Major Professors, the Graduate Curriculum Coordinator, and the Department Chair are available to facilitate this process.

Graduate Funding

Institutional funding opportunities are limited, especially for MS students. That said, several types of funding opportunities are noted below.

Research Assistantships: Many ESF faculty are involved in sponsored research that may include Research Assistants (RAs). Each research project is managed by a Principal Investigator who has the responsibility of selecting staff. The Department of Environmental Studies has no direct involvement in this process. Students interested in working as an RA should discuss opportunities directly with their Major Professor.

Graduate Assistantships (GA): Some students, especially at the PhD level, may receive an offer of support concurrently with the admissions process. Referred to as “recruitment”, such support may come with funding for up to two academic years for MS students and a commitment of three academic years for PhD students, with a possibility of a fourth year, all of which are contingent on continued academic progress and availability of funds. These assistantships typically involve support of classroom teaching, including grading and/or classroom responsibilities. More details on GA policies and procedures are included in Section VIII.

Each semester, a few GAs may be available to students on an *ad hoc* basis. Students indicate their interest in being considered for available positions by filling out and submitting a departmental GA application. Such GA decisions are made on a semester-by-semester basis and receiving an Assistantship for one semester does not imply or guarantee future funding. Graduate students in good standing may apply for open GA positions in other units at ESF.

Grants and Fellowships: Some graduate students come to ESF with a grant or fellowship (e.g., the National Science Foundation [NSF] Graduate Research Fellowship, or through the Fulbright international exchange program) that covers some or all costs of graduate education. Lead times for fellowships can be quite long – more than a year in some cases. It can be helpful to contact a prospective faculty Major Professor well in advance to work together to identify and obtain such funding opportunities. Sometimes there are funding opportunities for master’s students through sponsoring governmental agencies (e.g., NYS Dept. of Environmental Conservation) or non-profit or other organizations (e.g., The Nature Conservancy).

ESF may have other internal funding opportunities for current students, such as through the Randolph G. Pack Environmental Institute or the Sussman Fellowship, that can be used in support of graduate studies. See departmental communications and the ESF Graduate School website for further information. ESF's Graduate School and Office of Research Programs also circulate research, fellowship, and internship announcements throughout the year.

Requirements for the MS Degree

Program Requirements: The MS Environmental Studies degree requires 30 credit hours focused on academic scholarship and research related to environmental affairs and sustainability. Program requirements are outlined below. All courses are three (3) credit hours unless noted otherwise.

Advanced Standing: Transfer credit. Up to six (6) graduate course credit hours with a grade of "B" or better that have not been applied to another degree may be transferred via [Petition](#). The Petition must include an attached syllabus, and a justification of how the course(s) are to be included on the student's Graduate Program of Studies. Petitions for transfer credit are submitted following matriculation.

The Core (9 credits): Three core courses represent the methodological and interdisciplinary scope of the field of Environmental Studies and demonstrate its applicability to problem analysis and sustainability.

Required:

EST 600 Foundations of Environmental Studies (Fall)

AND two courses selected from:

EST 608 Environmental Advocacy Campaigns and Conflict Resolution

EST 612 Environmental Policy and Governance

EST 613 Urbanization and the Environment

EST 615 Environmental Justice: Policy, Tools, and Society

EST 618 Political Ecologies of Food & Agriculture

EST 640 Environmental Thought and Ethics

EST 645 Mass Media and Environmental Affairs

EST 650 Environmental Perception and Human Behavior

EST 708 Social Theory and the Environment

EST 770 Regenerative Approaches to Sustainable Futures

Research Methods (6 credits): One core Environmental Studies research methods course and an additional methods course (selected from the list below) provide methodological preparation for MS thesis proposal development and research.

Required:

EST 603 Research Methods and Design (Fall)

And, one of the following:

APM 510 Statistical Analysis

APM 625 Sampling Methods

APM 630 Regression Analysis

APM 635 Multivariate Statistical Methods

EST 604 Quantitative Social Science Research Methods

EST 605 Qualitative Methods

EST 617 Measuring Environmental Inequality

EST 702 Environmental and Natural Resource Program Evaluation

EST 705 Environmental Policy Analysis

EST 709 Indigenous Research Methods

EST 715 Community Based Participatory Research
LSA 640 Research Methods

Other courses may be identified in collaboration with the student's Major Professor.

Generalized/ Thematic Area (9 credits): Three additional Generalized or Thematic Area courses are selected in consultation with the student's Major Professor. These should be used to substantively prepare the student for master's thesis research by building a solid knowledge of some aspect of the interdisciplinary field of Environmental Studies. EST 898 and EST 899 may not be included as thematic area courses.

Thesis Research (6 credits): All students with an approved MS thesis research proposal take at least six (6) credits of: EST 899 Master's Thesis Research. In taking these credits, students are expected to develop a research-based master's thesis clearly demonstrating the student's competency in interdisciplinary environmental research and analysis. Completion of the thesis is accompanied by a Capstone Seminar, and an Oral Examination and Thesis Defense (see below).

Typical Course Sequence: The following is a typical course sequence for an MS student completing the degree in four semesters. Each student may tailor the specific courses and sequencing (within the limits of program requirements) to their own needs.

Year 1 Fall

Course Title	Credits
EST 600. Foundations of Environmental Studies	3
EST 603. Research Methods and Design	3
Core Course	3
Total Semester Credits	9

Year 1 Spring

Course Title	Credits
Research Methods Course	3
Core Course	3
Thematic Course	3
Total Semester Credits	9

Year 2 Fall

Course Title	Credits
EST 899. Master's Thesis Research	3
Thematic Course	3
Thematic Course	3
Total Semester Credits	9

Year 2 Spring

Course Title	Credits
EST 899. Master's Thesis Research	3
Semester Total Credits	3
Total Degree Credits	30

Requirements for the PhD Degree

Curricular Requirements

A total of 60 credit hours will be required to earn the PhD in Environmental Studies. Of these 60 credit hours, 33 to 45 credit hours of coursework are required. To complement coursework, students will complete 12 to 24 credits of Dissertation Research, and at least 3 hours of Professional Development experience over the course of the PhD. Up to 30 credit hours of transfer credits would be granted for related graduate coursework. Credit for relevant professional work experience may be granted by the student's PhD Steering Committee, in lieu of selected course requirements. The PhD in Environmental Studies has two formats: traditional (full residency) and hybrid (low residency). For the low-residency option, students would complete a minimum of two semesters of residence at ESF.

Sample PhD Program Schedule

Term 1 Fall 1

Course Number & Title	Credits
EST 600, Foundations of Environmental Studies	3
Thematic Course	3
Theory Course	3
EST 797, Environmental Studies Seminar	1
Term credit total:	10

Term 1 Spring 1

Course Number & Title	Credits
Research Methods Course	3
Thematic Course	3
Optional Course	3
Research Methods Course	3
Term credit total:	12

Term 3 Fall 2

Course Number & Title	Credits
EST 603, Research Methods and Design	3
Thematic Course	3
Thematic Course	3
Optional Course	3
Term credit total:	12

Term 4 Spring 2

Course Number & Title	Credits
Research Methods Course	3
Theory Course	3
Optional Course	3
EST 797, Environmental Studies Seminar	1
Term credit total:	10

Term 5 Fall 3

Course Number & Title	Credits
EST 999, Dissertation Research	6
Term credit total:	6

Term 6 Spring 3

Course Number & Title	Credits
EST 999, Dissertation Research	3
Term credit total:	3

Term 7 Fall 4

Course Number & Title	Credits
EST 999, Dissertation Research	3
EST 797, Environmental Studies Seminar	1
Term credit total:	4

Term 8 Spring 4

Course Number & Title	Credits
EST 999, Dissertation Research	3
Term credit total:	3

Program Total Credits: 60

PhD Curriculum Requirements

Category / Course Title	Credits	Category / Course Title	Credits
Theory, Philosophy, and Knowledge Systems	(9)	Thematic Environmental Social Science	(12)
Two courses in Environmental Social Science Theory, at least one of which must be taken at the 700 level, e.g.: EST 600, Foundations of Environmental Studies *EST 640, Environmental Thought and Ethics EST 708, Social Theory and the Environment EST 770, Regenerative Approaches to Sustainable Futures	6	Four thematic environmental social science courses, e.g.: *EST 606, Public Perception and Communication of Risk, Science and Environment *EST 608, Environmental Advocacy Campaigns and Conflict Resolution EST 613, Urbanization and the Environment *EST 615, Environmental Justice: Policy, Tools & Society EST 610, Critical Climate Studies EST 796, Water, Climate, and Society	12
A discipline-focused graduate level theory course at ESF or Syracuse University (e.g., Geography Theory)	3	EST 999 Dissertation Research	(12)
Research Methods, Design, and Utilization	(12)	OPTIONAL: Additional Dissertation Research Credits / Topically Relevant Coursework / Guided Professional Practice	(0-12)
Four courses in Research Methods, Design, and Utilization (at least one from each of the below categories):		Professional Development Seminar(s)	(3)
Research design: EST 603, Research Methods and Design	3		
Social science research methods: EST 604, Quantitative Social Science Research Methods EST 605, Qualitative Methods *EST 617, Measuring Environmental Inequality EST 645, Mass Media and Environmental Affairs EST 797, Indigenous Research Methods	3	Research utilization: EST 550, Environmental Impact Analysis EST 627, Environmental and Energy Auditing EST 652, Managing Sustainability EST 690, International Environmental Policy EST 702, Environmental and Natural Resource Program Evaluation EST 705, Environmental Policy Analysis	3

Total required credits: 60 (*offered online)

PhD Candidacy Examination

For a complete description of the PhD Candidacy Exam process and policies, please see the relevant section on the Graduate School [website](#). To initiate the examination process, the examining committee shall convene at a planning meeting with the student. During the first part of the planning meeting, the committee determines the form and schedule for the process and establishes the date for the oral component (reported on [Form 6E](#)). The student is then excused from the meeting and the committee develops and discusses the exam content. To schedule a doctoral candidacy examination, the student should complete [Form 6B](#), in consultation with their Major Professor(s). The exam has two components, written and oral.

Written exam: The purpose of the written exam is to assess the readiness of the student to move beyond the coursework stage of the doctoral program, into the development of a substantial research project and dissertation. Traditionally, questioning should verify sufficient breadth and depth of knowledge to successfully undertake such research, and then communicate the results in a scholarly manner appropriate to the discipline.

Oral Exam: The purpose of the oral examination is to further confirm the fitness of the student to apply the skills and knowledge acquired to date toward a successful and significant research project. The oral examination provides the opportunity for the student to demonstrate their ability to think synthetically and critically in a manner conveying their readiness to commence the dissertation project. At the completion of the oral examination, the candidate and observers are excused from the room and the examination committee determines whether the student has successfully completed the oral component of the exam and achieved the status of "doctoral candidate." The decision of the committee will be reported on Form 6F and returned by the exam chair to the Office of Instruction and Graduate Studies.

ES GA Policies & Procedures

This document is intended to clarify and make more transparent the policies and procedures in the Department of Environmental Studies as pertains to our Graduate Assistantship program. The document is not a substitute or replacement for ESF Graduate School policies and procedures. **Additional Information is available from the [Graduate School](#).**

Overview

The Environmental Studies GA Assistantship program is intended to provide financial support to ES-affiliated graduate students; offer opportunities for learning, apprenticeship, and mentoring; provide service to the College; and enhance program excellence. Each year, the department is assigned a total number of GA positions, based on factors that include faculty research funding to the college, total number of teaching credit hours, number of self-funded students, and PhD production. In the Environmental Studies Department, GA positions include:

- Working as a teaching assistant (TA) for classes with over 30 students. TA responsibilities may include attending class, keeping office hours, grading student assignments (along with appropriate preparation work), preparing modules, and/or facilitating discussion sections.
- Working as research support for junior faculty
- Supporting the work of the department and departmental committees

Work obligations are up to 20 hours per week for a full GA, and 10 hours per week for a half GA during the Fall and Spring semesters. Full (20 hours per week) awards include a stipend, in-state tuition, and health benefits for the semester(s) of the award; some benefits are pro-rated for half awards. Awards may be split on a semester basis to maximize student opportunity and program fit – that is, a student with a 20-hour-a-week GA may be assigned to two 10-hour-a-week positions.

Note: The time commitment for a GA position is either 10 or 20 hours per week. This is an average, and some weeks may be a bit more and others a bit less. While the activities and roles of a Graduate Assistantship may be variable (for example: attending meetings, taking notes, working on department-level projects, class attendance, preparation for grading, grading itself), it is important that the hours spent on the Assistantship do not go above the assigned average of 10 or 20 hours per week. These 10 or 20 hours should consider and include all required tasks (for example, if a student must read materials to prepare for grading, the reading counts as time spent on their Assistantship).

The ES Departments' Principles for the allocation of GAs are as follows:

1. Meet existing commitments to students who were recruited with funding.
2. Recruit strong PhD and MS students who can collaborate with faculty to attract external research funding – Prioritize PhD students.
3. Recruit strong PhD and MS students to work with junior faculty, with priority for PhD students.
4. Support PhD students making progress towards completion.

5. Meet programmatic needs.
6. Provide short-term funding to graduate students interested in working as a GA
7. Reward strong performance as a GA

ES funding support is contingent on a student a) making appropriate progress in their program of study and b) completing Assistantship tasks to a satisfactory level, based on input from faculty overseeing the Assistantship. It is also expected that students receiving departmental support will participate in and play a role in building the intellectual and cultural life of the department (which includes, but is not limited to, attending/participating in seminars, and other important department events).

How Recruiting Works

- For recruited PhD students (i.e., those offered funding at time of acceptance), we make a base commitment to 3 years of funding support. When possible, we will support recruited PhD students for up to one additional year. Priority is given to PhD students w/ external funding for some of their first three years from an external source (e.g., Fulbright or other external funding).
- For MS students, we make a base commitment to 2 years of funding support.
- The support can come from ES, or from a combination of ES and other sources (GPES, Fulbright, research funding). The nature of the ES commitment is to fill in any funding gaps with a full-time GA up to and including the full 2 (MS) or 3 (PhD) years.

How Short-Term Funding Works

- Opportunities for short-term GA funding usually come up at the last minute.
- Their availability is a function of whether students recruited with funding decide not to attend, course numbers, faculty getting grants which allow students to go on RA support, GPES funding allocations, and other dynamic variables.
- Receiving funding for a given semester does not mean that a student will be funded in subsequent semesters.

The GA Allocation Timeline

- Graduate Applications for new students interested in funding are due January 15th.
- In late January and early February, Departmental faculty review applications for admission for graduate studies & identify students to recruit based on above principles. Students whose applications are submitted by the deadline are notified of their acceptance by March 15 – they either receive an acceptance with no funding, possible funding, or with a specific funding commitment (i.e., recruited student).

- In March, MS and PhD students with an ES faculty member as a major professor apply for GA positions for the following academic year. Both recruited and non-recruited students who are interested in short-term funding should complete the application.
- GA work begins at the start of the new semester (GA/ RA positions do not extend through Summer or through Winter Break).