Division of Coastal Sciences
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Program Information

Major Milestones & Timelines

This section is organized based on the milestone checklist that can be found in the COA Graduate Student Handbook. Please follow the links provided in the appropriate table (M.S. or Ph.D.) below to access the necessary information in the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) section. Links to the various forms and answers to FAQs are provided for each milestone.

IMPORTANT: All completed forms must be submitted to the COA Graduate Program Coordinator and COA Degree Auditor in the Graduate School (electronic/pdf documents are best). All information on forms must be typed, with the exception of signatures.

M.S. Degree
Full-time students are expected to complete a Master of Science degree in three years or less. For part-time students, there may be up to an additional two years to complete the program (Semester here is defined as Fall/Spring academic semester).

Action	Date Completed
Completion of Required University courses	1st Semester (See FAQs for specific deadlines)
Approval of Program of Study (POS)	Beginning of the 1st Semester
Formation of faculty advisory committee	1st Semester
Annual Progress Report Form	Due annually early spring Semester
M.S. Thesis Prospectus approved	2nd Semester
Comprehensive exam	3rd Semester
Application for Graduation	Semester prior to Defense
Thesis Defense	End of 4th Semester
Commencement	After Defense

Ph.D. Degree
Full-time students are expected to complete a Ph.D. from a master's degree in five years or less, and a Ph.D. from a bachelor's degree in six years or less. For part-time students, there may be up to an additional two to three years to complete the program. Part-time students especially should be aware of the university time limits discussed later in this section (Semester here is defined as Fall/Spring academic semester).

Action	Date Completed
Completion of Required University courses	1st Semester (See FAQs for specific deadlines)
Approval of Program of Study (POS)	Beginning of the 1st Semester
Formation of faculty advisory committee	2nd Semester

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Annual Progress Report Form	Due annually early spring Semester
Ph.D. Qualifying Exam	3rd Semester
Ph.D. Prospectus approved	4th Semester
Comprehensive exam	3rd Year
Application for Graduation	Semester prior to Defense
Dissertation Defense	End of 4th Year
Commencement	After Defense

Other Program Information

This section addresses common questions and issues that arise as students progress through the degree program. Please follow the links provided below to access the necessary information in the FAQs:

Academic Performance
Award/Scholarship Opportunities
Forms
Graduate Assistantships (GAs)
SOAR
Student Healthcare Options

FAQs

Major Milestones & Timelines

Required University Courses

What are these required courses and when are they due?

> The following courses must be completed by all graduate students. Due dates vary depending on the type of course and are outlined below. Failure to complete these courses by the deadlines will result in a hold on your SOAR account and prevent your ability to register in graduate courses. The table below contains active links to each specific course.

University Course & Link	Due Date
Research and Scholarly Integrity Assurance Program (CITI)	Beginning of first semester
Animal Subjects Research Course (CITI)	Beginning of first semester
Academic Integrity (Workplace Answers)	32nd day after classes begin
Plagiarism Tutorial (University Libraries)	End of first semester
Other Workplace Answers courses – GA Students Only	Variable. Workplace Answers will send email notification of deadlines.

How do I access the CITI courses?

> You will need to set up a new user account and login and follow the provided instructions.

How do I get credit for these courses and when are they due?

> Save a pdf copy of all completion certificates. A copy of your certificates must be filed with the COA Graduate Program Coordinator and the COA Degree Auditor at the Graduate School.
>
> The CITI courses must be completed early in your first semester of graduate school. Failure to submit your CITI completion certificates within the first two months of the semester will result in a hold on your SOAR account, which will prevent you from registering for classes. This can have detrimental consequences, so be sure to complete this task soon after starting in the program.

What other courses do I need to take?

> In addition to the required University courses above offered through CITI and the library plagiarism course, you will also get notifications via email from Workplace Answers available at
> https://slate.workplaceanswers.com/UnivSM/.
> The email provides a link and instructions on how to log in using your SOAR ID.
> Modules may include some or all of the following courses:
> - Academic Integrity
> - Student Empower Plus

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- Bullying Prevention for Higher Education
- Child Abuse Awareness and Prevention
- Code of Conduct for Higher Education
- Diversity Benefits for Higher Education
- FERPA for Higher Education
- Preventing Discrimination and Sexual Violence: Title IX, VAWA and Clery Act
- Security Awareness
- Unlawful Harassment Prevention

Many of these courses are required annually (four by the end of fall semester and four by the end of spring semester), so be prepared to take them more than once during your time at USM.

*For Workplace Answers courses only: Upon completion of these training modules, a record is sent to the University showing your completion and passing of the course. It is recommended that you keep a copy of your completion certificates, but you do not need to file them with COA or the Graduate School.

What is IACUC and do I need it?
> The Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) must approve research projects that **handle living vertebrate animals** in any way. You do not need an IACUC if you are only using dead samples from a vertebrate provided by another researcher. You do not need an IACUC if you working with invertebrates or plants/microbes/fungi.

How do I get an IACUC?
> Students will need to work in collaboration with their Major Professor to obtain the IACUC if there is not already an existing one. You should consult the USM Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee access the application form and handbook with instructions.

Formation of Faculty Advisory Committee

What form do I need for this step?
> Students can access the Graduate Committee Request Form through the Graduate School. Before you submit your form, read the next question below.

Who can serve on my committee?
> You should consult with your major professor to select your committee members. Any COA faculty member can serve on your committee and a majority of the committee must be from the COA faculty.

> Individuals that are not a regular member of the COA faculty must be approved. You must ensure that all committee members have at least Level 2 Associate or Level 2 Regular Graduate Faculty Status. If not, this must be requested and approved through the COA faculty, Graduate Council, and the Dean of the Graduate School. Final approval of the Associate or Regular Graduate Faculty Status can take up to two months. Contact the

COA Graduate Program Coordinator if you need help determining a potential committee member's graduate faculty status.

Approval of the Plan of Study (POS)

What is the POS?
This is initially the outline and later the summary of your coursework and milestones towards graduation. It is currently an Excel Spreadsheet that you can download from the Graduate School website. The POS is required by the Graduate School and must be kept up-to-date. For additional details on the requirements of the POS for a degree in COA, please refer to the relevant sections in the COA Graduate Student Handbook (download here).

COA general POS forms (non-Emphasis Area only)
POS for M.S.
POS for Ph.D.

Since COA adopted the Emphasis Area (EA) Program, there are now specific POS forms for each EA. You can download the specific EA POS forms here.

You can find an example of a completed POS form here.

How do I complete the POS?
Access the example POS form that has been filled in correctly to use as a template.

When is the POS due?
The POS must be submitted early in your first semester of graduate school. Failure to submit this information within the first two months of the semester will result in a hold on your SOAR account, which will prevent you from registering for classes. This can have detrimental consequences, so be sure to complete this task soon after starting in the program.

What is the Emphasis Area (EA) Program?
It is an optional program for your Graduate Degree (M.S. or Ph.D.) that is structured around certain coursework offered in COA leading to a degree with a listed emphasis area intended to address national and international needs for graduates with specialized skills and abilities. You do not need to declare an EA to get your degree in COA.

What EA are offered?
The four emphasis areas are (1) Aquaculture, (2) Fisheries and Fisheries Oceanography, (3) Aquatic Health Sciences, and (4) Coastal Ecology and Ecosystem Processes.

How do I declare an EA?
In order to declare an EA, you must submit a Change of Status Form and the emphasis area POS. These forms must be submitted together. After consulting with your major professor, contact the COA Graduate Program Coordinator to declare your intent to

pursue a specific EA. You must complete the specific Plan of Study (POS) for your EA (see next question), as it must be sent with the Change of Status form.

Where can I find the POS for my EA?
There is a separate Plan of Study for each EA and they differ for M.S. versus Ph.D. degrees. You can download all EA POS forms here. Make sure to select the appropriate form based on your degree plan.

Finally, here is the general POS form if you did not declare an EA:
POS for M.S.
POS for Ph.D.

Where can I get more information about courses offered?
COA has developed a course rotation plan outlining which classes are offered annually and which are only offered every other year. Class schedules for current and future terms are posted on the COA website (URL). You can also do a general class search in SOAR or log in directly through your personal SOAR account.

Additional courses outside COA may also be taken at the recommendation of the Major Professor or Faculty Advisory Committee. These may include classes offered in the Division of Marine Science, Department of Biological Science, Geology and Geography or other University departments. You can find out what courses are offered each semester by doing a class search in SOAR.

Who needs to sign my POS form?
Students that have not officially set up a faculty advisory committee (i.e., you have NOT submitted a Graduate Committee Request Form to the Graduate School) requires the following signatures: student, major professor (listed as "advisor" on form), and division chair (listed as "chair/director" on form).

Students that have officially set up a faculty advisory committee (i.e., you HAVE submitted a Graduate Committee Request Form to the Graduate School) require the following signatures: student, major professor (listed as "advisor" on form AND under committee member section), division chair (listed as "chair/director" on form), and all committee members (under milestone section on form).

Annual Student Progress Report

What is the annual student progress report?
At the end of each calendar year, students will provide an annual report on their research progress to the Major Professor and meet with the three faculty members of the Student Advisory Committee. The current version of the Annual Progress Report form is available here.

When will I meet with the Student Advisory Committee?

Meetings happen during the early part of the spring semester and there will be a call for students to sign up for 15 minute slots. You are required to attend this 15 minute meeting.

What will happen in the Student Advisory Committee meeting?
The 15 minute meeting provides an opportunity for the student to discuss with the committee on progress being made. The Committee will guide the student based on information received, and then file a copy of the annual report along with Student Advisory Committee recommendations with the COA Graduate Program Coordinator. Being more than two semesters behind on milestones may trigger additional meetings with the Committee as well as the COA chair.

Does the Annual Student Progress Report need to be filed with the Graduate School?
No, this form is an internal division form. A copy of your final report must be on file with the COA Graduate Program Coordinator, but it does not need to be filed with the Graduate School.

PhD Qualifying Exam

What is the Qualifying Exam?
The Ph.D. qualifying exam is a written exam and serves two purposes:
(1) The exam is intended to extend the discipline-specific knowledge successfully gained through coursework.
(2) The exam is intended to be administered early enough in a Ph.D. student's program that a required proficiency of coastal sciences may be adequately assessed.

The written exam will be interdisciplinary and is intended to extend discipline-specific knowledge into an integrative context across the multiple disciplines comprising coastal sciences.

When should I take the Qualifying Exam?
The Ph.D. qualifying exam should be taken after the first year of courses is completed, preferably early in the third semester of study or at a time agreed upon by the Faculty Advisory Committee. All Ph.D. students must successfully complete the qualifying exam within six months of the end of their second semester.

How is the Qualifying Exam evaluated?
The Qualifying Exam Committee will evaluate the Ph.D. student's written responses to assess the student's academic progress and to help evaluate student learning outcomes in the Emphasis Area program. If the majority of the Qualifying Exam Committee members determine that the student performs at a standard equivalent to a B or greater, the student will pass the exam.

What happens if I fail the Qualifying Exam?
If a Ph.D. student fails the qualifying exam on their second attempt, then the student will be considered for an M.S. only.

What needs to happen after the qualifying exam?

    Faculty must complete the password protected [Results of Comprehensive & Qualifying Exams](#) form and submit to the COA Graduate Program Coordinator and COA Degree Auditor at the Graduate School.

Prospectus and Prospectus Approval

What is the Prospectus?

    The prospectus is a written document, usually 10-15 pages, that outlines the background and the proposed plan for your research project. An approved prospectus is a research plan detailing the scope of work and associated deliverables that will fulfill the requirements of the M.S. / Ph.D. degree.

When is it due?

    For M.S. students, the prospectus is due during the second semester and no later than 6 months after approval of the Plan of Study (POS). For Ph.D. students, the prospectus is due during the third semester and no later than 12 months after approval of the Plan of Study (POS). The finalized prospectus must be presented to the Faculty Advisory Committee for approval at least two weeks prior to the student presenting on the prospectus.

Do I have to do a public presentation on my Prospectus?

    Yes. The student will present an oral slideshow before a public audience on the prospectus. It is suggested the presentation be approx. 20 minutes in duration. Following the public presentation and question period, there will be additional questions from the Faculty Advisory Committee.

What if the Faculty Advisory Committee requests revisions?

    Any subsequent revisions to the research prospectus must then be approved by the Faculty Advisory Committee within one (1) semester of the public presentation and only after approval can the proposed research project be considered acceptable for earning the degree.

    Modifications to an approved prospectus during the implementation of the research is acceptable. Minor modifications need approval of the Major Professor only; however, major changes in scope or direction of the research must be approved by the Faculty Advisory Committee.

What needs to happen after the prospectus defense/approval?

    Faculty must complete the password protected [Dissertation, Nursing Capstone, & Theses Proposal Approval](#) form and submit to the COA Graduate Program Coordinator and COA Degree Auditor at the Graduate School.

Comprehensive Examination

What is the Comprehensive Exam (Comps)?

The Comps are a test of your overall knowledge related to your research discipline and research project. For M.S. students they may be a written or oral exam administered by the Faculty Advisory Committee, and typically last 2-3 hours. For Ph.D. students both a written and oral examination will be conducted by the Faculty Advisory Committee. In most cases the written examination is taken over multiple days and, pending the outcome of that examination, an oral examination lasting 2-3 hours is taken within 30 days of the decision of the written examination by the Faculty Advisory Committee.

Students electing to pursue an optional Emphasis Area designation will also need to complete an additional, emphasis-specific evaluation, at the time of their comprehensive examination. The evaluation is an additional written exam to determine emphasis-specific skills and is used to help evaluate student learning outcomes in the Emphasis Area program.

When do I schedule my Comps?
After completing all courses in the POS, a written and/or oral comprehensive examination will be conducted by the Faculty Advisory Committee. For M.S. students this is typically in the third semester, for Ph.D. students this is typically in the fourth semester. This may be changed to another time acceptable to the Faculty Advisory Committee. The Comps must be completed at least one semester prior to the defense.

How do I know if I passed the Comps?
The examination is passed by a majority vote of the Faculty Advisory Committee and the outcome is generally communicated to the student at the end of the oral exam. The comps may be taken twice only. Failure to pass the M.S. comprehensive exam on the second attempt is grounds for termination from the program. Failure to pass the Ph.D. comprehensive exam on the second attempt will result in the student being considered for an M.S. degree only.

Faculty must complete the password protected [Results of Comprehensive & Qualifying Exams](#) form and submit to the COA Graduate Program Coordinator and COA Degree Auditor at the Graduate School.

How Do I Advance to Candidacy?
Students advance to candidacy for the M.S. or Ph.D. in Coastal Sciences by completing the POS coursework with at least a 3.0 GPA, completing an approved thesis prospectus, and successfully passing the comprehensive examination. Your reward for advancing to candidacy is a $50 increase in your monthly stipend! In order for this stipend increase to take effect, you and/or your major professor must contact the COA Graduate Coordinator and provide a copy of your Results of Comprehensive & Qualifying Exams form.

Deadlines for Graduation, Thesis and Dissertation Projects

When do I have to apply for Graduation?

The USM Graduate School is setting ever earlier deadlines for students to submit the Application for Degree. These deadlines begin the semester before your defense and expected graduation. Please read over these deadlines and follow all the necessary application forms prior to the deadline to avoid delays in your graduation semester. To avoid late fee penalties, make sure you pay attention to the deadlines!

What should I submit before I Defend?
At a minimum it is required that you have completed the following items the semester before you defend. Consult the Graduate School website for specific deadlines (see link above!).
1. Submitted Application to Degree via your SOAR Self-Service (instructions here) and paid the fee.
2. Update your POS form (see POS section above).
3. Submitted an updated Graduate Committee form, if your Faculty Advisory Committee has changed since it was originally formed.
4. Submitted Contact Graduate Reviewer Form.
5. Submitted Title page in Word format as an email attachment to the Graduate Reviewer. See full instructions in Step #1 in Aquila.

Thesis or Dissertation Defense

How soon after my Comps can I Defend?
After the coursework in the POS is completed and the comprehensive examinations successfully passed, the M.S. / Ph.D. candidate becomes qualified to defend in their next semester. It is the responsibility of the student to adhere to the deadlines and timelines set by the Graduate School for Application for Degree.

How do I verify originality of my thesis/dissertation?
The Graduate School highly encourages students to run their thesis/dissertation through Turnitin (prior to the major professor/committee review of the document). The Graduate Reviewer creates a "Turnitin Assignment" that leads students through the steps to complete this task. The assignment is specific to your graduation semester. Please refer to step #4 at this link for more details.

The signature of the major professor on the "Results of the Oral Defense" form verifies that the document was checked for originality and found to be acceptable. Faculty must run their student's thesis/dissertation through Turnitin before submission to the Graduate School. More information on Turnitin can be found here. Faculty should consult these instructions for account creation and login information. If faculty need login information for the department (to create your account), please contact Darcie (or request this information from Writing Center Coordinator Gene O'Gordon at 601.266.4644 or turnitin@usm.edu).

All content, grammar, and spelling in the document must be correct before it is submitted to the Graduate Reviewer. The student should submit the committee approved document

to the Graduate Reviewer having followed the dictates of their chosen style manual and utilizing the template provided by the Graduate School.

What do I have to do before my Defense?
At least two (2) weeks prior to the defense date the student will present an acceptable copy of the thesis/dissertation document to all members of the Faculty Advisory Committee and have the formatting approved by the Graduate Reviewer. Student defenses must be publicly advertised at least two weeks prior to the defense date. It is the responsibility of the student and their Major Professor to determine the defense date and the responsibility of the student to reserve a venue.

What happens during the Defense?
The defense includes (1) a public seminar of approx. 45 minutes followed by (2) a Faculty Advisory Committee oral examination lasting 1-3 hours. Students are encouraged to bring their approved title page to the defense to obtain signatures. The title page should be printed on the appropriate paper (i.e., cotton). (*Do not print any materials until you have received specific printing instructions from the Graduate Reviewer and have approval.*)

How do I know if I passed the Defense?
The defense is passed by a majority vote of the Faculty Advisory Committee and the outcome is generally communicated to the student at the end of the oral exam. The defense may be taken twice only. Failure to pass the defense on the second attempt is grounds for termination from the program. Faculty must complete the password protected [Results of Oral Defense for Thesis, Dissertations, and Nursing Capstone](#) form and submit to the COA Graduate Program Coordinator and COA Degree Auditor at the Graduate School.

What else do I need to do after the Defense?
Your Faculty Advisory Committee will provide any remaining revisions to the thesis/dissertation document which must then be approved by the Faculty Advisory Committee before the thesis/dissertation document be considered complete and acceptable for earning the degree.

You need to also complete the following items to correctly submit your document:
1. Follow USM templates for correct formatting – see Step 2 at http://aquila.usm.edu/graduateschooldocs/
2. Provide two Final Signed Title Pages that were approved by the Graduate Reviewer and contain **original signatures** in black ink from each of your Faculty Advisory Committee members
3. Submit the final Graduate Reviewer approved copies of the thesis/dissertation.
4. Print Graduate Reviewer approved copy of the thesis/dissertation (on special paper). Deliver to the Graduate Reviewer at: USM Graduate School, Attention: Reviewer, 118 College Drive, Box 5024, Hattiesburg, MS 39406.

What happens with the bound copies of my thesis/dissertation?

The bound copy of your thesis/dissertation is maintained in Gunter Library. Typically, students do not receive a bound copy. The Graduate Reviewer will send instructions for ordering personal copies when the final version is approved.

Commencement Ceremony

Do I have to attend the Commencement ceremony?

Doctoral candidates are required to attend commencement unless excused by the Dean of the Graduate School. Master's and doctoral candidates should RSVP for participation in commencement using the online form (available at the link below) during their final semester. Prior to commencement, the Reviewer will send additional information to doctoral candidates regarding line-up procedures. All other graduate candidates will be contacted by the Registrar's Office.

Additional information about commencement can be found at the commencement webpage at https://www.usm.edu/commencement. Make sure you reserve a seat!

Other Program Information

Academic Performance

What are the minimum GPA and course grade requirements?

A minimum 3.0 GPA in coursework is required for graduation. No grade below a "C" is allowable in any coursework attempted. No more than two (2) grades of "C+" or "C" across six (6) credit hours is allowable in any coursework attempted. Students who fail to meet these requirements will be placed on probation.

The grading system for thesis (COA 698) and dissertation (COA 898) research courses is satisfactory (S), unsatisfactory (U), or pass (P). Below is an explanation for each grade option:

Satisfactory (S)
- Satisfactory research progress.
- The major professor/committee chair directing the research must develop a set of expectations for research progress in writing, discuss these expectations with the student no later than the first week of the semester, and collect the signature of the student acknowledging that he/she understands the expectations. These signed documents should be maintained by the faculty member in case of an appeal.
- The major professor/committee chair will assess student progress throughout the semester or minimally at the end of the semester to determine whether satisfactory progress was made.

Unsatisfactory (U)
- Unsatisfactory research progress

- If after assessment of student progress the faculty member determines the student did not meet the minimal expectations of satisfactory performance articulated in the research expectations document, the U should be assigned.
- A student who earns a U will be placed on probation the next semester enrolled.
- The student will return to good academic standing if an S in 698, 798, or 898 (as appropriate) is earned during the probationary semester.
- One U grade can be removed from the transcript by petition for a grade change by the faculty member if the student earns two consecutive S grades.
- A second U grade in these courses at any point in the degree program will result in dismissal from the program.

Pass (P)

- P indicates a student passed his/her thesis or dissertation defense and submitted the final document to the Graduate School, and the graduate reviewer cleared the document as final.
- Typically, P will be assigned the semester a student passes the thesis or dissertation defense, but in cases where a student passes the defense but defers graduation because the thesis/dissertation is not finalized, the student should enroll in 1 h of 698 or 898 during the final semester. A P grade will be assigned the final semester of enrollment in thesis/dissertation hours.

What happens if I'm put on probation?

Students must be in good standing to engage in progress toward degree activities which include: defending a thesis, dissertation, or capstone project, and participating in qualifying or comprehensive examinations.

A student will be placed on academic probation for the next regular semester of enrollment (fall or spring) for the following reasons: the cumulative grade point average (GPA) or program GPA falls below 3.0, a grade of "C-" or lower is awarded; a seventh hour of C+ or below is awarded; a U is earned in thesis or dissertation research. During the probationary semester(s), a student will not be allowed to take qualifying or comprehensive exams or defend a thesis, dissertation, or capstone project. The student will be required to achieve all requirements that are necessary to return the student to good academic standing. The student's department will inform the student in writing that he/she will be placed on probation for one semester or as directed by the program (if full time) or up to two semesters (if part time). The letter will include a set of expectations for the student's return to good academic standing and be approved by the major professor, the department chair and the dean of the Graduate School. Once the terms of the probationary period have been met, the department is responsible for informing the Graduate School and the student in writing. Failure to return to good academic standing by the end of the probationary period will result in dismissal from the program.

Students may request an appeal of reclassification by writing to the chair of the department and the Dean of the Graduate School. Contact the Graduate School for specific procedures.

A student may not graduate until he/she returns to good academic standing.

What is the course retake policy?

If a student earns a C- or below, they are automatically put on probation until they can retake that same course and earn a better grade. A student only has one course retake available per degree.

On the recommendation of the student's graduate committee or major advisor, a student may retake one course to improve his/her grade point average. The original grade in the course will remain on the transcript but will not be used in the calculation of the GPA once the repeat has been recorded. A course retake form must be submitted to the Graduate School during the semester the course is retaken.

A course retaken to return a student to good academic standing must be retaken the next semester the course is offered. Even if the course is not offered until the next academic year, the student will stay on probation until the course is retaken. In the case of Special Topics or Special Problems courses, the student is required to retake the course covering the same material. This policy does not apply to courses for which an XF grade was assigned for reasons of academic dishonesty unless the "X" is first removed following remediation (see Graduate Bulletin for more details on these sanctions).

What course levels count towards my degree?

Courses for which graduate credit will be applied are those numbered 500 or above. Graduate course levels are: 500-599 (Master's Level Graduate); 600-699 (Upper-level Master's Graduate); 700-799 (Specialist and Doctoral level Graduate); and 800-899 (Upper-level Doctoral Graduate). All graduate course work, including 500-level courses, shall have a research component that is included in the final grade.

A minimum of thirty (30) graduate credit hours are required for a M.S. degree and a minimum of 18 credit hours must be taken in courses numbered 600 or above.

For a Ph.D. degree, a minimum of 54 graduate credit hours are required for students that begin the program with a M.S. degree. Students entering the program with a B.S. degree are required to complete a minimum of 84 graduate credit hours. Only courses numbered 600 or above will count towards a Ph.D. degree.

Award/Scholarship Opportunities

What type of awards and scholarships are available to current COA students?

Details about awards and scholarships available to COA graduate students can be found [here](#).

I'm interested in presenting my research at an upcoming conference. Are there any travel funds available?

COA has a limited number of travel awards available to students each year. Awards are typically $500 and offered on a rolling basis. To be eligible, you must be presenting your

research at the conference. You (or your major professor) can apply for these travel funds by making a request directly to the division chair. Your request should include conference details, dates, and an abstract of the research you will present.

Forms

What forms do I need to submit, who submits them, and when are they due?
Refer to the "[Timeline for Submission of Graduate School Paperwork](#)."

What are the requirements for completing forms?
All forms must be typed (except signatures) and be the current version of the form. The Graduate School will not accept handwritten forms. You should consult the following links to the Graduate School website for all current forms: [Student Completion Forms](#) or [Advisor Completion Forms](#).

I'm trying to download a form and it is password protected. What do I do?
Password protected forms must be completed and submitted by your faculty advisor. The password is only available for faculty member use. Faculty should consult with the COA Graduate Program Coordinator or COA Degree Auditor at the Graduate School if they need the password.

I have my form(s) complete with signatures. Who do I submit them to?
All forms must be submitted to the COA Graduate Program Coordinator AND COA Degree Auditor at the Graduate School. All forms can be submitted electronically by email in pdf format.

Graduate Assistantships (GAs)

What is a GA and will I receive one?
Graduate Assistantships (GAs) are positions that grant students a paid stipend. Full-time GAs are required to work a maximum of 20 hours per week. Specific job duties are determined by the person that offers you the GA position (typically, your major professor). All GAs come with a tuition waiver. You cannot receive a GA without a tuition waiver (and vice versa). GA positions also come with basic health insurance (more details below).

While most students in COA receive a GA position, it is not automatic. Students receive GAs through a Memorandum of Assistantship Award (MAA) from the person that offers you the GA position (typically, your major professor). These letters provide important details about the length, rate, and requirements of your GA position. If you accept the GA position, you must sign your MAA and return it to your major professor and the COA Graduate Program Coordinator.

What is the annual stipend amount?

Refer to the below table for COA stipend rates. The rate increase that goes into effect in September 2017 is subject to funding availability. Students that are awarded external, competitive fellowships (e.g., NSF, Knauss, etc.) may receive a higher stipend rate.

Type of Student	Current Rates	New Rates for Fall 2017*
M.S. student	$1600	$1900
M.S. student that has advanced to candidacy	$1650	$1950
Ph.D. student	$1650	$1950
Ph.D. student that has advanced to candidacy	$1700	$2000

*Rate increase is subject to funding availability.

I've advanced to candidacy. How to get I get my stipend increase?

After successful advancement to candidacy, GAs are eligible for a $50/month rate increase at the discretion of the major professor and pending funding availability. The student must notify the COA Graduate Program Coordinator once comps are complete for rate change to be applied. Remember advancement to candidacy includes the following: completing the POS coursework with a 3.0 GPA, completing an approved thesis prospectus, and successfully passing the comprehensive examination.

What is covered by the tuition waiver?

All full-time GAs (20 hours/week) will receive a tuition waiver equal to 100% of the assessed in-state and out-of-state (if needed) tuition fees. All part-time GA's (10 hours/week) will receive a tuition waiver equal to 50% of the assessed in-state and out-of-state (if needed) tuition fees. Typically, only full-time GAs are offered in COA.

Tuition waivers do not cover course fees, student activity fees, international programming fees, textbook fees, capital improvement fees, parking fees, graduation fees, or any other type of fees. Tuition waivers will be prorated if the assistantship is terminated.

What are the enrollment requirements for a GA?

GAs are required to maintain full-time enrollment during all semesters of your position period. For Fall and Spring semester, full-time status is 9-13 credit hours. For summer semester, full-time status is 3 credit hours (see below for changes effective Summer 2017).

Note: Due to recent budget issues, the Graduate School has changed the policy for the enrollment requirement for GAs for Summer 2017 (and beyond). Below are the full details from the Graduate School:

Eligible summer GA's may hold the assistantship while enrolling in a minimum of 1 credit hour during summer 2017, rather than the 3 hours normally required for full-time summer enrollment. This change does not limit GA's to 1 hour; up to 3 hours will be awarded if needed. The change will allow us to utilize tuition waivers more effectively. To be eligible for the 1 hour minimum summer enrollment the following conditions must be met (in consultation with HR):

1. If a continuing student, the student must have been enrolled full time and held an assistantship during spring 2017 and must be already enrolled full time for fall 2017.
2. If graduating during summer 2017, the student must have been enrolled full time and held an assistantship during spring 2017 and has applied for graduation for summer 2017

IMPORTANT: Students that are enrolled in less than 2 hours while holding a summer assistantship will have FICA taxes deducted from their paycheck at the rate of 7.65%. If you choose to enroll in 1 hour, you need to be aware of this additional tax obligation. If you enroll in 2 hours, the FICA taxes will not be applied.

When do I need to be registered for classes?

You must be enrolled in credit hours through SOAR for your tuition waiver to be applied. In general, students should enroll for Summer and Fall classes by mid-April. Student should enroll for Spring classes by mid-October.

Please remember that it is the student's responsibility to consult with their advisor, select courses, and register in a timely manner. Failure to do so may result in late registration fees or other issues. Make sure you pay attention to the USM academic calendar for deadlines to avoid academic and financial penalties.

SOAR

What is SOAR and why do I need to use it?

SOAR is Southern's Online Accessible Records and contains all the student data that is maintained for graduate and undergraduate students. Students should regularly check their SOAR self-service page for detailed information regarding the academic status, and other detailed information. You must use SOAR to enroll in classes, view and pay your account balance, and view any other relevant academic information.

I don't understand how to use SOAR. What do I do?

There are some helpful tutorials on how to complete common tasks in SOAR. Some helpful tutorials include how to register for classes and how to view invoices, grades, and paychecks.

What are "holds" on my account and how do I get them removed?

Holds (also called indicators) on your record can be, but are not limited to academic holds, financial holds, library or parking fines, etc. Course enrollment and/or the ability to charge to your student ID may be blocked or limited depending on the type of hold on your account. You can look at what holds/indicators, if any, you have on your account via your SOAR Student Center. All holds will be listed in the "Holds" box, located on the top, right-hand side in your Student Center. In order to have the hold removed, you will need to contact the appropriate office or department, which you can see by clicking on the "Details" link in the "Holds" box.

Common holds/indicators that typically block all course registration activity include the following: Block Next Term Enrollment, Advisement Required, Balance Due, All Services Hold, Academic Probation Continued, Suspension - Department, Suspension - Dean, Suspension.

Student Healthcare

I am a GA. Where can I find more information on the basic health care that is included with my position?

The University of Southern Mississippi requires that all Graduate Assistants have a qualified healthcare plan. To support that goal the University provides a healthcare plan where GAs are required to either enroll and or waive the plan. If the plan is waived, the GA must provide evidence of comparable coverage.

If you opt to purchase health insurance through the University at a reduced rate a deduction will be withheld from your paycheck. Enrollment is automatic unless you provide proof of comparable insurance to the Office of Human Resources. Waivers are due by the date set by HR and must be completed each year. Failure to enroll or provide documentation of comparable insurance will result in the premium being withheld from the student's paycheck and is **non-refundable**. Go to http://www.usm.edu/employment-hr/ga-ra-international-student-information for more information.

I am a GA. Where can I find the link to enroll or waive my health insurance?

Visit this website, which includes a direct link to the waive/enroll site.

I am not a GA, but am interested in health insurance. Where can I find this information?

Visit this website, which includes information for voluntary enrollment options for all domestic full-time students.

I still have questions about my USM health insurance options. Who can I contact?

Mary Alexander (mary.m.alexander@usm.edu) is an HR specialist that handles all graduate health insurance questions.