

# **The Geography Master's Degree Program Graduate Handbook**

**2025-2026**

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## Program Overview

Welcome to the Portland State University Geography Master's program, housed in the School of Earth, Environment, and Society. It is our mission to provide a high-quality, supportive, and inclusive Geography education to all of our Master's students. Geography is a diverse discipline and our nationally and internationally recognized faculty advisors reflect this, providing graduate students with a variety of dynamic learning and cutting-edge research opportunities. In this handbook you will find information and resources to support your Geography graduate education at PSU from application to graduation. We are delighted you are here.

As Geographers, we are dedicated to research, scholarship, community outreach, and education that addresses many of the most pressing environmental and societal challenges of our time. At PSU, our basic and applied research and scholarship activities take many forms, often in partnership with community-based organizations, or in collaboration with non-governmental organizations and agencies at the regional, state, national, and international levels. Geography students at PSU are immersed in this dynamic learning environment with vast opportunities for experiential learning, preparing graduates for careers in the public and private sectors or for further graduate study in a doctoral program.

Our Master's program is designed to provide students with a disciplinary foundation in Geography while allowing the flexibility for students and their advisors to tailor their education to the student's goals and needs. Students may choose from two different degree options: A Master of Science (M.S.) or a Master of Arts (M.A.). Students pursuing the M.A. in Geography are required to demonstrate competency in a foreign language (more detail provided by the PSU [Department of World Languages](#)) as part of their graduation requirements, while students pursuing the M.S. in Geography are not. If you are unsure which degree option is the best fit for your graduate education goals, we recommend reaching out to a potential faculty advisor or Dr. Paul Loikith (Geography graduate advisor, [ploikith@pdx.edu](mailto:ploikith@pdx.edu)) for further guidance.

## Pre-Admission Information

All applicants are requested to identify an advisor in their application materials and the identified advisor must agree to advise the applicant before acceptance into our Master's program. It is therefore **highly recommended that applicants reach out to one or more potential faculty advisors prior to submitting their application** in order to identify the advisor or advisors that most closely match their scholarly interests and would be most likely to best support the applicant towards achieving their goals. Information on our faculty and their research and disciplinary interests can be found on our [school website](#). Faculty advisors will be happy to discuss their research and scholarly interests with prospective students and help them assess whether they are the right advisor for the student.

## *When to Apply and When to Enroll*

Detailed information on how to apply can be found on the program's [website](#). The standard timeline is for applicants to submit their application by January 15<sup>th</sup> and for accepted applicants to enroll the following fall quarter (September). This timeline applies to students who are

receiving support as Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) since GTA appointments begin in the fall quarter (PSU operates on the quarter system, not the semester system). Students who submit their application by January 15<sup>th</sup> will receive a decision on their application no later than mid-February. Applications that are received after January 15<sup>th</sup> will still be reviewed, but GTA offers are prioritized for applications received by January 15<sup>th</sup>. Students that are accepted, whether offered GTA support or not, are expected to communicate their decision by April 15<sup>th</sup>.

Prospective students may also apply and enroll in the Master's program during other times of the year under certain circumstances, including if the student has been offered a fully funded Graduate Research Assistantship (GRA) by a faculty advisor or if the student has a non-GTA source of funding and has reason to begin at a time other than fall quarter. Applicants hoping to enroll during a quarter other than fall should communicate in advance about this with their potential advisor. Admissions decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis. GTA positions always begin in the fall quarter, so students accepting GTA offers must start their position in the fall.

Please note that we **DO NOT** require GRE scores for graduate applications.

### ***Funding Opportunities***

Students in the PSU Geography Master's program have the opportunity to be considered for financial support, by either through a GTA or a GRA. Both assistantships come with tuition remission and a stipend. However, acceptance into the program is not contingent on having a funding offer. Other sources of funding support are also possible including paid work with the Center for Spatial Analysis and Research ([CSAR](#)). The [Graduate School](#) provides additional information on ways to finance your graduate education.

Graduate Teaching Assistantships (GTAs): Students who are supported by a GTA receive full tuition remission and a stipend while enrolled as a full-time graduate student (9 credits per quarter) for that academic year. GTAs will be assigned to an undergraduate class offered by the Geography Academic Area and are expected to assist the instructor with course duties. These duties may include, but are not limited to, grading assignments, preparing and/or leading lab assignments, and helping undergraduate and graduate students during office hours. The GTA and the instructor will agree to the GTA's expectations and responsibilities prior to the start of the assigned class. The work assignment notice will be sent from the Geography Academic Area Lead to each GTA one month prior to the start of the appointment. In Geography, we have a limited number of GTAs available to offer Geography master's students so we are unfortunately not able to offer GTAs to all eligible or qualified applicants. Your identified faculty advisor will be able to tell you if they are able to provide GTA support for a new student before you apply. GTA support can be provided by other units on campus such as University Studies, but students need to apply separately for these positions.

Graduate Research Assistantships (GRAs): Students who are supported by a GRA receive full tuition remission and a stipend, much like a GTA. However, instead of assisting with teaching, GRAs are hired to assist with research. Unlike GTA positions which are supported by PSU, GRA

funding typically comes from external research funding obtained by a faculty member (usually, but not always, the student's faculty advisor). Occasionally, GRA positions are available from other units on campus. Students supported by a GRA gain valuable research experience and the research they conduct as a GRA often contributes to their thesis work. The GRA and the faculty advisor will decide on reasonable GRA responsibilities and expectations. If an applicant is interested in being a GRA, they should ask potential faculty advisors about opportunities for research support for graduate students.

*GRAs and GTAs are represented by the Graduate Employees Union of Portland State University, and all PSU's academic units, including SEES follow the agreements that the Union and PSU have concurred. More information regarding the GREU can be found at their [website](#).*

## Post Admission Information

Welcome to the Geography Master's Program! Now that you have formally accepted the admission offer into our graduate program, we highly recommend touching base with your faculty advisor. Together you will develop your program of study including which courses to take and which degree option is the best fit for you. Once enrolled in the fall, it is important to continue to meet regularly with your advisor in order to ensure that you are keeping up with program expectations, research, and coursework.

Master's students in Geography may choose between two different degree culmination options: 1) Thesis Option; and 2) Paper option. Note that M.A. students must choose the thesis option. More information on the two options is provided below and PSU guidelines can be found [here](#). Students are required to follow and meet all university and departmental guidelines and expectations.

### *1. Thesis Option*

Students pursuing the thesis option must meet the following criteria:

#### **a) 45 credits of coursework**

- A minimum of 30 of the 45 credits must be in classes with a GEOG prefix, including required courses (see below).
- At least 6 but no more than 9 credits must be in GEOG 503, *Thesis*. This counts towards the 45 total GEOG credits. You are only eligible to register for Thesis credits after you successfully defend your thesis proposal (see below).

#### **b) Defend a thesis based on original research**

The thesis process consists of the following steps:

- 1) *Developing a Research Plan*: You will work independently and with your advisor to develop a research plan for your thesis. Thesis research can take many forms and should reflect your scholarly interest and goals.
- 2) *Identify a thesis committee*: Your thesis committee must include three committee members, including your advisor, with at least two of the three committee members

belonging to the Geography faculty. Your committee plays a supportive role in your research and progress towards defending your thesis. At the culmination of your graduate studies, you will defend your thesis to your committee. You will need to submit [a form appointing your thesis committee](#) to the Graduate School well in advance of your thesis defense. Please consult with your advisor for further guidance. It is also highly recommended that you speak with your committee members about your research well in advance of submitting your thesis for their review.

- 3) *Defending your thesis proposal*: Once you have developed your research plan and identified a committee, you will write a thesis proposal and defend this proposal to your thesis committee. Your proposal defense presentation can be open to the public or limited to your committee only. This is an opportunity for your committee to help you sharpen your research questions and/or methods, provide feedback on your research plan, and ensure that you are ready to proceed to conduct your thesis research. Once you have passed your proposal defense, you may enroll in *GEOG 503: Thesis credit*.
- 4) *Conducting the research*: Conducting your thesis research can take many forms depending on your research topic and goals. During this stage of your graduate study, it is highly recommended that you meet with your advisor regularly to discuss research progress and to receive feedback on your work. Constant communication with your advisor is one of the most important aspects of your graduate education.
- 5) *Defending your thesis*: Once you have completed all of your coursework, research, and have written your thesis, the final step before graduation is defending your thesis. A thesis defense consists of an oral presentation of your thesis research that is open to the public followed by a defense of your thesis with your committee. The thesis defense is designed to ensure that you have completed your thesis research and are able to defend the work to the satisfaction of your committee. Students are required to submit a final draft of their thesis to all committee members at least two weeks prior to a scheduled defense date. Once your committee has approved your thesis and passed you on your thesis defense, you are ready to graduate!

## 2. Paper Option

Students pursuing the research paper option must meet the following criteria:

### a) **54 credits of coursework**

- Of the 54 credits, a minimum of 34 must have a GEOG prefix, including required courses (see below).
- At least 3 credits of GEOG 501. This counts towards the 54-credit total.

### b) **A research paper**

Students writing a Master's research paper do not need to form a thesis committee nor defend their research paper. Rather, they will work closely with their advisor on writing the paper which must be approved by their advisor and two additional readers from the Geography faculty. Students pursuing the paper option must also present their paper in a presentation that is open to the public.

Check the Office of Graduate Studies for important [graduation dates and deadlines](#). All relevant forms can be found [here](#).

## Graduate Program Check-In

All students must complete a Graduate Program Check-In in order to proceed towards their thesis or research paper. The check-in is not a test or exam, but instead is designed to help students assess their progress and goals, and to receive feedback, recommendations, and support from the committee. For the check-in, each student will submit a portfolio of all graduate work up to the point of the meeting. This includes all papers and other substantive assignments completed as part of coursework, a review essay, and a DARS report. Portfolios are due no later than the Wednesday of Week 4 of the spring quarter in which the student is participating in a check-in (for full time students only). [For check-ins not held during spring quarter, the portfolio is due at least one week prior.]

Check-In Essay: As part of the check-in portfolio, students must write an essay that describes their research and scholarly interests. This may pertain to research the student is already conducting, or research interests that they hope to pursue. The essay should also include a self-assessment of progress to date, a set of objectives for completing their degree, and a plan for achieving those objectives. Consult with your advisor for examples, expectations, and advice.

Check-In Committee Meeting: Each student will meet with a committee of three Geography faculty members (their advisor and two others). The committee and the student will discuss the student's progress, interests, and objectives. This is an opportunity for the committee to make recommendations for additional coursework or research tasks that will help the student achieve their scholarly goals. The meeting typically lasts for about one hour. After the meeting, the committee will present the student with a set of recommendations based on their review of the student's portfolio and discussion during the meeting designed to help the student progress in the program successfully.

## Choosing Courses

Most full-time students register for 9 credits each quarter. This is also required for students receiving an assistantship. Additional information on the PSU Graduate School's enrollment policy can be found [here](#).

Required Courses: The Geography Master's program has two required courses that all students must complete.

- *Geographic Thought: GEOG 521* [Offered every winter quarter]
- *Introduction to Graduate Research and Design: EES 511* [Offered every fall quarter]
- *Seminar: EES 507* [Every fall, winter, and spring quarter]

It is expected that students take both GEOG 521 and EES 511 during their first year, although students starting during winter or spring terms may consult with their advisor on the best way to complete these courses. All students must complete GEOG 521 prior to their graduate program check-in.

### ***Example Course Sequence Plans***

A sample course sequence plan is provided below. This example plan is based on a student entering in fall and graduating in spring of the following academic year (a 2-year course of study). Every student will have a somewhat different course sequence plan, so this is only provided as a general guide. It is very important to develop your course sequence plan in consultation with your advisor. All classes are 4 credits unless otherwise noted.

*Note on “by arrangement credits”:* Students may take by arrangement credits with their advisor or other faculty members to fulfill some of their credit requirements. By arrangement credits include GEOG 501: Research and GEOG 505 – Readings and Conference. However, please note that a maximum of 12 credits in GEOG 501 and 505 combined may be used towards your degree requirements. Additionally, while you must take at least 6 credits of GEOG 503 – Thesis (if you are pursuing the Thesis Option), you may only count a maximum of 9 503 credits towards your degree requirements. It is recommended that you consult with your advisor on taking by arrangement credits and run a [DARS](#) report frequently to ensure you are applying them correctly to your degree.

#### **Year 1**

Fall:

- EES 511: Introduction to Graduate Research and Design (required for all students)
- One 4-credit elective
- EES 507: Seminar (1 credit, required for all students).

Winter:

- GEOG 521: Geographic Thought (required for all students)
- One 4-credit elective
- EES 507: Seminar (1 credit, required for all students)

Spring:

- Two 4-credit electives
- EES 507: Seminar (1 credit, required for all students)
- Graduate program check-in
- For thesis option students: Defend your thesis proposal

#### **Year 2**

Fall:

- For thesis option students: Defend thesis proposal if you did not do so in the spring. If you have successfully defended your thesis proposal, you may take GEOG 503: Thesis credits
- Otherwise take a combination of electives and GEOG 501: Research credits to reach 8 credits.
- EES 507: Seminar (1 credit, required for all students)

Winter:

- Run a DARS report and determine if/what types of credits you still need to fulfill graduation requirements. This may be a combination of electives, thesis credits, or research credits depending on your situation.

- By the end of the winter quarter, you should have a near complete thesis or paper draft for your advisor to review.
- EES 507: Seminar (1 credit, required for all students)

Spring:

- Credits will likely be primarily GEOG 501: Research
- EES 507: Seminar (1 credit, required for all students)
- Defend your thesis for students pursuing the thesis option
- Present your paper for students pursuing the paper option

## About Portland

Like any city, if you ask Portlanders to describe their city, you will probably get a range of responses. However, some facts are indisputable. Portland is a fairly large city with a population of nearly 650,000 people. Many residents like that Portland has the amenities of a big city, without feeling quite as big as its population would suggest. It is also a very livable city, made up of neighborhoods each with their own distinct character. Portland is also well-served by a comprehensive public transit system, and Portland State serves as a transit hub. Additionally, an ever-improving network of bike infrastructure makes Portland an easy place to get around without a car. More information on transportation can be found [here](#).

One of the most unique aspects of living in Portland is the easy access to a huge variety of outdoor recreation opportunities. Situated at the northern end of the Willamette Valley, the city is a day trip away from the spectacular Oregon Coast, the Columbia River Gorge, Mount Hood, and Mount St. Helens. The region's complex topography and proximity to the Pacific Ocean (about 60 miles away) make for a wide range of climates and ecosystems within a relatively small distance including rain forests, alpine mountaintops, high deserts, and everything in between.

While Portland is an easy city to navigate and an exciting and enriching place to live, like most West Coast cities, housing can be rather expensive. However, Portland is still more affordable than its West Coast neighbors like Seattle and San Francisco, and students are able to find housing they can afford. This reality, however, should be taken into account when planning your move to Portland if coming from out of town. Portland State University also offers some options for graduate student [housing on or near campus](#). The Portland metro area (which includes Yamhill, Skamania, Columbia, Clackamas, Clark, Multnomah, and Washington counties) has about 2.5 million people. Areas outside of Portland, including communities in Washington, Clackamas, and Clark Counties often offer more affordable housing options with access to transit to downtown Portland. You may consider housing options in such areas.

If you have any questions about moving to or living in Portland while a graduate student, our faculty, staff, and current students would be more than happy to answer any of your questions.