

The Hidden Curriculum of Academia at Virginia Tech

(Compiled from Spring 2022, Fall 2022, Fall 2023, Spring 2023, and Fall 2024 crowdsourced documents.)

General information: <https://graduateschool.vt.edu/current-students.html>

Expectations: <https://graduateschool.vt.edu/academics/expectations.html>

Policies and Procedures:

<https://graduateschool.vt.edu/academics/graduate-catalog-policies-procedures.html>

- TimelyCare <https://ucc.vt.edu/timelycare.html>
- Cook Counselling Center 540-231-6557 <https://ucc.vt.edu>
- Cranwell International Center 540-231-6527 <https://international.vt.edu>
- Dean of Students Office 540-231-3787 <https://dos.vt.edu>
- Hokie Wellness 540-231-2233 <https://hokiewellness.vt.edu>
- Graduate Ombuds 540-231-9573 <https://www.graduate.ombudsman.vt.edu>

Funding, Payroll, Emergency Funding

- Funding is influenced by relationships, timing, and departmental politics.
- Merit alone does not determine funding.
- Assistantship types differ in expectations and benefits.
- Tuition coverage varies by appointment and department.
- Step pay is not automatic, and interpretation differs by unit.
- Summer funding is not guaranteed.
- You must ask about summer support early.
- You may need multiple funding sources in one year.
- Funding can change with little notice.
- Appointment letters may not reflect real expectations.
- Always verify appointment details in writing.
- Stipends are taxable income.
- Taxes are not always withheld.
- Comprehensive fees are high.
- Comp. Fees are not always covered by funding.
- Late fees are rarely waived.
- Payroll delays are common.
- First paychecks often arrive weeks into the semester.
- Keep an emergency financial buffer if possible.
- Know who processes payroll and funding approvals in your department.
- Emergency funding exists but is limited and competitive.
- Emergency funding may take time.

- Know when insurance begins and ends.

Graduate Assistantships

<https://graduateschool.vt.edu/funding.html>

- GTA, GRA, and GA roles differ in expectations, workload, and authority.
- Job descriptions rarely match actual responsibilities.
- Assistantship expectations may change mid-semester.
- Some assistantships require work beyond contracted hours.
- Assistantship renewal is not guaranteed.
- Performance evaluations are often informal.
- Saying yes too often can increase workload permanently.
- You may not be trained for all assigned duties.
- Power dynamics affect how concerns are received.

Teaching

- Teaching expectations vary widely by department.
- Teaching responsibilities are often unclear.
- Clarify grading authority.
- Clarify office hour expectations.
- Clarify classroom attendance expectations.
- Some GTAs teach independently.
- Teaching evaluations affect future funding and opportunities.
- Teaching quality may be undervalued in research-heavy programs.
- Teaching training quality varies.
- You may need to seek pedagogy support yourself.
- Keep records of all teaching duties.
- Save syllabi, assignments, and evaluations.
- Student boundary management is often your responsibility.
- FERPA expectations are not always explained.
- Separate the time you use for teaching and research. Blocking time off for each activity is essential.

International Students

<https://international.vt.edu/>

- Visa rules restrict employment options.
- Funding opportunities are more limited.
- Tax rules are complex.
- Cultural expectations are rarely explained.
- Asking questions may feel risky.

- Mistakes can have serious consequences.
- Hidden curriculum effects are amplified.
- You may need to educate faculty about visa limitations.
- When you are homesick, don't stay by yourself, try to contact your family and friends, and ask them for their support.
- Find a community that speaks your native language.

Taxes

<https://www.controller.vt.edu/TaxCompliance.html>

International student taxes: <https://international.vt.edu/employment/taxes.html>

- Stipends are taxable income.
- Taxes are not automatically withheld.
- You may owe quarterly payments.
- International tax filing is complex.
- Free tax assistance may be available.
- Incorrect filing can cause future issues.

Students with Disabilities

<https://ssd.vt.edu/>

- Accommodations require documentation.
- Disclosure is a personal decision.
- Faculty awareness varies.
- Accommodation enforcement varies.
- Advocacy is often necessary.
- You may need repeated reminders.

Careers

<https://career.vt.edu/channels/graduate-students/>

- There is a Graduate and International student career advisor
- Academic jobs are scarce.
- The academic pipeline is narrow.
- Career preparation is largely self-directed.
- Non-academic careers are valid.
- Faculty may lack alt-ac knowledge.
- Networking affects career outcomes.
- Publications and prestige shape options.
- Job Searching (<https://career.vt.edu/job-search.html>)

Career and Professional Development

- Workshops exist but are underused.
- You must seek opportunities actively.
- Professional skills are not always prioritized.
- Leadership development is optional, not required.
- Career exploration may be discouraged.

Grades

- Grading standards vary by instructor.
- Expectations are not always explicit.
- Grades can affect funding and progress.
- Grade disputes are political.
- Share grading concerns with your professor sooner rather than later.
- A well-rounded GPA calculation should reward active classroom participation, ensuring students are engaged and fostering a collaborative learning environment.

Planning

- Long-term planning is essential.
- Short-term survival often dominates.
- Plans change frequently.
- Flexibility is necessary.
- Start looking for housing early.
- Keep in mind that health insurance is a hidden cost.
- Prepare yourself for the cost-of-living expenses.

Plan of Study

<https://graduateschool.vt.edu/academics/graduate-catalog-policies-procedures/plan-of-study-narrative.html>

- Requirements are complex.
- Rules vary by program.
- Errors can delay graduation.
- Always confirm approvals in writing.
- Verbal approval is not protection.
- Administrative mistakes are common.
- There's a flow chart for plan of study:
https://graduateschool.vt.edu/content/dam/graduateschool_vt_edu/process/POS_submission.pdf.

Student-Supervisor Interactions

Expectations: <https://graduateschool.vt.edu/academics/expectations.html>

- Advisor relationships shape outcomes.
- Management styles differ.
- Communication expectations vary.
- Authorship expectations must be clarified early.
- Advisors advocate for students.
- Advisors also gatekeep opportunities.
- Document meetings and decisions.
- Email summaries protect you.
- Changing advisors is possible.
- Changing advisors is political.
- Committee members matter.
- Power imbalance affects communication.
- Advisors are very busy with their own work as well as helping other students.
- Your advisor does not know everything and might not tell you about important documents to file or other important dates.
- Find time to meet with your supervisor(s) socially as well. Develop those relationships early on through informal department events, ask to get coffee and catch up a few times a semester, etc. and maintain them. This helps build trust and foster a more supportive student/supervisor relationship.
- You are looking at a long-term relationship. Your PI will be someone you work for/with for at least 2 years (for masters) or 4 years (for PhD). So, it is important to always have clear communication with them and set expectations. It is also important to remember that there is no “one size fits all” situation, so tailoring your situation according to your and your advisor’s preferences and personality is beneficial.
- Each advisor will have their own unique advising style. Some are “hands-on” to the point of micro-managing their students, while others are “hands-off” and allow their students to be almost completely independent. It is important to communicate clearly with your advisor regarding what you need to be successful, even if this means you must ask for more space.

Academic Resources

- Covering journal publication expenses.
- You must advocate for yourself.
- Access varies by department.
- Not all students receive the same information.
- The Writing Center can help you with your writing and CV.
- The library can help you find articles and navigate databases if you are struggling. Librarians are also excellent in providing support in systematic reviews.

<https://lib.vt.edu/find-borrow/grad-student.html>

Ombuds

<https://www.graduate.ombudsman.vt.edu/community.html>

- Ombuds is confidential.
- Ombuds can help to navigate conflict.
- Many students are unaware of this resource.
- You can have the graduate ombuds (Bryan Hanson) come talk to your student group or group of grad students.

Work/Life Balance

- Overwork is normalized.
- Burnout is common.
- Rest feels risky.
- Balance is rarely modeled.
- Guilt accompanies time off.
- Productivity is rewarded over wellness.
- Being able to ask for time off from research labs can be difficult based on expectations.
- Extracurricular activities and socializing are also crucial for well-being. Rec Sports offers a lot of programs and activities.
- The Little Hokie Hangout is a daycare for grad student parents:
<https://graduateschool.vt.edu/student-services/spouses-partners-and-children/child-care/little-hokies-hangout.html>.
- There's a work/life grant that you can get when you welcome a new child. It is now 8 weeks. If you are on an assistantship, you'll get paid.
<https://graduateschool.vt.edu/funding/work-life-grants.html>.

Parking/Transportation

<https://parking.vt.edu/>

- Parking is limited.
- Permits are expensive.
- Transportation affects scheduling.
- Campus access varies.
- Get to know the bus routes.
- Blacksburg Transit has an app for checking the real-time locations of the bus.
- The Smartway Bus to Roanoke (park and ride in Christiansburg, airport, and Amtrak) is free with your VT ID <https://www.valleymetro.com/services/smart-way-services>
- The Smartway bus will wait for the evening Amtrak train if it is late

Asking for Exceptions

- Exceptions are sometimes possible.
- Requests are political.
- Who you ask matters.
- Timing matters.
- Tone matters.
- Documentation helps.
- <https://graduateschool.vt.edu/forms.html>

Wellness

- Food insecurity exists.
- Housing insecurity exists.
- Support resources are available but underpublicized. <https://dos.vt.edu>
- The Graduate Life Center has a wellness room with a UV lamp and a sleep chair. You can access it with your Hokie Passport.
- Timely Care is a free counseling service available to all students. You can reserve virtual sessions with counselors at no cost.
<https://www.hr.vt.edu/benefits/optional-benefits/mental-wellness/timelycare.html>
- VT has a Family Therapy Center that charges a \$15 flat fee for sessions.
<https://familytherapy.vt.edu/ftc/>
- Hokie Wellness provides programs that help students improve their wellbeing.
<https://hokiewellness.vt.edu/students.html>

Graduate Honor System

- Graduate students can serve as panelists in honor code cases. This can be a good way to learn about the honor code and academic integrity.
- <https://graduateschool.vt.edu/academics/expectations/graduate-honor-system.html>

Networking

- Networking is essential.
- Conferences are political spaces.
- Informal conversations matter.
- Reputation forms early.
- Visibility affects opportunity.
- Talk to people you have read at conferences or ask someone to introduce you to them.
- The career fairs are helpful.

- Try to get an internship at an early point in your program so that at graduation you have a job already.
- Have your advisor or other faculty in your department introduce you to influential people in your field. Try to reach out and form partnerships with people whose work you are interested in.
- Don't be afraid to ask for recommendations.
- Be excited about your research. You will be asked about it a million times, but people will remember more if you are enthusiastic when you discuss it.

Imposter Syndrome/Feelings of Inadequacy

- Imposter feelings are common.
- Comparison reinforces doubt.
- Belonging is questioned.
- Success often feels accidental.
- Accept compliments. Don't belittle your work or shake it off. You put in the effort and you deserve the recognition.
- Sharing your feelings with trusted friends, mentors, or colleagues can be incredibly helpful. You might find that they have had similar experiences and can offer support or advice. Having a mentor who understands your journey can provide invaluable guidance and reassurance.
- Having a hobby or interest in addition to academic life can provide a sense of achievement and worth that's separate from your academic identity.
- Make sure to celebrate every milestone, no matter how small it may seem. Were you able to finally send that email? Go buy yourself your favorite drink or pastry. Did you submit your paper for publication? Go on that trip you've been putting off or take some time off for hobbies or visits with friends.

Commencement

<https://graduateschool.vt.edu/academics/what-you-need-to-graduate/commencement.html>

- Deadlines are strict.
- Participation is optional.
- Paperwork errors delay graduation.
- Hotels fill up very quickly for commencement, so if you have out of town guests, make sure they book at least 6 months in advance.
- Your diploma will be sent to you by mail.
- GPSS has a gown/robe lending program.

Campuses

- Campus resources vary.
- Policies differ by location.
- Support access is inconsistent.
- Can be easy to get lost—Google Maps walking directions help.