



General Info for ESGS PhD Forms and Policy

Terminology:

GGG: The Geography and Geoinformation Science Department, GGS office, GGS Graduate Coordinator, or Department Chair;

COS: College of Science, COS Graduate Office, COS Graduate Director, or relevant Deans;

Mason: George Mason University and the relevant parties at the university level.

Notes:

1. If there is any inconsistency in these guidelines vs. Mason/COS policies, the university/college policy should supersede the GGS policy. The [Mason Catalog](#) is the final standard for all policies. (AP.6.10).
2. Links provided here are for your information only. Due to website edits by Mason/COS administrators, GGS cannot guarantee all links are valid. If a link is invalid, please use the information provided to search for the correct links yourself. Most university forms are available at the [Registrar's website](#).

Timelines:

Based on Mason policy, there are two major milestones that a PhD student must successfully meet in order to graduate. Those are:

1. Advancing to Candidacy
2. Successfully defending a dissertation

A student has six years from the time of the first enrollment in the ESGS PhD program to Advance to Candidacy. This means:

1. Completing all coursework (except GGS 999)
2. Passing a comprehensive exam
3. Successfully defending a dissertation proposal

Students have a total of nine years from the time of the first enrollment in the ESGS PhD program to graduate.

These specific two milestones are outlined in [AP.6.10.1](#).

Once a student's "clock" starts, it does not stop, even if they are not actively taking classes.

In certain circumstances, a student may request time extensions beyond the 6-year or 9-year time limit. Students should check the [Mason website](#) for details.

Forms

There are several GGS and Mason forms required to record a student's progress and to collect information for the ESGS program assessment. The five GGS forms and one Mason form are discussed below. All forms can be found on the [GGG website](#).

Detailed guidance on each form is given below.

◇ **GGG ESGS Form SW – Program of Study:**

- This form is a guide for students to plan their course work and schedule. Students are responsible for updating and ultimately completing this form. Once completed, the finalized form should be submitted with the Mason "Doctoral Advancement to Candidacy and Non-Course Requirements" form for advancing to PhD candidate.
- Students should use this form as a guidance and should begin to fill out the Program of Study form during their first semester in consultation with their advisor and/or the Graduate Coordinator. The Program of Study lists out the courses a student is considering taking to complete their degree. It should include ALL courses, even those taken at other institutions by filing the Graduate Transfer of Credit (GTC) forms.
 - **Graduate Transfer of Credit:** According to Mason catalog [AP.6.5.2](#), one can transfer certain credits from other institutions. We strongly suggest students read the [catalog](#) for details. In summary, the transferred credits must be graduate credits earned within “within ten years prior to first enrollment as an admitted student in the specific certificate or degree program” with a B- or better grade. “The number of transferred credits earned at another institution cannot exceed one credit less than half of the maximum number of credits required by the doctoral or master’s degree or certificate program.” In our interpretation, that means you can transfer up to 35 credits to the ESGS PhD program. Please note that one should do within two years from admission to the ESGS program.
 - If you transfer your Mason credits to the ESGS program, no form or action is needed.
 - To transfer credits from another institution, one should file the Transfer of Credit form to the GGS department. Please visit <https://registrar.gmu.edu/forms/> and search for “[Transfer of Credit \(Graduate\)](#)” to find the current form. From there, detailed directions are provided. The current ESGS Program Representative is Ruixin Yang at ryang@gmu.edu.
 - Based on the Mason Catalog, [AP.6.5.2 Transfer of Credit](#), students should provide corresponding transcripts with the Transfer of Credit. The department may check your student file for the transcripts. If the required transcript is not on file, you will be asked to provide one. If the course contents are not clear based on the course title for any course, you may be asked for course description. Please note that most forms require multiple levels of approval. After the GTC form is approved by the GGS Graduate Coordinator, the form is then sent to COS Graduate Director and the University Registrar. This process can often take months. During this time, the student is responsible for checking their academic status via Patriot Web. Please send any inquiries to enoyes@gmu.edu. The GGS Graduate Coordinator is not notified of decisions by COS or the Registrar, and cannot make inquiries on a student’s behalf.

- If a student plans to use course credits earned at an institution that uses a quarter system, the previous credits earned will be factored by 2/3, or, one credit earned is equivalent to 0.6667 (2/3) Mason credits. For other calculations, please check: [https://support.ptk.org/hc/en-us/articles/115001941473-
Converting-Quarter-Hours-to-Semester-Hours](https://support.ptk.org/hc/en-us/articles/115001941473-Converting-Quarter-Hours-to-Semester-Hours).
- Special notes for GGS 998/999:
 - Please note that CRNs for GGS 998 and 999 are assigned to all GGS faculty serving as dissertation committee chairs. Students should email enoyes@gmu.edu for the CRNs.
 - Based on Mason policy, no more than 24 credits are allowed for 998 and 999 together. GGS requires at least 12 credits of 998-999, with at least six of those credits in 999. Therefore, one should carefully plan their GGS 998 coursework because no more than 18 credits of GGS 998 will be counted toward the ESGS degree. The 998 and 999 credits listed on the Program of Study form should satisfy those rules.
 - For each session, a student can take 1 to 12 credits of 998 or 999. However, based on Mason policy, the first 999 course after advancing to candidacy must be at least 3 credits. A special note on the course registration system: If you cannot register with the desired number of credits, please go to the *Schedule and Options* tab. Then, under the *Hours* column, you should be able to click the number of hours and type in the desired number.
 - GGS 998/999 will be graded as “IP” (In Progress) until you have passed your dissertation proposal or successfully defended your dissertation. In the final semester, GGS 998/999 should be graded as “S” (Satisfactory). Please remind your advisor about grading individual 998/999 sections each semester.
- A student should finalize this (**Program of Study**) form after their dissertation proposal is approved by the dissertation committee and submit it as supporting materials for the advancement package. The final form should include **ALL 72** credits needed, those taken at GMU, any credits from the Transfer of Credit, and the planned GGS 999 credits.
- Please make sure all of the information on the form is correct except for the number of credits of 999 (sometimes, 998, too). Any inconsistency with your actual course work in this form may delay the processing time for your advancement or graduation.
- ◇ **GGG ESGS Form 1** – Dissertation Committee Formation: This form should be done as early as possible, as it must be fully approved prior to any committee activities such as organizing the comprehensive exam and proposal approval. The committee will be chaired by a GGS tenure or tenure-track professor and must be composed of at least four members including the committee chair. GGS full-time faculty should comprise at least 50% of the committee membership. At least one member should be a full-time faculty member from another Mason department or program outside of GGS (the external member). All members of the committee must be Mason Graduate Faculty and approved by the department chair.

If needed, you may have one committee member from outside GMU. Based on University policy, all committee members must be Mason Graduate Faculty, and a nominating and approval procedure should be followed to make it possible. The minimum requirements include a PhD degree. You should discuss with your [potential] committee chair on your intention to include a non-Mason member on your committee, as only GGS faculty can initialize the nomination process.

If you make any change to your committee, a revised form must be completed and filed to make the change effective.

If any committee member leaves the University or retires, as long as the Mason graduate faculty status is valid, the member can continue serving in the committee. The exception is the committee chair. Based on Mason policy, your advisor (the committee chair) must be Mason full-time (GGG tenured or tenure-track based on GGS policy) faculty. Therefore, a new chair must be appointed. The previous chair could serve as co-chair if the status is held.

- ◇ **GGG ESGS Form 2-** Results of Comprehensive Examination: This form records the results of the student's comprehensive exam. The committee chair should record the exam date, result, and rating.

The ESGS PhD Comprehensive Exam is administrated by the dissertation committee. The common style is that each committee member will give 2-4 questions with individual policy (time allocation, open/close book policy, etc.). The most common time allocation for the exam is one weekend or one (or two) week(s) for an exam that includes a mini-project. The committee is fully responsible for organizing the exam, including determining the exam contents (areas), style, and time.

- Students are encouraged to discuss the exam date, the style and scope of the questions, the number of questions, the exam duration, etc. with the committee chair and other committee members. The exam must be administrated by a committee member, usually the committee chair. Therefore, the committee chair will notify the committee about the exam date, collect questions, distribute the questions to the student, collect the answers, and organize the grading. The suggested grading scales are Pass, Conditional Pass, or Not Pass. If Conditional Pass, the condition should be listed in the form. For the ESGS program assessment purpose, a rating on the overall quality of the exam is needed if a student passes the exam. It is suggested that individual grading is also based on the rating such as Pass/Superior, Pass/Good, or Pass/Fair.

Before the exam, the dissertation committee should be approved by both GGS and COS (Form 1 signed by both levels).

A student is allowed to repeat the exam only once. After the first "Not Pass" grade, the committee must organize a new exam.

- ◇ **GGG ESGS Form 3** – Defense of Dissertation Proposal: This is the final step before advancing to candidacy. A student must get their proposal approved by the full committee.

A student must pass their comprehensive exam, before the dissertation committee will approve a proposal.

- ◇ **Mason Form: “Doctoral Advancement to Candidacy and Non-Course Requirements”**
 - GGS uses the Mason [Doctoral Advancement to Candidacy and Non-course Requirements](#) form to certify that all coursework and candidacy requirements have been successfully met. This form is actually the cover page of an advancement packet. A copy of the Reduction of Credits (or Credit Transfer), ESGS Forms SW (the almost final Program of Study), 2 and 3 and other supporting materials.
 - The deadlines for the package to COS are November 15th to advance in a spring semester, April 1st to advance in summer and June 1st to advance in the fall semester. If for any reason you expect that you cannot complete all requirements in six years minus one semester, please consider the [time extension request](#).
 - Please check your record via Patriot Web for the result, because we (including you) will not be notified of the progress of your submission.

- ◇ **GGG ESGS Form 4 – Defense of Doctoral Dissertation:** This is the final form needed for a doctoral student at GGS. This form asserts that the student has successfully defended their dissertation in front of their committee and the public. For the ESGS program assessment purpose, a rating (Superior, Good, or Fair) on the overall quality of the dissertation research is needed.

A dissertation defense should be announced (via GGS and/or COS) two weeks (recommended) before the event. The announcement should include: dissertation title, your name, target degree (PhD, Earth Systems and Geoinformation Sciences), date, time and location. If you need help reserving a location, please work with ggs@gmu.edu. If you want the defense to be available via Zoom, please provide the link and meeting ID/password. The announcement should also include a list of the committee members and Chair (and/or dissertation director), and the abstract.

Before an announcement, a student must pass a pre-defense.

The format of a dissertation must be approved by the University and submitted before the University deadlines. The deadline for final submission to the library (the last step for a thesis or dissertation) is set by the University. The dates usually are the first Friday of December (for fall semester), May (spring), and August (summer). The format checking deadlines usually are one week before the submission deadlines.

Please check the library’s [University Dissertation Resources page](#) for guideline on format and deadlines, and other information. The current deadlines are usually posted near the bottom of that page under “Academic Calendar.”

Please note that a student must apply for graduation early in the semester in which they plan to graduate. Therefore, if you plan to defend your dissertation in a specific semester, you should follow the University guidelines and deadline to apply. Details including the timeline and graduation process can be found on the [Registrar’s website](#).