# BIOMOLECULAR SCIENCE GATEWAY Ph.D. STUDENT HANDBOOK 2026 - 2027

BIOMOLECULAR SCIENCE

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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# 1. Program Overview

## 1.1. Mission Statement

Michigan State University's (MSU) BioMolecular Science (BMS) Gateway's mission is to recruit and retain a diverse pool of creative and motivated individuals for its dynamic biological sciences research community.

## 1.2. Overview

The BioMolecular Science Gateway (BMS) offers admission to six graduate programs:
Biochemistry and Molecular Biology; Cell and Molecular Biology; Genetics and Genome Sciences; Microbiology, Genetics and Immunology; Pharmacology and Toxicology; and Molecular, Cellular, and Integrative Physiology. Students have access to training in over 200 research laboratories with various research areas including, but not limited to, cancer, computational biology, developmental and reproductive biology, drug discovery, ecology and evolution, environmental toxicology, gene expression, host-pathogen interactions, immunology, metabolism and synthetic biology, molecular basis of disease, molecular biophysics and enzymology, neurophysiology, and plant biology/pathology. MSU has multiple state of the art facilities, including NMR, mass spectrometry, genomics and transcriptomics, proteomics, cell sorting, electron and cryo-electron microscopy, and transgenic and genome editing.

The major objectives of the BMS-affiliated graduate programs are to help students develop their creative potential and to prepare them for a variety of science-related careers. Individual programs of study are designed to develop independent thinking, broaden scientific knowledge, and hone technical and professional skills through formal and informal courses, laboratory experiences, seminars, individual study, and, foremost, through original research that forms the basis for the student's dissertation.

During their first semester, students rotate through up to three laboratories of potential Ph.D. mentors and take two courses that contribute to fulfilling the requirements of their disciplinary interests. Additionally, students attend a weekly professional development forum during the fall semester. At the end of the fall semester, students select the Ph.D. program that aligns most closely with their educational goals.

The Ph.D. is the terminal degree for professional scientists who seek to design, execute, and direct independent research projects. The heart of the Ph.D. training program is an original and creative research project that moves the field forward and forms the basis of the doctoral dissertation. The specific course of study is decided in consultation initially with the student's thesis research mentor and later honed with a Guidance Committee composed of faculty members and chaired by the thesis advisor.

Students also have the option to complete joint degrees with affiliated academic departments or interdepartmental programs such as the Molecular Plant Science Program, the Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior Program, and the Environmental and Integrated Toxicological Science Program. Students with a particular interest in college-level teaching can earn a Certificate in College Teaching (CCT). Information can be found on the graduate school's website here: https://grad.msu.edu/CCTP.

All BMS graduate students receive financial support throughout their studies. First year BMS students

are supported by graduate research assistantships or fellowships for their rotations during the first semester. The research mentor primarily provides support in subsequent years. Stipends are set annually and are competitive with those offered by departments and other programs at MSU, as well as with those at other prominent universities in the USA. In addition, all graduate assistants receive up to nine credits of tuition waiver for each fall and spring semester (six credits are full-time for doctoral students), five credits for the summer semester, and paid health insurance.

### 1.3 Dual Degree programs and majors

*Dual Major Doctoral Degree*

A dual major program is a single graduate program of study that simultaneously satisfies the requirements of two graduate departments or programs. Students earn a single degree. The Dean of the Graduate School must approve all dual major doctoral degrees. A request for the dual major degree must be submitted via GradPlan within one semester following its development and within the first two years of the student's enrollment at MSU.

*Dual Degree Doctoral Program*

A dual degree doctoral program is a program in which students complete two separate degrees. The most common dual degree programs are the M.D.-Ph.D. and the D.O.-Ph.D. programs. Students have to be admitted into the dual degree program to complete it. They cannot be admitted into the Ph.D. and M.D. or D.O. programs separately.

### 1.4. People to Contact for Information

**BioMolecular Science Gateway**

John LaPres, BMS Graduate Director (Academic Advising)
lapres@msu.edu
224 Biochemistry

Claire Vieille, BMS Associate Director (Academic Advising)
vieille@msu.edu
6172 Biomedical Physical Science

Laurisa Ankley, Director of Graduate Student Success (Rotation Advising)
ankleyla@msu.edu
4174 Biomedical Physical Science

Jennifer Miller, Education Program Coordinator
jmiller@msu.edu
2165 Biomedical Physical Science

**Graduate Recruitment Initiative Team**

Brigette Berke (Director) berkebri@msu.edu

### 1.5. Contacts for Each BMS Program

*Biochemistry and Molecular Biology*
Dr. Erik Martinez Hackert emh@msu.edu
Jessica Lawrence jesslaw@msu.edu

*Cell and Molecular Biology*
Dr. Peggy Petroff petrof10@msu.edu
Alaina Mannie mannieal@msu.edu

*Genetics and Genome Sciences*
Dr. Claire Vieille vieille@msu.edu
Alaina Mannie mannieal@msu.edu

*Microbiology, Genetics, and Immunology*
Dr. Sean Crosson crosson4@msu.edu
Amber Bedore bedoream@msu.edu

*Molecular, Cellular, and Integrative Physiology*
Dr. Gina Leinninger leinning@msu.edu
Bradley Robinson robin454@msu.edu

*Pharmacology and Toxicology*
Dr. Jamie Bernard jbernard@msu.edu
Meagan Kroll krollm@msu.edu

## 2. BMS Program Requirements

Students must meet the course and program requirements specified below:

1. Participation in the BMS Orientation and Retreat.
2. Participation in up to three 5-week laboratory rotations to facilitate selection of a thesis advisor
3. Participation in a weekly professional development series (BMS 800) during the first semester of the first year
4. Follow the course requirements outlined by each major doctoral program that your major requires in the Academic Program Catalog
    - Biochemistry and Molecular Biology - Doctor of Philosophy
    - Cell and Molecular Biology – Doctor of Philosophy
    - Genetics and Genome Sciences – Doctor of Philosophy
    - Microbiology, Genetics and Immunology – Doctor of Philosophy
    - Molecular, Cellular and integrative Physiology – Doctor of Philosophy
    - Pharmacology and Toxicology – Doctor of Philosophy

# 3. Program Policies

## 3.1. Financial Support

All students accepted into the BMS Gateway receive financial support in the form of a fellowship or a graduate assistantship while performing their rotations. This support includes a stipend, graduate student health insurance, and a tuition waiver. The minimum stipend rates for research and teaching assistants can be found here: https://hr.msu.edu/employment/graduate-assistants/stipend-ranges.html.

Thereafter, graduate assistantships are typically funded from research grants or other available sources to the student's major professor(s). BMS students should discuss future funding with potential mentors during the lab selection process.

It is the student's responsibility to closely monitor their student account and employment records to ensure that there are no issues with their financial support. If the student is overpaid, it is the student's responsibility to notify the departmental or programmatic administration. In most cases, the student will be required to return the full overpayment amount.

*2026-2027*

For August 16, 2026, to August 15, 2027, BMS Research Assistants and Teaching Assistants will receive an annual stipend of $38,047.81.

## 3.2. Work Hours

Students should be actively engaged in coursework, research, literature reviews, or some other phase of the doctoral program, even during semester breaks. All students, regardless of the type of financial support they receive, are viewed by the Department as accepting a responsibility equivalent to that of a half-time graduate assistant. It should be noted, however, that working towards a Ph.D. is a full-time effort that requires a mixture of graduate assistant duties and substantial academic effort. The amount of work a student performs in the lab should be determined through a discussion between the student and their rotation/PhD advisor.

A graduate assistant is entitled to University staff holidays designated in the University calendar and vacation time as settled with the rotation period advisor or BMS Graduate Director. Between-semester periods and Spring break are not considered holidays. Any absence from the University, except those authorized for scientific meetings, etc., must be approved.

## 3.3. Illness/injury/pregnancy leave

A graduate assistant unable to fulfill the duties of their appointment because of illness, injury, or pregnancy shall notify the BMS Director or Associate Director as soon as circumstances permit.

During illness, injury, or pregnancy, the BMS Director, in consultation with the rotation mentor, shall adjust (reduce, waive, or reschedule) the graduate assistant's duties as those duties and the assistant's physical circumstances reasonably dictate. If total absence from duties becomes necessary, the BMS shall maintain the stipend of the appointment, provided the graduate assistant is still enrolled, for two months, or to the end of the appointment period or of the semester, whichever should occur first.

The graduate assistant shall have the right to return to the assistantship, within the original terms of the appointment, at such time as they can reassume the duties of the position.

### 3.4. Academic Files

Students have the right to review their academic file (except confidential admissions recommendation letters) upon request and challenge the accuracy of its contents by writing a rebuttal that becomes part of their file.

### 3.5. Academic Performance

The BMS program accepts only those students who are believed to have the potential to complete the degree program. Depending on the program of choice, students are expected to earn grades of 3.0 or above (out of 4.0) in all their required courses or maintain an average GPA of equal to or greater than 3.0. Students receiving a grade of 2.5 or lower in a required course are expected to retake that course or an equivalent course.

Should a student be unable to find a lab or fail a class, actions including repeating a class, performing an additional rotation, dismissal, or a leave of absence may be implemented at the discretion of the BMS Director, in consultation with BMS faculty.

### 3.6. Rights, Responsibilities, and Ethical Standards

The Spartan Code of Honor Academic Pledge:
***"As a Spartan, I will strive to uphold values of the highest ethical standard. I will practice honesty in my work, foster honesty in my peers, and take pride in knowing that honor in ownership is worth more than grades. I will carry these values beyond my time as a student at Michigan State University, continuing the endeavor to build personal integrity in all that I do."***

All graduate students are bound by the general Student Rights and Responsibilities (SRR). The Graduate Student Rights and Responsibilities (GSRR) documents outline the rights and responsibilities of MSU graduate students and establish procedures for resolving allegations of violations through formal grievance hearings. Under the SRR and the GSRR, the BMS will adhere to the procedure set forth by the MSU Ombudsperson to address academic grievances.

Graduate students in the BMS are expected to adhere to the ethical standards outlined in University regulations (www.grad.msu.edu/researchintegrity/) and those conventionally used in the conduct of scientific research.

### 3.7. Responsible and Ethical Conduct of Research (RECR)

The Graduate School's RECR education program consists of two parts:

1. Basic or foundational education (Year one and Two for all Ph.D. students)
2. Annual refresher education (Years Three and beyond, for Ph.D. students only)

<table>
<tr><th>Year 1</th><th>Year 2</th><th>Year 3 forward</th></tr>
<tr><td>Complete four required CITI online modules<br>• Introduction to the Responsible Conduct of Research<br>• Authorship<br>• Plagiarism<br>• Research Misconduct</td><td>Complete three CITI online modules selected from this list<br>• Collaborative Research<br>• Conflicts of Interest<br>• Data Management<br>• Financial Responsibility<br>• Mentoring<br>• Peer Review</td><td rowspan="2">Three hours per year of annual refresher training<br>• Training activities may be selected to coincide with activities pursued by the faculty advisor's laboratory<br>• Activities may include:<br>o Graduate School Workshop<br>o Online Module<br>o Workshop/Forum<br>o Seminar<br>o Lab Meeting<br>o One-on-One Discussion</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">By the end of year 2, have completed 6 hours of discussion-based training</td></tr>
</table>

Additional RECR training may be required by certain departments. Graduate students should work closely with their department regarding RECR education requirements before seeking assistance from the Graduate School.

### 3.8. Admission

The BMS admissions process attempts to select those applicants with the most promise for superior achievement and does not establish minimum cut-off values on any indices. The following standards serve as a general guideline only. The successful applicant will typically have:

- Equivalent to a four-year bachelor's degree that includes coursework demonstrating proficiency in math and science. (The intermediate completion of a master's degree is not required.)
- An undergraduate GPA of 3.5
- Research experience
- Strong letters of reference that include an evaluation of the applicant's research experience.
- Demonstration of attributes that might positively impact their chance of success, such as leadership, creativity, resilience, commitment to diversity, and community outreach.

To apply to the BMS program: Submit an MSU online application form, which can be obtained through the MSU Graduate School website at https://admissions.msu.edu/apply/graduate-students

1. The application requires an **academic statement**. This statement should discuss your motivations for pursuing a graduate degree and your experiences that are pertinent to the discipline, such as undergraduate research, publications, and workshops you have completed.

2. The application also provides space for a **personal statement**. You may discuss elements of your history that demonstrate leadership potential, your potential contribution to a diverse educational community, and your record of overcoming obstacles. If preferred, these two statements may be combined into a single academic statement.

3. Three letters of recommendation from individuals who can attest to your academic and/or research experience. The MSU online application portal enables applicants to submit the names and email addresses of faculty whom they would like to provide letters of recommendation on their behalf. The system automatically notifies the recommenders of their request and instructs them on the procedure to submit the letters electronically. Alternatively, the recommenders may send letters directly to the BMS office via email to bmsgrad@msu.edu.

4. The MSU Office of Admissions requires official transcripts from **all** undergraduate institutions. Applicants with a Master's degree should submit their Master's transcripts as part of their application materials as well. While unofficial transcripts may be used for the review process, official transcripts are necessary before accepting any offer of admission. International students must follow the procedure outlined for English Language Competency set by the Graduate School here: https://grad.msu.edu/english-language-competency

5. Application materials should be received by **December 1** for full consideration for admission and funding opportunities for the following fall.

6. Graduate students usually begin their graduate studies in late August (Fall semester). Students admitted for the Fall semester may elect to "start early" by completing their first rotation during the preceding summer. This option requires approval from the BMS director and is not available to international students. Early start students are not provided health insurance by the BMS but are able to purchase insurance here: LINK.

### 3.9 Evaluation of Progress of First-Year Students

It is in the interest of the students and of the BMS gateway to evaluate progress throughout the first year of graduate school. Following the completion of each rotation, evaluation forms will be used to monitor a student's progress in developing research skills and finding a research advisor. It is essential that every rotation advisor completes these forms and that the feedback is shared with both the student and the BMS administration.

Students are expected to find their rotation mentors. The BMS cannot place students who fail to find a rotation into a lab, but the BMS administration will guide them to faculty members who are seeking students. It is important to remember that rotations are meant to expose students to interdisciplinary science. Therefore, a student may have to compromise on their primary research interests to find a lab in which to rotate. No lapses exist between rotation periods. If there is a lapse of more than one week between rotations, a written notice of probation will be issued to the student, informing them that they have one additional week to begin a rotation before their financial appointment will be suspended. If a student fails to find a rotation during that week, the BMS will provide a notice of grounds for dismissal from the graduate program immediately or at the end of the academic semester, depending on the student's performance in their courses.

At the end of the first academic year, since most students will not have yet formed their research guidance committees, the Director of Graduate Programs for the students' chosen major will review their academic and research progress in consultation with the BMS director.

## 4. The Rotation System

A research rotation system allows students to complete up to three rotations during their first semester. Rotations are performed in the laboratory of up to three different faculty members. The purpose of rotations is twofold. First, rotations provide a means for students to work in a focused research area, become familiar with the primary objectives of a research area, and learn the methods used to probe research problems. The second purpose of the laboratory rotation is to identify a research mentor and to discuss and investigate potential thesis projects with that prospective mentor. Rotations provide an excellent opportunity for students to learn firsthand about the research activities of various laboratories. In turn, a rotation is an opportunity for faculty to observe and evaluate the research potential of rotation students and to interact on a personal level.

BMS students are expected to participate in three research rotations; however, they are not all required. If a student wants to join a lab after one or two rotations, they can discuss their decision with the BMS Director. During this meeting, the BMS Director will determine if the PI and student understand the financial ramifications of this decision.

Under exceptional circumstances, the BMS Director may approve or require a fourth rotation.

### 4.1. Rotation Selection

Over 200 faculty members are associated with the six BMS-affiliated units. However, not all faculty will have space or funding to accommodate rotation students every year. Faculty may accept two or three rotation students but typically have funding to support only one student in their lab. Students should be mindful of the likelihood of joining the lab when making their rotation selections.

In the week before beginning the Fall semester, incoming BMS students participate in an orientation program. During that week, principal investigators from the six units that make up the BMS present short talks on their work to familiarize students with the breadth of research performed by MSU researchers and to help them choose laboratories in which to rotate.

Students are encouraged to view BMS and departmental faculty web sites that describe research interests and recent publications. BMS students have additional opportunities to familiarize themselves with faculty at the BMS Fall Retreat. It is suggested that students read one or two recent publications written by a faculty member in whose laboratory they might wish to do a rotation and then meet with the faculty member and discuss the possibility of a laboratory rotation. The issue of funding should be discussed at that meeting. Do not hesitate to raise the issue if the faculty member does not address it.

The student may request assistance from the BMS Director or the Unit Graduate Programs Director in selecting a laboratory, particularly if difficulties in selecting a mentor are encountered.

Students must notify BMS administrators (no specific form needed) of their rotation selection at least one week before the beginning of the next rotation period. BMS students are limited to rotating with BMS faculty only. Students may select all three rotations at the beginning of the academic year or select appropriate laboratories for additional rotations as the academic year progresses.

### Henry Ford Health and the Grand Rapids Research and Secchia Centers

Students may elect to complete one or more of their rotations at Henry Ford Health in Detroit, the Grand Rapids Research Center, or at the Secchia Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Students are responsible for discussing hybrid class options with their professors. Students may apply for a Road Fellowship to help defray the cost of commuting.

### 4.2. Rotation Participation

Emphasis during the rotation period should be on 1) active participation and intellectual engagement in laboratory research, 2) gaining a working knowledge of the field, and 3) sufficient experimental and personal engagement that will facilitate a valid evaluation of the student's potential fit for the rotation laboratory. Students should plan on spending at least 20 hours per week on the rotation assignment. The specific activities in each rotation may vary among laboratories; these activities and expectations should be defined at the outset by the faculty members. These activities are likely to include reading background and project-specific scientific literature; design, execution, and analysis of experiments; discussion of research project opportunities; interactions with other lab members; and presentation of the rotation project effort at a lab group meeting.

### 4.3 Rotation Evaluation

Each faculty member with whom the student works during the rotation periods will continuously evaluate the student’s performance. The students should initiate frequent meetings with their rotation advisor during the rotation period to discuss their progress in the laboratory. At the end of each rotation period, the rotation faculty advisor will discuss the student’s performance, and an advisor’s evaluation will be discussed with the student. The evaluation will be maintained in the student's file.

Students are required to also complete an evaluation of their rotation faculty mentor at the end of each rotation period. This evaluation is not shared with the rotation advisor. It is reviewed only by the BMS staff and is used to help assess student-mentor fit and identify long-term trends across labs.

## 5. Selection of dissertation advisor

### 5.1 Initial Selection of Major Professor

The student’s major professor is determined only after the student has completed a rotation in the professor's lab. It must be understood that the selection of a dissertation research advisor by the student does not guarantee acceptance by the faculty member. Space and funding limitations, as well as differences in research attitude, are necessary factors that must be considered.

After a mutual agreement is reached between a student and a professor, the student must complete and submit the Permanent Lab Selection Form and Financial MOU to the BMS so that departmental approval and administrative records can be established.

## Rotation Schedule

| Rotation Selection Deadline | Rotation | Rotation Evaluations Due |
|---|---|---|
| 8/24/26 | Rotation I<br>8/31/26-10/02/26 | 10/09/26 |
| 9/28/26 | Rotation II<br>10/05/26-11/06/26 | 11/13/26 |
| 11/02/26 | Rotation III<br>11/9/26-12/11/26 | 12/18/26 |
| Permanent Lab Selection Form and MOU<br>12/21/26 | Permanent Lab<br>12/21/26 | |

**Summer Rotations**

Summer rotations dates are July 6th- August 7th. If you plan to complete a summer rotation you must notify the BMS team ASAP and indicate which lab you will be rotating with by June 29th.

**The summer rotation counts as one of your three rotations.**

**5.2 Eligible Faculty**

Regular faculty (those appointed under the rules of tenure with the rank of assistant, associate, or full professor) having an appointment in the BMS can accept a graduate student unless otherwise notified by their department chairperson. Review the Graduate School procedure to have Fixed-Term MSU Faculty, Academic Specialists, Support Staff, and Non-MSU individuals serve on graduate student committees.

### 5.3 The General Responsibilities of the Major Professor

1. Ensure that graduate students receive information about the requirements and policies of the graduate program.
2. Advise graduate students on developing a program plan, including appropriate coursework, research, or creative activity, and on available resources to complete their work.
3. Advise graduate students on the selection of a dissertation topic with realistic prospects for successful completion within an appropriate time frame and on the formation of a guidance committee.
4. Provide training and oversight to graduate students in creative activities, research rigor, theoretical, and technical aspects of the dissertation research.
5. Model professional integrity and ensure that their graduate students complete the Responsible and Ethical Conduct in Research (RECR) training.
6. Encourage graduate students to stay up to date on the literature and cutting-edge ideas in the field.
7. Help graduate students develop professional skills in writing reports, papers, and grant proposals, making professional presentations, establishing professional networks, interviewing, and evaluating manuscripts and papers.
8. Provide regular feedback on the progress of graduate students toward degree completion, including input on research or creative activities, coursework, and teaching, and constructive criticism if progress does not meet expectations.
9. Help graduate students develop into successful professionals and colleagues, including encouraging students to participate in and disseminate results of research or creative activities through the appropriate scholarly or public forums.
10. Support students in the creation of a professional development plan that considers their goals and interests, and prepares them for their future career, and review this plan with the student at least semi-annually. Encourage students to interact with other professionals outside their area of expertise and to participate in appropriate professional development activities.
11. Facilitate career development, including advising graduate students on appropriate job and career options, as well as on the preparation of application materials for appropriate fellowship, scholarship, and other relevant opportunities.
12. Write letters of reference for appropriate fellowship, scholarship, award, and job opportunities.
13. Provide for supervision and advising of graduate students when the major professor is on leave or extended absence.

### 5.4 Major Professor Leaves MSU

If the major professor leaves MSU before a student completes the requirements for their degree, the department chair, graduate program director, major professor, and student will meet before the faculty member leaves. The purpose of the meeting is to ensure that the student will have the guidance and financial resources necessary to complete the degree. While each situation is unique, a possible scenario is that one of the guidance committee members assumes the role of research advisor, with the graduate program director or another faculty member joining the committee to ensure that the minimum requirement of committee members is met. It is expected that departing faculty members will leave sufficient funds to support the student as they complete their studies or will transfer the student to someone who has the funds to do so. If the departing faculty member does not have sufficient funds to complete the student, the department will assume those costs.

### 5.5 Conflict with Major Professor

If a graduate student and faculty mentor are having difficulties working with one another, the graduate program director and/or department chair should be notified. Both the graduate program director and department chair will strive to resolve the conflict because leaving a major professor who is solely responsible for the student's financial support has profound implications for both the student and the faculty member. If a resolution is not possible, the graduate program director, department chair, and student will attempt to identify another faculty member willing to assume responsibility for the student. If the faculty mentor is the department chair or the graduate program director, the chair of the Department Advisory Committee (DAC) will assume the role of the department chair or graduate program director in helping to resolve conflicts.

## 6. University Resources

This section provides a list of university resources available to all graduate students.

### 6.1 University Level Resources

- MSU Academic Calendar
- Academic Programs Catalog
- Office for International Students and Scholars
- Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities
- Office of Spartan Experiences
- Michigan State University Libraries
- Olin Health Center for Students
- Institutional Diversity and Inclusion
- The Writing Center
- University Outreach and Engagement
- The Ombudsperson's Office
- MSU Council of Graduate Students
- MSU-GEU Contract
- Technology at MSU
- Campus Safety Information and Resources
- Student Parent Resource Center
- Gender and Sexuality Campus Center
- Student Veterans Resource Center
- Women's Student Services
- Anti-Discrimination Policy (ADP)
- Code of Teaching Responsibilities
- Disability and Reasonable Accommodation Policy
- Digital Accessibility Policy
- General Student Regulations
- Integrity of Scholarship & Grades
- MSU Guidelines for Graduate Student Mentoring and Advising
- Policy on Relationship Violence and Sexual Misconduct

### 6.2 Graduate School Resources

- Career Development
- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Programs
- Events and workshops via MSU Graduate School Calendar
- Graduate school forms
- Overview of graduate funding types and opportunities
- Graduate Educator Advancement and Teaching (GREAT)
- Graduate School Office of Wellbeing

- Mentoring
- Out-of-State Tuition Waivers
- General Graduate Student Policies and Procedures
- Professional Development
- Research Integrity
- Graduate Teaching Assistant Preparation Program
- Traveling Scholar opportunities
- University Committee on Graduate Studies

### 6.3 College of Natural Science Graduate Student Resources

- First-Year Student Toolkit
- Funding and Financial Support
- Professional Development