



School of Neuroscience

Graduate Student Handbook

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This handbook is to be used in conjunction with information provided by the [Virginia Tech Graduate School](#) and [Graduate Catalog](#). It is the responsibility of each student entering the graduate program to read and understand all policies and procedures in this handbook as well as those cited by the Graduate School. Any questions regarding this document or on the Graduate School website should be addressed to the graduate program director or graduate program coordinator. Additional information can be found on our website <https://neuroscience.vt.edu/graduate.html>

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Virginia Tech Principles of Community

Our departmental expectations of civility, inclusion, and respect are embedded and reaffirmed by Virginia Tech's Principles of Community:

Virginia Tech is a public land-grant university, committed to teaching and learning, research, and outreach to the Commonwealth of Virginia, the nation, and the world community. Learning from the experiences that shape Virginia Tech as an institution, we acknowledge those aspects of our legacy that reflected bias and exclusion. Therefore, we adopt and practice the following principles as fundamental to our on-going efforts to increase access and inclusion and to create a community that nurtures learning and growth for all of its members:

- We affirm the inherent dignity and value of every person and strive to maintain a climate for work and learning based on mutual respect and understanding.
- We affirm the right of each person to express thoughts and opinions freely. We encourage open expression within a climate of civility, sensitivity, and mutual respect.
- We affirm the value of human diversity because it enriches our lives and the University. We acknowledge and respect our differences while affirming our common humanity.
- We reject all forms of prejudice and discrimination, including those based on age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, and veteran status. We take individual and collective responsibility for helping to eliminate bias and discrimination and for increasing our own understanding of these issues through education, training, and interaction with others. We pledge our collective commitment to these principles in the spirit of the Virginia Tech motto of *Ut Prosim* (That I May Serve).

Section I. Coursework: Year 1 and Beyond:

1. Graduate Student Orientation

New graduate students receive a welcome letter from the School of Neuroscience that indicates when they should arrive on campus and a list of important dates for orientation and expectations that first week on campus. These include the dates for the Graduate School and School Orientation, the GTA workshop, and events which enable incoming students to organize fall research rotations (NEUR 5374). All students are expected to attend each of these events which are held the week before classes begin (typically mid-August).

During orientation, students will be introduced to the Director of the School of Neuroscience, the Graduate Program Director and Graduate Program Coordinator and School of Neuroscience Human Resources Manager. Presentations will be given by the Graduate Ombudsperson, and a representative from the Office of Inclusion and Diversity. Additionally, students will be informed about the expectations, duties and responsibilities of graduate students, teaching assistants, laboratory safety, the Graduate Honor System, and the Neuroscience Graduate and Post-Doctoral Association (NGPA).

All students must participate in the Graduate Teaching Assistantship (GTA) Workshop (Grad 5004) offered by the Graduate School. The GTA workshop consists of a one-day course the week before classes start in the fall and additional online requirements throughout the first semester. This workshop is designed to provide recommendations and advice from dedicated faculty, staff, and experienced graduate students and to assist students in developing the knowledge base and skills needed to serve as faculty members. Topics covered include but are not limited to: Family Education Rights and Privacy (FERPA), computer security, services for students with disabilities, diversity and inclusion, threat assessment, and the honor system. The workshop is not taken for credit toward the proposed degree program but is evaluated by the Graduate School as pass/fail. If a student fails the workshop, the student will remediate with their advisor and can retake as many times as needed to pass. The workshop can be used toward the Future Professoriate Certificate for students with an interest in becoming university faculty members.

*note: not all graduate students will serve as GTA's. The purpose of this course is so that at any time should you and your mentor decide that you will serve as a GTA, you have the appropriate training to serve in a classroom with undergraduate students.

2. Our Curriculum

The Ph.D. in Neuroscience degree program requires 96 credit hours beyond the bachelor's degree. Successful completion of a dissertation is required.

The curriculum provides a solid, educational foundation regarding neurological function across the lifespan and the issues related to neurological disease. Coursework will educate students in nerve cell structure and chemical signaling and teach students to evaluate nervous system circuits and networks and overall neurological system functioning. Courses in neuroanatomy, brain region function and malfunction, and statistics will allow students to apply their knowledge and skills to discover and contribute to knowledge of neurological function in health and disease. Through required research and course requirements, students will learn to conduct research using the most current relevant and state of the art approaches.

3. The First Semester:

A. Coursework

Students that enter directly into the Neuroscience PhD program will automatically be registered for first semester coursework and laboratory research experience (rotations). A grade of 'B-' or better is considered a passing grade for core and required graded coursework. The program will allow a grade of 'C' in a single course, if the overall GPA is > 3.2. Remediation for a failing grade and resources for students requiring additional help in their core coursework is discussed below. Failure of two or more courses (grade 'B-' or below) is cause for dismissal from the program.

It is expected that students will participate in class and to class discussion daily. A grade of 'B-' or better is considered a passing grade and is required in all core coursework. Remediation for a failing grade and resources for students requiring additional help in their core coursework is discussed below. Failure of two or more courses is cause for dismissal from the program.

B. Laboratory Rotations

During the first semester, students will undertake two laboratory rotations in addition to their coursework. These two rotations are structured into the curriculum via a two-credit, NEUR 5374: Research Experience in Neuroscience course. School of Neuroscience faculty members will serve as faculty advisors in the individual laboratory rotations to provide the guidance, supervision, and evaluation of student performance.

The goal of these laboratory rotations is to provide students with the opportunity to experience and contribute to different research topics and environments in a supervised setting. The laboratory rotations serve two purposes: 1) to aid students in their selection of a research advisor, and 2) provide students with the opportunity to gain conceptual and technical skills in the laboratory. Students will learn about and demonstrate the basics of experimental design and hypothesis testing in a laboratory setting. Students are expected to gain competence in one or more technical research approaches and the appropriate data analysis and relevant literature searches for that approach. Students will also be trained in regulatory policies regarding human research subjects, live vertebrate animal subjects in research, and safe laboratory practices. Upon completion of each laboratory rotation, students are required to give a formal presentation structured around their experience in the laboratory rotation. The presentation should demonstrate the student's ability to communicate effectively to a broad neuroscience audience, including sufficient detail in the scientific method, logical organization of results, and conclusions of the research as well as potential pathways for future directions. Student presentations are graded by the faculty advisor for that individual rotation using a faculty-developed rubric specific to the research laboratory in which the rotation occurred.

In the circumstance a student is unable to identify a research dissertation advisor and dissertation laboratory within the first two research rotations, they will be given the opportunity to repeat NEUR

5374 in the spring semester. A student that fails to identify a research dissertation advisor and dissertation laboratory by the end of the fourth rotation will be dismissed from the program. If a student fails one individual laboratory rotation but passes the other individual laboratory rotation, they are assigned the grade of "Incomplete" for the NEUR 5374: Research Experience in Neuroscience course and given the opportunity to complete a single laboratory rotation the next semester in the same or different laboratory. If the student fails the subsequent individual laboratory rotation, they will be dismissed from the program. If the student passes the subsequent laboratory rotation, their grade will be updated to the earned letter grade for the laboratory rotations course. If a student fails both individual laboratory rotations in the NEUR 5374: Research Experience in Neuroscience course, the student will be dismissed from the program.

Core Courses

NEUR 5004: Principles in Neuroscience (3 credits)

NEUR 5014: Fundamentals of Cellular Neuroscience (3 credits)

NEUR 5024: Neuroanatomy and Systems Neuroscience (3 credits)

NEUR 5074: Current Topics in Neuroscience (1 credit- four times for a total of 4credits)

NEUR 5374: Research Experience in Neuroscience (2 credits)

STAT 5615: Statistics in Research (3 credit hours)

Total = 18 credit hours

4. The Second Semester and beyond

At the start of the second semester, students have selected a Research Dissertation Advisor. Planning of research or dissertation work begins and students will work with their Research Dissertation Advisor to develop a list of appropriate courses to complete the Plan of Study (*a representative example of the Plan of Study can be found on our Canvas site*). In addition to the CORE courses list above, each student is required to register for an additional six credit hours of restricted neuroscience electives as well as six credits hours of free electives. Each of these courses must be taken for a letter grade. Regardless of the restricted and free electives chosen, each student must be registered for a total of 12 credits each semester. Students can register for NEUR 7994 Research and Dissertation to get to achieve 12 credits each semester. **Note that once free and restricted electives are completed, each student will have a minimum of 30 graded credit hours on their Plan of Study.**

Current approved restricted electives include the following courses. Please check with the Program Director and Program Coordinator to determine when each of the following courses are offered.

Current List of Restricted Electives

NEUR 5034G: Advanced Diseases of the Nervous System (3 credits)

NEUR 5054: Developmental Neuroscience (3 credits)

NEUR 5064: Cognitive and Behavioral Neuroscience (3 credits)
NEUR 5314G: Advanced Genetics of Neuroscience (3 credits)
NEUR 5364G: Advanced Neuroscience of Language and Communication Disorders (3 credits)
NEUR 5514G: Advanced Neuroimmunology (3 credits)
NEUR 5814G: Advanced Nutritional Neuroscience (3 credits)
NEUR 5914: Neuroscience of Drug Development (3 credits)
NEUR 6014: Glial Biology (3 credits)

Free Electives: 6-12 credit hours

Students will select a minimum of 6 credit hours and a maximum of 12 credit hours of graduate coursework at the 5000 level or higher. All courses must be approved by the student's advisor as part of the Plan of Study. Courses can come from any course offerings at the institution.

All students must register for NEUR 5074: Current Topics in Neuroscience (1 credit) during the first – fourth semester in the program. In total, students will have registered for this course for a letter grade a total of four times, semester one – semester four. Following the fourth semester, students no longer register for a letter grade, but must participate in a journal club each fall and spring semester until the semester before their graduation using the pass/fail option upon registration.

5. The Second Year and Beyond

Students will complete coursework as outlined in the Plan of Study. Remember, each semester to register for a total of 12 credits, balancing required coursework with NEUR7994 Dissertation and Research.

6. Transfer Credits

At the discretion of the Graduate Program Committee, up to nine credits* of previously completed coursework may be transferred from another Virginia Tech program or from an outside institution and applied toward the proposed Ph.D. in Neuroscience degree program.

*In rare instances there may be an exception to the nine graded transfer credits accepted.

7. Additional Requirements: Non-Credit

Students will be required to complete a seminar series, a course on responsible conduct in research and participate in a career development workshop series. The seminar series and career development workshop are not taken for credit but attendance is required.

A. Seminar Series

All students must participate in the neuroscience program seminar series for the duration of their enrollment in the degree program. The goal of the seminar series requirement is to expose students to the appropriate breadth of current neuroscience research, emerging and relevant techniques, as well as the ability to comfortably discuss topics which span the field of neuroscience. The seminar series will consist of speakers who represent the most innovative neuroscience researchers. Seminars occur twice monthly during the fall and spring semesters. The seminar is not taken for credit toward the proposed degree program. Students are required to attend, participate in the discussion as appropriate, and provide their signature as proof of attendance. Attendance rosters are collected and reviewed by the Graduate Program Committee. If a student in the program does not attend, the student's advisor will be notified.

B. Responsible Conduct in Research

Prior to admission to candidacy, students are required to participate in a 'Responsible Conduct in Research' course offered at the university. The course is not taken for credit toward the proposed degree program but is evaluated as pass/fail. It is recommended this course be taken the second semester of study. The course is designed to ensure that graduate trainees receive formal instruction in contemporary ethical issues in biomedical research and develop lasting positive attitudes and behavior regarding responsible conduct in research. The course meets the mandated requirements of all external funding agencies in graduate ethics training. Topics include academic integrity, mentoring, research misconduct, collaborative research, use of animal and human subjects in research, ownerships of data, data acquisition and management, plagiarism, authorship, peer review, conflict of interest, bias in research and export controls, and national security.

C. Career Development Workshop

All students must participate in the monthly Career Development Workshop series throughout the duration of their enrollment in the degree program. The goal of the career development series requirement is to expose students to career opportunities that exist outside of academia and to reinforce professional competencies for both academic and non-academic settings. Examples of topics will include: An Industry Perspective; Conflict Management; Negotiating Skills; Careers in Science Communication; Commercialization; Working within Collaborative Groups; Public Speaking; Interpersonal Communication; and, Project Management. Students will be provided anonymous Qualtrics surveys to rate the utility of each session. The workshop is not taken for credit toward the proposed degree program. Students are required to attend, participate in the discussion as appropriate, and provide their signature as proof of attendance. Attendance rosters are collected and reviewed by the Graduate Program Committee. If a student in the program does not attend, the student's advisor will be notified.

D. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

The Neuroscience Graduate program is strongly committed to racial, gender and ethnic equality as well as social inclusion. All PhD degree seeking students at Virginia Tech must participate in inclusion and diversity training as part of their graduate studies. This training begins during orientation week and continues through the duration of your time as a PhD student within the School of Neuroscience. Compliance with training is indicated in each student plan of study. Topics of such training are indicated below.

- 1) The Universities principles of Community valuing human diversity and inclusion, creating a climate of civility, sensitivity and mutual respect.
- 2) Impact of personal action and words understanding difference, bias and microaggressions.
- 3) Avenues of redress and shared responsibility as active bystanders recognizing and disrupting academic bullying.
- 4) Process of individual introspection to create inclusive environments awareness of words and language.
- 5) Inclusion and diversity in a global context.

Additional information regarding DEI training, awareness and participation can be found at the [VT Graduate School](#) and the [NPGA website](#).

Section II. Doctoral Requirements and Procedures

1. Research Dissertation Advisor

Prior to registration for the second semester of study, Ph.D. students are required to select a research dissertation advisor. This advisor will be selected from research rotations performed during the first semester of study. Research dissertation advisors are determined by mutual agreement between the student and potential advisor. The research dissertation advisor is expected to provide guidance in generating a Plan of Study and facilitating the student toward completion of the degree program requirements.

2. Plan of Study

Prior to completion of the third semester in the program, a Plan of Study, signed by the Research Dissertation Advisor and Dissertation Committee Members must be submitted to the Program director (gradneuro@vt.edu). An example of a completed Plan of Study and a blank Plan of Study form can be found on the Neuroscience shared Canvas site. The Plan of study should include the list of all core, restricted and free electives either taken or planned to be taken by the student. Students are required to submit the plan of study to the program director and program coordinator prior to requesting signatures from your committee. To make changes to the Plan of study, a Plan of Study Changes form must be completed. This form is also found in our Canvas site.

3. Dissertation Committee

During the fall of the second year in the program, each graduate student must form a dissertation committee in collaboration with their research dissertation advisor. The dissertation committee will be composed of five tenure-track faculty in the School of Neuroscience and other relevant Virginia Tech units. One tenure track research faculty member from outside of Virginia Tech can also serve as one of the five committee members. It is expected that the research expertise of the committee members will complement the student's research efforts. To make changes to the Dissertation Committee once the Plan of Study has been submitted to the graduate School you will be required to complete, a Plan of Study Changes Form. This form can be found in our Canvas site.

The student and faculty dissertation advisor are responsible for arranging regular meetings of the Dissertation Committee at appropriate times. At a minimum, one meeting is required prior to the Preliminary Doctoral Examination, once for the preliminary doctoral examination, and once per year until the dissertation defense. We anticipate the majority of student to complete their degree within five years. If a student has not completed their degree within five in a half years, the PI and student must schedule a meeting with the Graduate Program Committee to provide justification. Unless an exception is granted funding for the graduate student will end at the six-year mark.

4. Preliminary Doctoral Examination Part 1 (Written Examination)

The Ph.D. student will prepare a written description of his or her research using an NIH F31 style format (one specific aim page + six pages of research strategy). The written component of the exam will assess the student's ability to evaluate the course material and demonstrate critical integration of the literature as it relates to the student's individual research project. This document must be delivered to the research dissertation committee 10 business days (or two full weeks) prior to the scheduled preliminary doctoral examination (Part 2). It should be noted that scheduling a preliminary doctoral examination requires approval by the graduate school and should be done well in advance of the scheduled meeting. Instructions regarding how to register for the preliminary exam can be found on our website under 'resources for current students'. For all students, the preliminary doctoral exam Part 1 should be completed prior to the end of the third year following entry into graduate studies. Exceptions to this will be considered on a case-by-case basis by the full graduate program committee. If not already completed by the end of Year 2 of graduate studies, the preliminary exam should be listed as an upcoming goal on the Annual Evaluation.

5. Preliminary Doctoral Examination Part 2 (Oral Examination)

The purpose of the oral comprehensive examination is to demonstrate to the committee members that the student is prepared to perform the proposed research. This examination entails an oral defense of the student's NIH F31 style grant proposal. During this oral examination the student must demonstrate that they have 1) integrated the knowledge gained from the core curriculum, 2) demonstrated a comprehension of the appropriate literature related to the student's proposal, and 3) demonstrated knowledge of appropriate

technical approaches to address the experimental paradigms in the written research proposal. Students who do not receive a 'unanimous pass' on both the written and oral Preliminary Doctoral Examination may be given up to six months of remediation as deemed appropriate by the Dissertation committee and one additional opportunity to pass the examination. Failure to pass either exam on the second attempt will result in dismissal from the program. For all students, the preliminary doctoral exam, Part 2, should be completed prior to the end of the third year following entry into the Neuroscience PhD program. This should be included as an upcoming goal on the Annual Evaluation at the end of Year 2 if the student has not already passed their preliminary exam.

Following successful completion of written and oral examination, students are encouraged to submit their written document for external/internal funding. This would include applying for opportunities at the NIH, NSF private foundations and opportunities within VT. Graduate students which successfully compete for external funding covering 50% or more of their stipend will receive an additional \$1000 in yearly stipend.

6. Admission to Candidacy

Admission to candidacy requires a passing grade of B- or better (on a 4.0-point scale) in all core and required courses and a unanimous 'pass' decision by all members of the Dissertation Committee for the students Preliminary Doctoral Examination (Part 1 and Part 2). It is expected that these requirements will be completed prior to the end of the third year of study.

7. Dissertation Defense

Prior to the dissertation defense, students must be given permission by the Dissertation Committee to prepare the final written dissertation document. It is expected that permission will be given during a final Dissertation Committee meeting no more than six months before the final dissertation defense. The final dissertation comprises a written dissertation and an oral defense centered around the dissertation research. This exam will be publicly advertised two weeks prior to the dissertation defense. All professional rank faculty and students will be invited to attend. Each of the students Dissertation Committee members is required to attend although remote attendance is acceptable in unusual circumstances. The student will deliver a public oral presentation of the dissertation research and answer questions from those present. Immediately following the public dissertation defense, a private dissertation defense involving the student and the Dissertation Committee will take place for additional questions. In order to pass, the student must obtain a unanimous pass vote from all committee members. If the student fails the dissertation defense, one full semester (or 15 weeks) must elapse before the student is allowed to complete a second dissertation defense. If the student fails the dissertation defense a second time, the student will be dismissed from the program.

PLAN AHEAD

iThenticate: The Graduate School has instituted a policy requiring graduate students and their advisors must verify that the ETDs (electronic theses and dissertations) are appropriately written and cited, using the iThenticate system. Your thesis document must be evaluated by iThenticate and reviewed by you and your thesis advisor prior to scheduling your final exam. The final similarity report must be included in the submission of your ETD to the graduate school.

As with the preliminary exam this document must be delivered to the research dissertation committee 10 business days (or two full weeks) prior to the scheduled Dissertation Defense. It should be noted that the dissertation defense requires approval by the graduate school and should be done well in advance of the scheduled meeting. Instructions regarding how to register for the preliminary exam can be found on our website under 'resources for current students'.

8. Student Retention and Continuation Plan

To ensure students are supported throughout the program, faculty have developed requirements and milestones designed to maintain student engagement, enrollment, and retention to successfully progress to degree completion.

A. Monthly (minimal) meetings with Research Dissertation Advisor

All students in the proposed Ph.D. in Neuroscience degree program will attend monthly meetings with their dissertation advisor. The dissertation advisor will monitor course performance and research progress, as well as assist students in accessing resources needed to successfully navigate the program. Dissertation advisors are required to provide annual written progress reports to the Graduate Program Committee and Program Director.

B. Graduate Student Annual Evaluation Process

Each spring, graduate students are required to submit a brief report of progress to his/her advisor which will be considered by the faculty during the graduate student review process. The annual report provided by the dissertation advisor and graduate student evaluation will be submitted to the Graduate Program committee for review, along with an updated CV. This committee will provide annual evaluations to students, which will indicate whether their progress is satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

C. Research Updates

At the end of year one, during the summer session and each summer throughout the duration of the PhD students are expected to orally present their research findings to all faculty members, post-doctoral fellows, and graduate students in the department. The purpose of the research updates is to provide students with the opportunity to hone scientific communication skills.

D. Mitigation Strategies for Unsatisfactory Grades

Course instructors for all core coursework will be required to meet with any student that receives a grade of 'C' or below (on a 4.0-point scale) on a course examination. This information will also be communicated with the program director and graduate program committee. These students will be required to meet with a tutor at regular intervals while repeating a course. Peer mentors will be assigned to all Ph.D. students. Peer mentors will be selected from a pool of graduate students that have successfully completed admission to candidacy.

9. Additional Requirements

A. CV

Each student must provide to the program an updated professional curriculum vitae. This document must be updated before every Annual Progress Review.

B. Biosketch

Each student must have a current Biosketch. This document must be updated before every Annual Progress Review.

C. ORCID ID

ORCID provides a persistent identifier that you own and control and that distinguished you from every other researcher. This number should be uploaded in the shared Neuroscience Canvas site.

D. Publication Requirement

Students are required to submit at least one first-authored research paper based on their dissertation work for publication in a peer-reviewed journal listed in the Science Citation Index Expanded prior to scheduling their dissertation defense. Advisory Committee members will determine that this requirement has been met to their satisfaction as a condition of approving the scheduling of the defense.

E. Teaching Requirement

Following the semester of entry into the program students in this program are not required to teach or serve as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA). However, individual Research Dissertation Advisors may require their own PhD students to GTA for one semester or more. This is a discussion you are encouraged to have with Research Dissertation Advisor prior to rotating and joining a laboratory.

To facilitate timely completion of the program students are not permitted to serve as GTAs beyond year five in the program. Exceptions to this policy may be waived for students selected to participate in the Neuroscience PhD Teaching Opportunity or in instances where the Principal Investigator has requested or is utilizing bridge funding.

For those students that do GTA, certain criteria and responsibilities must be met.

- i. **Teaching Quality:** GTAs should give conscientiously prepared, good quality presentations and general assistance to the students in their laboratory courses. Difficulties with teaching should be discussed by the student and teaching supervisor with every effort made to give the GTA positive, constructive guidance.
- ii. **Office Hours:** GTAs should post their office hours and inform their classes of office hours and the location of their office. GTAs should always be available during their office hours.
- iii. **Grading:** GTAs may be assigned the primary responsibility for assigning grades in laboratory sections. Prior to 18 hours of course work at the graduate level, grades are officially assigned by a faculty member in accordance with University policy.
- iv. **Evaluation of Teaching:** Beginning in Fall 2021, course directors are to provide an independent evaluation of GTA performance (course instructors will be provided with a standardized evaluation form). Copies of these evaluations are shared with the student and the research thesis advisor. A copy should be shared with the graduate program in the form of an attachment with the student annual review. Consecutive poor evaluations from teaching supervisors may result in loss of eligibility to receive subsequent GTA assignments.

Section III. PhD Student responsibilities

1. Expectations for Graduate Study

Virginia Tech graduate students are expected to be honest, ethical, contributing members of the campus community. The following resources provide details about these important responsibilities.

Expectations for Graduate Study

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

Student Code of Conduct

https://codeofconduct.vt.edu/content/dam/codeofconduct_vt_edu/CodeOfConduct-Fall2021.pdf

2. Academic Responsibilities:

Degree Requirements: "It is the student's responsibility to satisfy all university requirements described in the Graduate Catalog as well as any additional requirements established by the

faculty in the academic program in which the student is enrolled" (Graduate Catalog, Graduate School Policies and Procedures"). While the student should expect good quality advising by his/her Advisory Committee, the Department of Neuroscience, and the Graduate School, the primary responsibility for knowing the degree requirements and progressing through the degree rests with the student. The student should be familiar with University Policies as detailed in the Graduate Catalogue and with the Department policies as detailed in this handbook.

3. Vacation/Holidays:

Time away from campus for holidays/vacations or travel to conferences may not interfere with a graduate student's GTA or GRA responsibilities and must be scheduled in consultation with, and with prior approval from, the Research Dissertation Advisor. Students are encouraged to discuss planned or desired absences with their Research Dissertation Advisor as far in advance of the anticipated date as possible.

4. Honor System:

All graduate students should be familiar with the [Virginia Tech Graduate Honor Code](#), both for their own information and for the appropriate handling of their GTA/GRA responsibilities.

5. Active Bystander Responsibilities

The Virginia Tech Graduate School and the School of Neuroscience PhD program encourages graduate students to be active bystanders.

What is an active bystander?

As detailed on the VT '[Get Involved](#)' webpage, an **active bystander** is a person who are aware of an abusive situation and chose to speak up and say or do something without putting their own safety at risk. In contrast, **bystanders**, are the largest group of individuals involved in violence who greatly outnumber both perpetrators and victims and have the power to stop abuse and seek help for those who have been victimized.

For more information on how to 'get involved' and be an active bystander visit VT's '[Get Involved](#)' website.

6. Academic Bullying

The Virginia Tech Graduate School and the School of Neuroscience PhD program encourage graduate students to be active bystanders and to report academic bullying when they witness it.

What is Academic Bullying?

As detailed on the VT graduate school '[Disrupting Academic Bullying Academic](#)' webpage, academic bullying manifests itself in many different ways and can include intimidation, humiliation, belittlement, embarrassment, and undermining one's authority. Academic bullying also includes behaviors or comments that indicate disregard of one's concerns, ignoring contributions, minimize one's efforts in the eyes of colleagues, and other means of exclusion or withholding information. Academic bullying occurs throughout the academic or professional space; in the classroom, in meetings, at conferences, in the laboratory setting, in face-to-face interactions, and of course through email and social media.

Through the Disrupting Academic Bullying Initiative, the Graduate School has created resources to help members of the VT community identify academic bullying and to report it through the [Disrupting Academic Bullying Reporting Form](#).

Section IV. GRADUATE STATUS CHANGES

1. Change of Research Dissertation Advisor

It is not uncommon for students to reach the conclusion that their initial mentor selection is not the ideal match. As a program, we recognize this and completely support the student's decision to identify a new research mentor (core or affiliated Neuroscience faculty). Students wishing to identify a new Research Dissertation Advisor and who are making satisfactory progress toward the degree, will have one "grace semester" to find a new Research Dissertation Advisor and form a new Thesis Committee. The new Dissertation Committee may or may not include members of the original committee. Students choosing to switch labs will be given a "grace semester" to identify a Research Dissertation Advisor. Failure to identify a new Research Dissertation Advisor during the "grace semester" will result in the student being terminated from the program. If the Research Dissertation Advisor leaves the University, and the student chooses not leave with the Research Dissertation Advisor the student, if making satisfactory progress, should work with their Dissertation Committee, the Director of the School of Neuroscience and the Graduate Program Director to find a new Research Dissertation Advisor.

2. Discontinued enrollment

Graduate students are expected to be continuously enrolled while they pursue their degrees. Students in residence fulfill this requirement by registering for 12 credits per semester. Under special circumstances the enrollment requirement may instead be met in the following ways.

- A. Graduate students in good standing who for academic reasons need to spend an entire Fall or Spring semester away from campus can apply for and be granted In *Absentia Status*. In *Absentia Status* is granted for work that is directly related to a student's academic course of study and that is integral to his or her degree. Examples

include field research and laboratory work with research collaborators at remote institutions. Students can remain in absentia for two consecutive semesters, but then must return to residency for a minimum of one semester prior to graduating. During each Fall and Spring semester in absentia, students must register for one credit hour. Note that students can be away from campus during the summer without In Absentia Status being required. To obtain *In Absentia* Status graduate students, with the approval of the Chair of their Graduate Advisory Committee, must file a Request for In Absentia Status with the Graduate School. The request must be approved by the Director of the School of Neuroscience or Graduate Program Director. Note that students with *In Absentia* status cannot be paid via Graduate Research Assistantships; they can be paid via hourly wage. Students requesting In Absentia Status for the Spring semester can continue their student health insurance for which they signed up in the Fall, but students requesting *In Absentia* Status for the Fall semester are not eligible for student health insurance.

- B. Changes in life circumstances sometimes necessitate a break in graduate studies and continuous enrollment. Graduate students who need a break in continuous enrollment may apply for a Leave of Absence. Acceptable reasons for granting a leave include medical and health, family emergency, change in parental status, military service or call-up, financial hardship, personal reasons and academic reasons. Students on leave of absence are not entitled to use University resources not normally available to the public or alumni. Leave of absence may be granted for up to one year at a time. Graduate students, in consultation with and with the approval of their Research Dissertation Advisor, may file a Request for Leave of Absence with the Graduate School. The request must be approved by the Director of the School of Neuroscience and the Graduate Program Director.
- C. Readmission to the graduate program after one year of leave is automatic.
- D. If a leave of longer than one year is required, the student must file an "Application for Graduate Readmission" with the Graduate School. This form requires the signature of the Department Head.
- E. If absence from the program continues for four semesters or more, in addition to the "Application for Graduate Readmission" submitted to the Graduate School, the student must also submit to the Department a written plan outlining how and when degree requirements will be met. The plan should be developed by the student in consultation with the Major Advisor and members of the Advisory Committee who are willing to continue serving on the committee. If some members are unwilling to serve, a new committee may have to be formed; the chair and members of the old committee are under no obligation to continue their service on the committee. Thus, the student

must discuss the continued participation on the committee with former committee members and also assume responsibility for the participation of new members if necessary. If the submitted plan is unacceptable to the student's Advisory Committee, the Graduate Director, with a recommendation from the Graduate Review Committee and the Advisory Committee chair, will have the option of terminating the student from the program. Once four semesters have passed, if the student has not sought readmission the Graduate Director will attempt to contact the student and request a plan as outlined above. If the plan that is submitted is unacceptable, no plan is submitted, or the student cannot be contacted, the Graduate Director, with a recommendation from the Graduate Review Committee and the Advisory Committee Chair, will have the option of terminating the student from the program. Students returning from leave must be enrolled for at least 3 credits. Returning students do not become eligible for the Start of Semester Defense Exception until their second semester back in the program.

- F. Students who decide to leave the program permanently should submit a letter of resignation to the Graduate School and provide copies to the Director of the School of Neuroscience, the Chair of their Graduate Dissertation Committee, and the Graduate Program Director.

3. Termination of Student for Inadequate Progress Toward the Degree

A negative review by a student's Dissertation Committee, followed by a written evaluation detailing the Dissertation Committee's expectations for improvement, should result in improved performance by the student. If such progress does not occur, as documented during the next Dissertation Committee meeting, it is the responsibility of the student's Dissertation Committee to recommend that the student be terminated from the graduate program (Graduate Policies and Procedures and Course Catalog, "Satisfactory progress"). If Dissertation Committee has not been formed, the student's Research Dissertation Advisor can also act to terminate a student. In both cases, if the student has a GPA of less than 3.0 at the time that the Committee or the Research Dissertation Advisor recommends termination for lack of progress towards the degree, termination will be effective at the end of that semester. If the student has a GPA 3.0 or higher at the time that the Committee or Chair recommends termination, the Graduate Program Director may allow the student one additional semester to attempt to establish a new Dissertation Committee. The decision to terminate the student will be reviewed by the Graduate Review Committee, Graduate Program Director, and Director of the School of Neuroscience before (a) making the recommendation of termination to the Graduate School or (b) allowing the student one semester to find a new advisor and establish a new Dissertation Committee.

4. Graduate Student Appeals

These procedures will ensure the student's right to appeal at every level as specified by Graduate School policy (see Graduate Catalog, "Graduate Student Appeal" <https://graduateschool.vt.edu/academics/expectations/expectations-for-graduate-education-overview/complaints-and-appeals.html>). Should the student's committee not act despite two Advisory Committee meetings when the student's progress was rated Unsatisfactory, then upon a recommendation of the Graduate Review Committee and Graduate Director, the Department Head may recommend termination of the student to the Graduate School. Two consecutive ratings of Unsatisfactory from the Graduate Review Committee are grounds for termination.

Section V. AVENUES OF REDRESS

As detailed in Virginia Tech's [Expectations for Graduate Education](#)

The university provides informal and formal means for graduate students to address concerns that arise in the academic setting, with the goal of resolving disputes in a fair, collegial manner. Concerns may arise in a number of areas, including academic evaluation and/or progress, assistantship requirements and/or termination, academic freedom, and professional misconduct, among others. In addition, graduate students may surface concerns about issues related to professional or scholarly expectations, such as authorship and civility. These issues involve subjectivity and, therefore, demand sensitivity and respect for all participants.

1. Informal Resolution

The university strongly encourages students to explore all available informal avenues for resolving concerns before filing a formal complaint/appeal. First, students are encouraged to familiarize themselves with university, Graduate-School, and department-level policies that may affect or involve issues of concern. Graduate students may consult with the Graduate Dean, who has an open-door policy, the [Graduate School Ombudsperson](#), and other offices for advice on policies and on resolving their concerns and communicating with other involved parties. Informal Steps and Resources Graduate students may use one or a combination of these resources at any point in the resolution process.

Discussions with involved parties

Whenever possible, graduate students are encouraged to discuss concerns directly with the person(s) involved. The university recognizes that these conversations can be difficult and, therefore, provides resources, such as the [Graduate Student Ombudsperson](#) and other offices to help students learn how to handle these situations.

Discussions with Advisor, Department Head, or Graduate Program Director

Students who feel they need help finding resolution or believe that departmental policy or practice is contributing to the issue of concern may discuss the matter with their advisor, department head and/or graduate program director.

Confidential Discussion with Graduate Student Ombudsperson

The Graduate Student Ombudsperson, with an office in the Graduate Life Center, is an advocate for fairness for graduate students who acts as a source of information and referral, aids in answering individual's questions, and provides an impartial "safe place" for graduate students' voices to be heard. Confidentiality, neutrality, informality, and independence are the core principles of the ombudsperson's practice. The ombudsperson will not disclose names or other information about visitors without permission. However, the office does provide information on visitor statistics and issue trends to university administrators to foster improvements in policy, practice, and climate for graduate students. [The Office of the Graduate Student Ombudsperson](#) offers support for graduate students who want help developing options for addressing concerns or who may wish to consider learning how to deal with problems on their own. The ombudsperson does not accept formal complaints or notice on behalf of the university but can provide information on how to submit them.

Discussion with Graduate School

The Graduate School, including staff, associate deans, and the dean, is a resource for graduate students for discussing any and all concerns. The graduate dean has an open-door policy and welcomes students to visit her to discuss their concerns, questions, and experiences. The dean will maintain confidentiality whenever possible.

2. Formal Resolution

If, after attempting to resolve a concern through informal avenues, the matter remains unreconciled, students have the option to file a formal complaint/appeal. For this process, a complaint/appeal is defined as a concern brought forward by a graduate student alleging a violation, misinterpretation, or incorrect application of a policy, procedure, or practice of the university that directly affects the student.

Section V: MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

The VT Graduate School and leadership within the School of Neuroscience are committed to providing a positive graduate student experience. We recognize that graduate school is stressful and mental health concerns are at the forefront of student concerns.

In 2020, the VT graduate School convened a mental health task force to identify and review practices and begin conversations with students and their advocates to determine what Virginia Tech can do to promote and support the mental health of all VT graduate students. This resource is evolving and updates regarding the discussion can be found [here](#).

School of Neuroscience faculty, leadership and graduate program director and coordinator may work with individual students to identify suitable resources.

Resources outside of the School of Neuroscience can be found below.

- [Cooks Counseling](#) seeks to provide a safe, welcoming, and affirming environment for all persons who seek our [services](#).
- [Schiffert Health Center](#) Virginia Tech's on-campus health care center

Additional resources where students' voices can be heard, gain personal mental health building skills and concerns can be raised:

- [The Graduate Student Assembly](#) represents students' concerns, and serves as a liaison between graduate students and University Administration.
- [FEELS](#): FEELS members gain personal and professional development on mental health skill building, public health approaches, program assessment, facilitation, and leadership skills
- [Accessibility](#)-Services for students with disabilities.
- [Graduate Student Ombudsperson](#): The Ombudsperson is a confidential and impartial resource that can help you navigate conflict.
- [Stop the abuse](#): university is committed to providing an environment of work, study, and leisure/recreation for students, faculty, and staff that is free from all forms of harassment, intimidation, fear, coercion, and exploitation.
- [See something, say something](#): For more information about reporting harassment and other negative actions, visit this [website](#). Students can report experiences of bias, harassment, and discrimination, as well as file a complaint, ask for advice, express a concern, or simply tell someone.