

Grad Student Handbook

Prepared by
Biology Graduate Students' Association
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Getting Started as a Grad Student

Welcome! This handbook aims to provide you with the information you might need to navigate the department and your grad school. The handbook is compiled by the Biology Graduate Students' Association. This is not an official document - we are grad students and we don't have a say in most of these matters, but we hope this handbook will make life easier for new grad students. If you have questions or suggestions please contact us at bgsa@ualberta.ca

The GSA provides a [new student guidebook](#) with more generalized information, but this guide is tailored to be useful for the Department of Biological Sciences.

Who is Who

Administration

Department Chair: David Coltman biochair@ualberta.ca

Associate Chair, Graduate Studies: James Stafford stafford@ualberta.ca

Assistant Associate Chair, Graduate Studies: Alison Murray ammurray@ualberta.ca

Associate Chair, Research: Lisa Stein stein1@ualberta.ca

Student Admin Office (BSB CW 405)

Graduate Program Coordinator: Mark Wolansky biograd@ualberta.ca

Mark is the person to ask about program requirements, courses, and TA (teaching assistantship) assignments. If you have a question and not sure whom to ask, ask Mark!

Graduate Program & Payroll Coordinator: Shelley Scott biogradf@ualberta.ca

Contact Shelley if you have any money-related questions (tuition, scholarships, etc.). She also handles keys.

Admin Office (BSB CW 422) Financial Administrator: Dean Wilson dean.wilson@ualberta.ca

If you need to be reimbursed for any expense (conference registration fee, travel, etc.), Dean is the person handling these requests.

Before you arrive

Campus housing

Check this [website](#) for info. Bear in mind that living on-campus is usually more expensive than off-campus housing!

Off-campus housing

Check these sources:

- [Rentingspaces.ca](#)
- [Rentals.ca](#)

You can find more info on housing [here](#).

Cost of living in Edmonton

The FGSR provides [information about the cost of living](#) which is reasonably accurate for the items included. However, it lacks some key details!

Commuting

[Transit passes](#) were included with U of A enrollment in past years, however they are no longer provided for students, as of fall 2020. If you want a [commuter pass](#), you will have to buy it yourself. In 2020, it's around ~\$97 per month.

Vehicles at home

If you own a vehicle in Edmonton, it is common to pay additional rent for a parking space, above the cost of your housing. It is not unheard of for a heated indoor garage to charge \$250 per month for a parking space. Outdoor parking is usually cheaper than indoor parking, but whatever you choose, you can expect to pay for it. The city of Edmonton has [paid parking programs](#) for residents of some neighborhoods.

Vehicles on campus

[University parking permits](#) can be quite [expensive](#) and may not be available. [Street parking](#) is another option, but it's not cheap.

Parents

Childcare is another expense that is not included in the FGSR estimate. It is hard to know how childcare will evolve during the pandemic, so it's difficult to estimate the potential cost. Just be aware it is a nonzero expense that isn't included in the FGSR cost of living documents.

If you are new to Canada

Social Insurance Number

First thing, you have to apply for a SIN (Social Insurance Number). The procedure is explained [here](#). The closest Canada Service Centre is located at 9700 Jasper Ave. If you apply for SIN in person, it takes only an hour or so, but now in-person services are suspended due to COVID19. Applying online is also an option.

Bank account

Once you get your SIN you can get a bank account. The closest bank branch to campus is CIBC branch at 8207 112 St NW.

Phone number

After you get your SIN and bank account set up, you can buy a SIM card. There are multiple cell service providers, e.g. [Telus](#) and [Shaw](#).

Health Insurance

[Here](#) are the instructions on how to apply for health insurance.

Classes and Registration

Program requirements

Academic year in UofA is split into four terms: Fall (Sept-Dec), Winter (Jan-Apr), Spring (May-Jun), and Summer (Jul-Aug). To be a full-time student, you need to be registered for 9 credits during the fall and winter terms and 6 credits during spring and summer.

THES 901-909 are classes that represent your graduate research. You can use them to “top up” your course load to the required 9 credits. The last digit represents the number of credits you get. For example, if this Fall term you want to take one class worth of 3 credits, you should couple it with THES 906; if you are not planning to take any courses, you should register for THES 909. This only applies to fall and winter terms. You will be automatically registered for THES class every spring and summer term.

How to choose your classes

Course catalog can be found [here](#). Be careful: some of the courses there are not offered every year, and some are not offered currently at all. You can choose any class offered by our department, which includes BIOL, BOT, ZOOL, ENT, GENET, MICRB, PALEO, and IMIN. You can take a class from another department, but you need to get approval from the department

first. First digit in a course's name represents its level (e.g. BIOL108 is a first-level class). Everything below fifth level is considered undergrad-level. You can take these classes, but likely you won't be able to count it towards your program requirements.

Different programs (Masters vs PhD) and different concentrations (Ecology, Microbiology, etc.) have different sets of requirements when it comes to course work. You can check them [here](#), but it is always better to double-check with Mark Wolansky! Usually the requirements include one or two graded grad-level classes and some seminars.

Next, you should ask your supervisor which classes they recommend to take. Don't be shy about contacting other grad students too! If you want to find out more about a class but you don't know anyone who has taken it, you can write the BGSA and we will try to put you in contact with someone.

How to register

Once you decide which classes you want to take, you need to register. For all undergrad-level classes and THES classes you can register yourself through the [beartracks](#) (Academics -> Enroll -> Add). To register for grad-level courses you need to submit an [Add/Drop form](#) to Mark Wolansky.

eClass

[eClass](#) is the UofA online learning environment. As a student, you will likely use eClass to access course materials, submit assignments, etc.

Bear Tracks

[Bear Tracks](#) is the portal to your administrative accounts at the university. This is not only where you register for classes, but where you will find employment information and where you will access your student rosters and other information when you begin teaching.

Bears Den

[BearsDen](#) is the online social hub for the university. Student groups and events are hosted here.

Campus Bridge

[Campus Bridge](#) is a networking and career development site provided by the University of Alberta Alumni Association.

Resources

BGSA website has several compilation of resources:

[Campus Resources](#),

[EDI \(Equity, Diversity, Inclusion\) Resources](#),

[Coding and Data Analysis](#),

[Teaching Resources](#).

ONEcard

OneCard is your university ID, which gives you access to facilities (health clinic, library, gym, etc.), but only as long as you are registered for classes (if you haven't decided which classes to take yet but want to use these facilities, you can register for a THES class and drop it later).

[Here](#) is how you get a ONEcard.

U-Pass

[U-Pass](#) is a public transit pass. It looks like a small sticker you need to put on your ONEcard.

U-pass fee is included in the tuition, so you don't need to pay extra to get it. You can use

U-Pass on all buses in Edmonton and in LRT. You can get your first U-Pass together with the

ONEcard and then you need to replace it three times a year, at the start of every fall, winter, and spring term. U-Pass was suspended for fall 2020 due to COVID19.

Libraries

UofA has several libraries on campus. You can borrow books using your ONEcard or use their [website](#) to browse, place orders for interlibrary loans, and access part of their collection online.

Health Centre

To access the university health centre you need both your ONEcard and your health insurance. Find more information [here](#).

Gym, swimming pools, etc.

[Here](#) is the list of UofA facilities. Most of them are accessible with your ONEcard with no extra fee as long as you are registered in at least one class, but in some cases you need to pay for extra services and/or during the Spring/Summer terms.

Departmental resources:

BioSci Storeroom (BSB Z207)

Storeroom Administrator: Debbie Preston biostore@ualberta.ca

Storeroom is the place where you can purchase lab consumables, office supplies, lab coats, etc. Their [website](#) is the place to go if your lab needs to purchase something from a supplier.

MBSU (CCIS 5-047)

Facility Administration: Anthony Cornish acornish@ualberta.ca. General inquiries should go to biombsu@ualberta.ca.

The Molecular Biology Service Unit is a facility providing services (sequencing, qPCR, etc.) as well as training and access to equipment. Check their [website](#) for more info!

Funding and Tuition

There are three main types of funding:

Graduate Teaching Assistantship: you work as a teaching assistant plus-minus 12 hours/week and receive pay. Typically, you need to teach only during fall and winter terms, and spring and summer is covered by your supervisor.

Graduate Research Assistantship: you get paid from your supervisor's grant.

Awards and Scholarships: you receive money from a funding agency.

Please note that your first paycheck only comes in late September! After that you get paid twice a month.

Applying for scholarships

The department sends out application instructions for all major scholarships. You can also browse the [university](#) and [department](#) awards page. Receiving a big scholarship usually (but not always) means that you won't get GRA or GTA funding during the tenure of your scholarship. More time to focus on something else! A smaller award is just extra money for you.

Every student is entitled to a certain sum from the university to cover a conference, but the "first apply first served" system means that you need to act fast (and be lucky) to get it.

Tuition

GTA and GRA students' tuition is deducted from their paychecks. The deductions do not happen every paycheck (here is the [schedule](#)). This makes some paychecks bigger and some smaller. On top of that, the deduced amount is different depending on the term (e.g. fall tuition is higher than winter tuition).

If you hold an award you have to pay your tuition at the beginning of every term though your bank, [here](#) are the instructions.

International students' tuition is higher than Candian students'. Some professors in our department compensate their international students for this difference. If you are an

international student, you might want to check with your supervisor whether they consider doing that for you.

If you have questions, check [this page](#), or contact Shelley Scott.

Things That You Need To Do At Some Point

In addition to taking classes, you also need to complete 8 hours of ethics training and 8 hours of professional development. Find out more [here](#) and in the BGSA organized workshops.

At some point during your first year, you should talk with your supervisor about who will be on your supervisory committee.

If you are a PhD student you need to pass a [candidacy exam](#) by the end of your third year.

See [this page](#) for the program timelines.

Teaching Assistantship

If you have never taught before, don't worry! Most classes have multiple TAs who will be able to coach you as you learn the ropes. Don't be surprised or stressed if you don't find out your TA assignment until the last minute, it's a known issue that is unavoidable because of the complicated logistics of scheduling previous and new students into positions that match their background and experience. Be assured that everybody is going through the same thing and nobody will expect you to be psychic or superhuman.

The most important things for TAs to remember include:

- **Be at work on time or early.**
You will find that TAs rely on each other, so lateness affects the whole group. Also, students are not obligated to wait for more than ten minutes before leaving - which they will definitely do, starting at about nine minutes and thirty two seconds.
- **Adhere to the working hours specified in your agreement.**
If you can't get the work done (usually marking papers) within the allotted hours, communicate with the instructor and other TAs, to work out a functional plan that won't require you to work overtime. It may feel like you're being a squeaky wheel, but rest assured, this happens all the time, so don't try to do the impossible or let your research suffer.
- **Follow marking rubrics and collaborate with other TAs on marking papers.**

Make sure that marking is consistent and unbiased. Don't make exceptions unless all TAs and the instructor are following the same practices. For example, don't give partial credit for misspelled words on fill-in-the blank questions, unless everybody else is doing the same thing consistently. Any inconsistencies in marking are to be avoided.

- **Mark your students' work only and make no personal judgments or assumptions about the students themselves.**

Remember anybody can have an off day, or week, or even semester. Who knows what problems or issues a student may be having outside of class. Don't assume that students who are performing poorly are disinterested - just judge the work. Don't assume that poor performance or lack of student engagement has anything to do with you personally or your ability as a TA - just judge the work. As a matter of fact, don't take *anything* personally - just judge the work.

There are many other best practices, but these four are a good start at being a good TA. One benefit of attending the U of A is the vast number of excellent opportunities for teacher training and professional development.

The [Center for Teaching and Learning](#) has many workshops and training materials available for instructors and TAs alike.

The FGSR ([Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research](#)) offers training specific to graduate students, including the [Graduate Teaching and Learning Program](#).

Not interested in teacher training? Your work as a TA can also benefit from classes in universally valuable skills such as interpersonal communication and time management.

Many of these workshops and training sessions also count towards the 8 hour Professional Development requirement. The offerings sometimes change, so if you want to use these courses toward your PD hours, check with the department ahead of time, just to make sure (biograd@ualberta.ca).

Grad Student Community

BGSA

[The Biology Graduate Students' Association](#) is an organisation advocating on behalf of graduate students of our department. We also organize social events and workshops. Our monthly meetings are open to everybody, so if you want to know more about what is going on here or if you want to be involved, please come and join us!

R.E. Peter

[R. E. Peter Biology Conference](#) is a grad student-run conference for both graduate and undergrad students. The conference is free to everybody and is a great way to get to know other people within the department and practice presenting your research. If you want to volunteer, contact Cerrise Weiblen weiblen@ualberta.ca.

BGSA EDI Committee

If you are passionate about Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, consider joining the BGSA EDI Committee.

Slack and Email List

By now, you should have received an invitation to the BioSci Graduate Students Slack. It is a platform where you can communicate with other grad students, ask questions, share resources, look for housemates, or just chat about random stuff. Come and join us!

A more formal way of contacting BioSci grad student body is through the email list. All you need to do is to direct your email to 3601501-GRP-0@ualberta.ca, and every grad student in the department will get it.

Support Services On and Off Campus

Grad school can be tough. If you ever need help, here are some resources.

On Campus Resources

- Counselling and Clinical Services - 780.492.5205 (open 8 - 4:30 Mon, Thurs, Fri, and 8 - 7 Tues, Wed) - Intake nurse does suicide assessment with every person who wants to see a counselor. Sometimes it can take a few weeks to see a counselor, so it is not always immediate.
- Community Social Work Team - 780.492.3342 (open 8:30 - 4:30 Mon to Fri) (Graduate Students can access this service. Students can call for a consultation if you are dealing with a situation and not sure how to go forward with it. They also see students one on one for resource referral, systems navigation and advocacy, but not counselling.)
- Peer Support Centre - 780.492.4268 (open 9 - 8 Mon to Fri) (Graduate Students can access this support, please note it is run by undergraduate students.) - Students can drop in and speak to a peer. This may be appropriate if you don't feel comfortable seeing a professional.
- Helping Individuals at Risk - 780.492.4372 (8:30 - 4:30 Mon to Fri) (Graduate Students can access this service.) - This is a central reporting system for anyone you are worried about, whether you are worried for their safety, or are just concerned for them (haven't seen them in a

while, maybe stopped attending classes, etc, any unusual behavior that makes you worry), or you are worried for campus members' safety (violence, aggressive behavior).

- Office of Safe Disclosure and Human Rights -780.248.1894 -osdhr@ualberta.ca The Office provides a confidential, neutral and safe space for members of the University community (students, staff and faculty) to speak in confidence. This could include, but is not limited to, concerns about safety violations, financial mismanagement, ethical concerns, discrimination and harassment. The intent of safe disclosure services is to supplement current processes for reporting concerns regarding the application of University policies. The OSDHR is one of many places students, staff and faculty can turn to for assistance. The intent is to advise people coming to the Office of the most effective process for resolving the issue brought forward.

- University of Alberta Protective Services - 780.492.5252 (24 hour/ 7 days a week) (Graduate Students can access this service. This is the security service for the University of Alberta. They work with a variety of services on campus, and very closely with Helping Individuals at Risk. They can attend a location on campus if you are concerned about someone, can accompany the person to the U of A Hospital if the person agrees, and if deemed high risk they will contact Police directly and attend the person's location with EPS. EPS and EMS will call UAPS if they are attending campus for anything. If a campus member has any concerns about a student they can notify UAPS and they will investigate and determine what help is needed. Welfare checks for students living in residence can be requested by anyone - family, friends, professors, TAs, students, staff, roommates, etc.

Graduate Students and Staff Resources On Campus

- Staff Employee and Family Assistance Program –780.492.2249 - Health Benefits available to staff and graduate students.

- Homewood Solutions –780.428.7587 - Where one can work with a therapist or counsellor using benefits.

Off Campus Resources

- The Support Network, Crisis Support Centre, 24 hour Distress Line – 780.482.HELP (4357) - You can contact the Support Network by calling 211. They keep a database of all services and programs on campus. They run the Distress Line and it can be accessed 24/7 for people who just really need to talk to someone in that moment about their concerns, issues or crisis. It is a volunteer run service and a person may need to be put on hold as they deal with several phone calls at once, but they will let the person know and will not put them on hold longer than 5 minutes.

- Mental Health Helpline – 1.877.303.2642 (24 hour/7 days a week) – Alberta Health Services helpline, accessed across the province. This service is run by nurses and can access translation services if needed.

- The First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Line – 1.855.242.3310 (24 hour, 7 days a week)
This is a national service with access to people who can speak First Nations, Inuit or Métis languages.