

GRADUATE PROGRAM TRANSITION POLICIES

Department of Civil & Environmental Engineering
University of Utah
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1. PURPOSE

Graduate education rarely follows a single straight path. Research directions shift, grants end, faculty relocate or retire, personal circumstances change, and students sometimes conclude that a different degree or a different laboratory is the better fit. Changes of this kind are a normal and expected part of graduate study.

The purpose of this document is to give students, faculty, and staff a clear and consistent process for managing changes in a student’s advisor, degree path, funding arrangement, or enrollment status. It is written on the assumption that most transitions are not the result of conflict, failure, or misconduct. Initiating or requesting a transition is not, by itself, evidence of any deficiency on the part of a student or a faculty member.

A small number of transitions do arise from a breakdown in the advisor–student relationship. Those situations are addressed first under the Department’s conflict resolution process; once a transition becomes the likely outcome, the procedures in this document apply in the same way they would for any other cause.

2. SCOPE AND RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER DOCUMENTS

This document covers changes of faculty advisor, changes of degree path, transitions in research funding, and voluntary withdrawal, together with the written Transition Plan that accompanies them. It does not restate policies that live elsewhere. The table below indicates where each related topic is governed.

Topic	Where it is governed
Changes of faculty advisor; changes of degree path (including PhD to MS); transition planning for data, code, authorship, and intellectual property; voluntary withdrawal	This document
Advisor–student conflict and informal resolution	Graduate Handbook, Informal Dispute Resolution; CVEEN Graduate Student Conflict Resolution Guidelines
Satisfactory academic standing, academic probation, academic dismissal	Graduate Handbook, Academic Dismissal Policies & Procedures; Graduate School Graduate Academic Standing, Performance, and Probation Guidelines

Topic	Where it is governed
Appeals of Academic Actions	Graduate Handbook, Formal Dispute Resolution; University Policy 6-100 and Rule R6-100C
Academic, professional, and research misconduct	University Policies 6-410 and 7-001
Leave of absence and vacation semester	Graduate Handbook, Leave of Absence & Vacation Semesters
RA, TA, and Fellow responsibilities; Semester Performance Evaluation; tuition benefit and health insurance	Graduate Handbook, Financial Support; Graduate School Tuition Benefit Program Guidelines
Degree requirements, credit limits, milestones, and examinations	Graduate Handbook, Program Requirements and Examinations

This document complements, but does not replace, University of Utah, Graduate School, John and Marcia Price College of Engineering, and Department policies. Where it conflicts with a University or College policy, the University or College policy governs. Matters involving discrimination, harassment, Title IX, student conduct, academic misconduct, professional misconduct, or research misconduct must be handled through the applicable University process and are not resolved through this document.

3. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Transitions are normal. A change in advisor, funding, or degree path is a routine part of graduate education and is not treated as an adverse academic action.
- No penalty for good faith. A student or faculty member who raises the possibility of a transition in good faith will not be disadvantaged for having done so.
- Student-centered but program-governed. Decisions support student progress and well-being while upholding the academic standards of the program and the obligations of sponsored research.
- Early notice. Concerns about funding, fit, or progress should be raised as early as possible, while options remain open.
- Everything in writing. Requests, agreements, plans, and decisions are documented and retained.
- Clear authority. Advisory roles (mentorship and recommendation) are distinguished from decision-making authority (formal approval as assigned in Sections 5 and 6.5).
- Consistency with flexibility. Similar situations are handled consistently, with room for justified exceptions.

All parties are expected to act professionally and in good faith, to maintain confidentiality, and to refrain from retaliation.

4. SITUATIONS COVERED BY THIS DOCUMENT

Transitions are organized here by outcome rather than by cause, because the same outcome may follow from very different circumstances. The table below lists common situations and the outcomes they typically lead to. It is illustrative, not exhaustive, and more than one outcome may be appropriate in a given case.

Situation	Outcomes commonly considered
A grant ends, is not renewed, or is unexpectedly reduced, and the advisor can no longer support the student	Alternative RA or TA support; change of advisor; PhD to MS; leave of absence; withdrawal
The faculty advisor leaves the University, retires, or begins an extended leave	Change of advisor; change of supervisory committee chair; accelerated completion
The student's research interests move away from the advisor's area	Change of advisor; change of research topic within the same group
The student concludes that the PhD is not the right path for them	PhD to MS transition; withdrawal
The student accepts employment or another opportunity	Non-thesis MS; leave of absence; withdrawal
The student does not pass a required PhD milestone	PhD to MS transition; dismissal under the Graduate Handbook
The advisor's group is at capacity, closing, or changing direction	Change of advisor; if no new advisor can be identified, PhD to MS transition, leave of absence, or withdrawal.
Personal, medical, family, or financial circumstances interrupt study	Leave of absence; reduced enrollment; withdrawal
The advisor–student working relationship has broken down	Addressed first under the Conflict Resolution Guidelines; may lead to any of the outcomes above

5. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Role	Responsibilities in a transition
Graduate student	Raises the request or concern in a timely, professional manner; provides documentation; participates in planning; continues to meet academic and employment responsibilities while the matter is under review, unless directed otherwise.
Faculty advisor or RA/TA supervisor	Communicates expectations, funding outlook, and concerns clearly and in writing; gives as much advance notice as possible of any change in

Role	Responsibilities in a transition
	support; completes Semester Performance Evaluations; participates in transition planning.
Graduate Coordinator	Maintains records; identifies required forms, deadlines, registration, tuition benefit, and payroll implications; retains the final Transition Plan. Does not make academic decisions.
Director of Graduate Studies (DoGS)	Primary departmental contact for transitions; conducts initial review; identifies who must be consulted; facilitates discussion; consults the College or Graduate School as needed.
Supervisory committee	Reviews academic progress, remaining degree requirements, and thesis or dissertation feasibility where a committee has been established.
Graduate Committee	Reviews program-level questions such as changes of advisor, PhD to MS petitions, and degree requirement issues when committee review is required.
Department Chair	Makes or confirms department-level decisions; ensures conflicts of interest are addressed; consults the College, Graduate School, HR, or other University offices as needed.
College, Graduate School, and University offices	Provide oversight, appeal processes, neutral or confidential consultation, and processes outside the Department's authority.

Conflicts of interest. If the DoGS, Department Chair, supervisory committee chair, or another decision-maker has a direct interest in the matter, the Department Chair or the College dean's designee will appoint a non-conflicted faculty member or committee to handle that step. For example, if the student's advisor is also the DoGS, another non-conflicted faculty member facilitates the departmental review.

6. GENERAL TRANSITION PROCESS

6.1 INITIATION

A transition may be initiated by the student, the faculty advisor, or the DoGS. The request is submitted in writing to the DoGS and the Graduate Coordinator and should identify the outcome being requested, the reason for the request, any supporting documentation, and any urgent timing tied to funding, registration, visa status, or degree deadlines.

6.2 INITIAL REVIEW

The DoGS reviews the request and determines who must be consulted. Depending on the outcome sought, this may include the faculty advisor, the supervisory committee, the Graduate Committee, the Department Chair, the College, the Graduate School, Human Resources, or International Student &

Scholar Services (ISSS). The current faculty advisor is always informed of a transition request affecting their student before a decision is made, except where safety concerns or a conflict of interest dictate otherwise.

6.3 CONSULTATION AND REVIEW

Where the outcome requires academic judgment — for example a PhD to MS transition — the Graduate Committee reviews eligibility and remaining requirements. Where the outcome is administrative, the DoGS and Graduate Coordinator may proceed without committee review.

6.4 TRANSITION PLAN

If a transition is approved, the student and the relevant faculty complete a written Transition Plan before the effective date whenever possible. Section 7 describes its required contents.

6.5 DECISION AND NOTIFICATION

Administrative transitions — such as a mutual change of advisor, a voluntary withdrawal, or the processing of a leave — are confirmed by the DoGS, with the Department Chair informed. Transitions requiring academic judgment or involving a dispute — such as a PhD to MS transition or a contested change of advisor — are decided by the Department Chair on the recommendation of the Graduate Committee. The decision is confirmed in writing to the student and states the outcome, the basis for it, the effective date, the next steps, and any implications for funding, tuition benefit, enrollment, degree progress, or visa status.

6.6 RECORDS

The Graduate Coordinator retains the request, the Transition Plan, and the written decision in the student's departmental file, and processes any required departmental, College, Graduate School, Registrar, or tuition benefit forms.

International students must be referred to ISSS as soon as a transition may affect enrollment, financial support, or visa status.

7. THE TRANSITION PLAN

A Transition Plan is a short written agreement, signed by the affected parties and retained by the Graduate Coordinator. Its contents vary with the situation, but it should address, as applicable:

- The effective date of the transition.
- The degree path and research area the student will follow.
- Remaining degree requirements, milestones, committee composition, and expected graduation term.
- Funding, tuition benefit, payroll, health insurance, and registration implications.
- Data, code, lab notebooks, samples, equipment, software, and other research products — what transfers, what the student may continue to use, and where materials are stored.
- Authorship and publication expectations for work in progress and planned manuscripts.
- Intellectual property, confidentiality, export control, and sponsor requirements.
- Any continuing obligations to the original project or research group during the transition period.

Research outputs generated under funded projects belong to the project and the sponsoring entity rather than to the individual student. Students retain the right to appropriate academic credit and authorship for their contributions, and no student may be removed from authorship without documented justification consistent with disciplinary norms. The original research group must not unreasonably restrict a student's ability to complete the degree or to publish legitimate contributions.

8. CHANGE OF FACULTY ADVISOR

A change of advisor may be initiated by the student, by the advisor, or mutually, and may follow a change in research direction, a change in funding, the departure or retirement of the advisor, capacity limits in a research group, or a breakdown in the working relationship.

A prospective new advisor must agree in writing before the change is final. No faculty member is obligated to accept a student, and the Department cannot guarantee a replacement advisor or replacement funding. A mutual change of advisor is confirmed by the DoGS and processed by the Graduate Coordinator, with the Department Chair informed; a contested change is decided under Section 6.5. If a new advisor cannot be identified within a reasonable period, the DoGS will work with the student on the other outcomes in Section 4.

Where the advisor is leaving the University, students who expect to complete the degree within one year of the departure may be able to retain that faculty member as supervisory committee chair; see the Graduate Handbook. Students who need longer must amend the supervisory committee.

For thesis and dissertation students, a Transition Plan under Section 7 is required. Disagreements about data, authorship, intellectual property, or transition conditions should first be raised under the Conflict Resolution Guidelines and, if unresolved, referred to the DoGS, the Graduate Committee, and the Department Chair in that order.

9. CHANGES IN RESEARCH FUNDING

Academic standing and graduate assistant employment are separate matters. Ending or changing an RA or TA appointment does not, by itself, dismiss a student from the graduate program, and continued funding does not by itself establish satisfactory academic standing. Graduate assistants are educational trainees under University Policy 6-309; appointment terms, duties, dates, and supervisor should be stated in writing at the time of appointment. Appointment start and end dates should be written to align with semester boundaries wherever the funding source allows.

9.1 WHEN SUPPORT ENDS

The governing rule. RA or TA support ends at the end of a semester, not in the middle of one. This applies regardless of the reason the support is ending — the advisor is not renewing the appointment, the student's performance has not met documented expectations, the project has changed direction, or the funding source has run out. Ending support mid-semester creates payroll, tuition benefit, health insurance, and visa complications and triggers review by Human Resources and the Graduate School. It may occur only in exceptional circumstances and only after consultation with the Department Chair, the DoGS, and the applicable University offices.

Notice. A faculty advisor who intends to end a student's support must tell the student in writing as early as possible, stating the date through which support is committed — in every case at least sixty (60) days before that date, and before the departmental deadline for TA assignment requests for the following semester. This notice costs the advisor nothing beyond the support already committed; its purpose is to give the student a realistic opportunity to compete for a TA assignment, another RA position, or a fellowship for the following term. If a decision is reached too late to meet this notice requirement, support continues through the end of the following semester.

Loss of the funding source. When the funding source itself ends, is reduced, or is terminated by the sponsor, that is a resource constraint, not a judgment about the student. The sixty (60) day notice requirement above applies to advisor-initiated decisions to end or not renew support; when a sponsor terminates funding, the advisor's obligation is to notify the student in writing as soon as support is known to be at risk. In these circumstances, neither the faculty advisor nor the Department is obligated to provide bridge funding: the Department does not expect the advisor to extend personal or unrelated project funds beyond the committed appointment period, and the Department does not commit departmental funds to cover the gap. If the funding ends partway through a semester, the advisor must consult the DoGS and the Graduate Coordinator before support is allowed to lapse mid-semester, so that available options, such as another project, a TA assignment, or external opportunities, can be explored; this consultation does not guarantee replacement funding.

After support ends. The Department is not responsible for securing replacement funding but will help the student understand degree-completion requirements and identify options, which may include another RA position, a TA appointment, a fellowship, an internship, a change of advisor, a PhD to MS transition, a leave of absence, or withdrawal.

9.2 DURING THE REMAINING APPOINTMENT PERIOD

Expectations during the remaining appointment. The student remains an employee of the University and is expected to perform assigned work professionally. The supervisor provides written duties, deliverables, deadlines, and expectations for the remainder of the appointment. Continued support is tied to continued engagement: if the student does not meet those written expectations, the supervisor should document the failure and consult the DoGS and the Department Chair, and earlier separation may then be appropriate.

Reassignment and redeployment. The supervisor may reassign the student's duties, including to work not connected with the original project. Where continued work in the original research group is not productive for either party, the supervisor should consult the DoGS about redeployment for the remainder of the appointment — for example to grading support, a departmental TA assignment, or another RA placement — so that the appointment produces useful work. Reassigned duties must be set out in writing on the same terms as any other assignment; assignments should not be used to make continued employment untenable.

Immediate action for cause. Conduct raising safety, harassment, discrimination, academic or professional misconduct, or research-integrity concerns is addressed through the applicable University process and is not subject to the timing expectations in this section.

9.3 RESIGNATION BY THE STUDENT

A student who voluntarily resigns from an RA or TA appointment during a semester may be responsible for tuition, fees, or benefit adjustments under the Graduate School Tuition Benefit Program rules and other applicable University policies. Students should consult the Graduate Coordinator before resigning from a funded appointment.

10. TRANSITION FROM PHD TO MS

A transition from the PhD to an MS may be appropriate for many reasons: the student concludes that the MS is the right terminal degree, research interests or career plans change, funding or advisor capacity is no longer available, an employment opportunity arises, or a required PhD milestone is not passed. The transition is not automatic and is not a disciplinary outcome.

10.1 REVIEW OF ELIGIBILITY

The student submits a written petition to the DoGS and the Graduate Coordinator with a brief statement of the reason for the request. The Graduate Committee, in consultation with the faculty advisor and the supervisory committee where one exists, reviews whether the student can complete all MS requirements. The review addresses completed coursework and research credits, GPA, any remedial coursework, the thesis or non-thesis option, supervisory committee requirements, the comprehensive exam or thesis defense requirement, and the expected completion timeline.

10.2 THESIS AND NON-THESIS OPTIONS

For the thesis MS, the student must have a faculty advisor willing to supervise the thesis and a properly constituted three-member supervisory committee. For the non-thesis MS, the student must satisfy the Department's coursework and comprehensive examination requirements. Any use of research or independent study credits toward the non-thesis MS is subject to the limits and petition requirements stated in the Graduate Handbook.

10.3 STUDENTS SUPPORTED BY PROJECT FUNDING

A student who has been supported as a Research Assistant or otherwise funded from a sponsored project toward the PhD is normally expected to complete a thesis MS, so that the research supported by the project results in a documented scholarly product.

A funded student who wishes to transition to the non-thesis MS must obtain written approval from the faculty member or members who provided that financial support. The written approval is submitted with the petition and, where approval is given, the Transition Plan must state how any outstanding project deliverables, data, documentation, and authorship expectations will be handled. If the supporting faculty member declines to approve a non-thesis transition, the student may ask the DoGS to review the matter. The DoGS may consult the Graduate Committee as needed and may recommend approval to the Department Chair. The Department Chair may then approve a non-

thesis transition where a thesis MS is not feasible — for example, where the project has ended, the advisor is no longer at the University, or a thesis advisor cannot be identified.

10.4 PLAN AND APPROVAL

The Department Chair makes the final departmental decision on the recommendation of the Graduate Committee. The written Transition Plan must state the approved MS path, remaining requirements, expected graduation term, funding implications, enrollment requirements, and any data, authorship, or project obligations. Approval of a PhD to MS transition does not guarantee continued funding. The MS degree is awarded only upon full completion of all requirements.

International students must consult ISSS before a change in degree program, since program level and expected completion date affect immigration records.

11. VOLUNTARY WITHDRAWAL

A student considering withdrawal should consult the faculty advisor, the DoGS, and the Graduate Coordinator before taking action, and should be informed of the academic, funding, tuition benefit, health insurance, visa, and transcript implications, as well as any conditions on future re-admission. Where the student has been supported on a research project, an exit plan should address data, code, lab notebooks, project materials, authorship, intellectual property, and any remaining project obligations. Withdrawal is documented in writing and processed through the required University and departmental forms. International students must consult ISSS before withdrawing or dropping below required enrollment.

A student who withdraws in good standing may be encouraged to consider a leave of absence instead, which preserves the option to return without reapplying.

12. LEAVE OF ABSENCE AND VACATION SEMESTER

Leave of absence and vacation semester requests are governed by the Graduate Handbook and by University and Registrar requirements, including eligible reasons, the one-year maximum, parental leave provisions, and the requirement that requests be submitted before the last day of classes of the semester for which leave is sought. Students receiving RA, TA, or fellowship support must consult the Graduate Coordinator before requesting leave, because leave affects funding, tuition benefit eligibility, health insurance, payroll, research obligations, and visa status. International students on F-1 or J-1 visas must obtain ISSS approval before a vacation semester or reduced course load.

13. ACADEMIC PROBATION AND DISMISSAL

Academic probation and academic dismissal are not transitions under this document. They are governed by the Academic Dismissal Policies & Procedures in the Graduate Handbook and by the Graduate School's Graduate Academic Standing, Performance, and Probation Guidelines, which set out the required written notice of deficiencies, the opportunity to improve, the expectation of a probationary semester before dismissal for academic performance, and consultation with the Graduate School.

Where a student facing probation or possible dismissal remains eligible for a different degree path, a transition under this document — most often a PhD to MS transition — may be considered alongside, but does not substitute for, the process in the Handbook. Appeals of academic probation, academic dismissal, and other Academic Actions follow University Policy 6-100 and Rule R6-100C as described in the Handbook under Formal Dispute Resolution.

14. TRANSITIONS ARISING FROM ADVISOR–STUDENT CONFLICT

Where a transition is being considered because the advisor–student working relationship has broken down, the parties should first follow the CVEEN Graduate Student Conflict Resolution Guidelines and the Informal Dispute Resolution process in the Graduate Handbook: direct conversation, then consultation with the Graduate Coordinator and the DoGS, then structured departmental review if needed.

If those steps do not resolve the matter, or if a transition is agreed to be the best outcome, the process in this document applies without modification. A transition that follows a conflict is documented, planned, and approved in exactly the same way as any other transition, and carries no additional consequence for either party.

15. DOCUMENTATION

The following should be maintained by the responsible party and, once a transition is approved, retained by the Graduate Coordinator:

- Written expectations for academic progress, research duties, RA/TA duties, deliverables, and timelines.
- Semester Performance Evaluations and written follow-up where performance was rated Needs Improvement or Unsatisfactory.
- Appointment and funding letters, tuition benefit records, and written notice of any change in support.
- The written transition request and any supporting documentation.
- Written summaries of transition meetings, including agreed next steps and deadlines.
- The signed Transition Plan.
- The written decision, including its basis, effective date, and effect on funding and enrollment.

16. RELATED POLICIES AND RESOURCES

- [Graduate School — Graduate Academic Standing, Performance, and Probation Guidelines](#)
- [University Policy 6-100, Instruction and Evaluation](#)
- [Rule R6-100C, Appeals of Academic Actions](#)
- [University Policy 6-309, Academic Staff, Educational Trainees, Postdoctoral Fellows and Medical Housestaff](#)
- [University Policy 6-400, Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities](#)
- [University Policy 6-410, Student Academic Performance, Academic Conduct, and Professional and Ethical Conduct](#)
- [Graduate School Tuition Benefit Program Guidelines](#)

- [Graduate School Code of Conduct](#)
- [Registrar — Leave of Absence](#)
- [Price College of Engineering — Academic Appeals](#)
- [CVEEN Graduate Student Conflict Resolution Guidelines](#)