University of Southern California

Neuroscience Graduate Program

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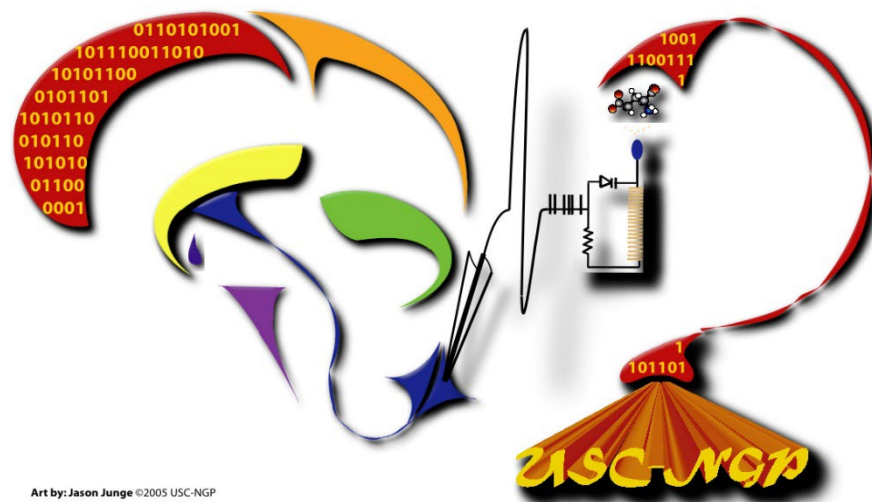
Orientation Handbook – 2025

Available on the NGP website

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I.   Welcome

Welcome to the Neuroscience Graduate Program (NGP) at USC. Neuroscience is a discipline that integrates many traditional academic fields. NGP was established in 1994 to coordinate neuroscience research at USC, and to foster graduate training that leads to focused research within an interdisciplinary context. NGP is the only university-wide interdisciplinary PhD program, and holds a special administrative place at USC, overseen by the Office of the Provost rather than a department or school.

NGP typically has 90-100 PhD students and over 120 affiliated faculty members. The faculty hold primary appointments in more than 20 departments in the Dornsife College of Letters, Arts & Sciences, Viterbi School of Engineering, Keck School of Medicine, Ostrow School of Dentistry, Davis School of Gerontology, and the Mann School of Pharmacy.

Laboratories associated with NGP are located on four separate USC campuses. Administration of the NGP is located in the Hedco Neuroscience Building (HNB) on the University Park Campus (UPC), with a satellite office in the Center for Health Professionals Building (CHP) on the Health Science Campus (HSC). Currently, UPC is home to just under half of the laboratories run by NGP faculty, including buildings housing the Sections of Neurobiology, Human and Evolutionary Biology, and Molecular Biology of the Department of Biological Sciences, and the Departments of Psychology, Economics, Computer Science, Biomedical Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Dornsife Center for Brain and Creativity, and the School of Gerontology. The largest number of faculty are located at HSC. This campus has faculty in the Zilkha Neurogenetic Institute, the Stevens Neuroimaging and Informatics Institute, the Broad Center for Regenerative Medicine and Stem Cell Research, in the Departments of Integrative Anatomical Sciences, Neurology, Ophthalmology, Physiology and Neuroscience, Psychiatry, and in the Schools of Pharmacy and Dentistry (Occupational Sciences, Biokinesiology, and Physical Therapy). The University operates frequent shuttles that travel between UPC and HSC. NGP faculty at Children's Hospital of Los Angeles (CHLA) have research programs that emphasize developmental neuroscience and translational developmental neurogenetics. CHLA is located approximately 15- 20 minutes from UPC and HSC campuses. There are NGP faculty and students located at the USC Imaging Genetics Center (IGC), which is approximately 30 minutes west of UPC in Marina Del Rey. Finally, a few faculty have research programs at USC-Rancho Los Amigos in Downey and a satellite facility in Alhambra.

Thus, you will have many opportunities to perform exciting, high-impact neuroscience research at USC. You will become an expert in your chosen research area, which will be the subject of your dissertation. Further, you will obtain professional training that will arm you with the additional tools and knowledge that will facilitate your successful future in science-related occupations. In the past 10 years, 98% of our graduates hold positions related to their neuroscience training.

To take maximal advantage of NGP, you will need to know the way the program operates administratively. This orientation handbook provides you with this information. Over the years, many faculty, staff and students have contributed to the evolution of this handbook. It will assist you in adjusting to life as a graduate student in Los Angeles and at USC. Most importantly, it will

serve as a source to which you will refer during your graduate studies to provide you with guidance in meeting your milestones and following NGP and USC Graduate School rules. **Thorough reading and understanding of the content in the Orientation Handbook is a <u>requirement</u> for all students. In addition, rules established by the USC Graduate School apply to NGP students. It is <u>YOUR RESPONSIBILITY</u> to know and comply with all guidelines of the Program. A claim by any NGP student, such as "I did not know the rules", is an unacceptable excuse for not meeting a program milestone or specific requirements and rules.** Our students typically experience few problems, and the Directors and Administrative Staff are available and very helpful in answering <u>any</u> questions that you may have. Please note that some USC Graduate School and NGP requirements, rules, and options might change from time to time to improve the quality of the Program. We will inform you of any such changes promptly and clearly. Major rule changes regarding NGP guidelines may be 'grandfathered' at the discretion of the NGP Director and Executive Committee. Changes will not add further obstacles to your success in obtaining your PhD in Neuroscience at USC.

If you have any questions about the program, do not hesitate to ask. We think you will find that all of the faculty, students, and staff that make up NGP are here to help you achieve your goals of becoming an outstanding neuroscientist.

Good luck, and thanks again for choosing USC and our program for your graduate studies!

Ruth Wood, PhD
Director, Neuroscience Graduate Program

John Monterosso, PhD
Associate Director, Neuroscience Graduate Program

Dear 2025 NGP Cohort,

Congratulations on your admission to the Neuroscience Graduate Program (NGP) at USC and welcome to the Trojan Family**!** My name is Jessica Morrel, and I am honored to serve as the elected president of the Neuroscience Graduate Forum (NGF), the student body representing all NGP students, including you! NGF exists to: 1) to foster a **supportive and inclusive community** of neuroscience graduate students here at USC, and 2) to **support** students in their **transition** into and **navigation** of graduate school, and to help **prepare** them for life after completion of graduate studies.

In pursuit of these goals, NGF offers a plethora of student-led programming, including professional development workshops and networking opportunities, social events, mentorship, and more. NGF is run by a team of elected students who are passionate about improving NGP and creating a thriving and supportive environment for their peers. It is a wonderful group of people, and I strongly encourage any and all interested students to apply for roles in NGF or reach out for more information. NGF is only as strong as the students who shape it.

As **NGF President** for the 2025-2026 academic year, I will work alongside and support an incredible NGF Executive Committee to ensure meaningful programming, student support, and achievement of our NGF vision. I will also serve as the primary liaison between students, faculty, and NGP leadership. Most importantly, I am here to advocate for and support the NGP student body and NGF Executive Committee. This past year, under the leadership of **Riley Elmer**, NGF made great strides in expanding its events and uplifting student engagement, providing new and unique opportunities for student involvement in events such as the NGF symposium. This year, we will build on that momentum. Therefore, our vision this year is:

<div align="center">

COLLABORATE & UPLIFT:
Advancing Community and Empowering Resilience

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I am excited to introduce the *phenomenal* team of students who will help bring this vision to life.

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The 2025-2026 NGF Executive Committee

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As **Vice President,** Zoe Tsokolas will be my right hand, assisting with the goals of NGF, overseeing collaborations with other student organizations, and serving as the point of contact for students in Year 2 and above. As **New Student Liaison**, Kevin Camey is here to support your transition into graduate school and ensure a smooth and positive start for incoming students.

As **Director of Professional Development (PD),** Suhani Amin will work with both academic and non-academic partners to create engaging seminars, workshops, and networking events and oversee the PD team. As **Networking Liaison,** Shangzhou Xia will connect NGP with outside organizations to provide a plethora of relevant opportunities open to students and seek potential speakers for events. The **First Year Liaison of Professional Development** is the final position in the PD team, and is open for applications! In this role, you would assist with finding speakers or other networking opportunities, assist with event planning, and identify potential career exploration opportunities for Year 1 students.

As **Director of Programming,** Tamara Jafar will serve as the primary point of contact for most NGF-related events and oversee the Programming team in the planning, scheduling, coordination, and execution of these events. Our **Service and Outreach Liaison,** Jingyang Cai is responsible for incorporating service and outreach opportunities from external organizations into NGF opportunities and collaborating with the NGP Connectome and EmpowerED teams. As **Symposium Liaison,** David Johnson will serve as the chair of the NGP Symposium Committee, coordinating and overseeing all planning for the day. Our **Retreat Liaison,** Nushka Remec is the chair of the NGP Retreat Committee, working with students, faculty, and administrators to plan and coordinate details of the Retreat. The final position in the Programming team is the **First Year Liaison of Programming,** which is open for applications! As First Year Liaison, you would assist with brainstorming ideas for NGF activities, event planning, and engaging Year 1 students in activities. Please apply if you are interested!

Our **Director of Media,** Emma Carpenter, oversees all NGP media efforts, including the program website, monthly newsletter, and social media accounts in order to increase engagement. Finally, as **Chief Editor, NGF Newsletter,** Eryn Perry is in charge of the NGF monthly newsletter, highlighting NGP and NGF events, opportunities, and student accomplishments.

In addition to NGF, there are several other opportunities to get involved in NGP and NGF activities and programming. We will continue to advertise positions and opportunities as they arise throughout the year. Here are a few…

- **NGP Connectome Committee** - focused on fostering community and belonging in NGP

- **Younger Researchers Program** - gives you a chance to mentor high-school students with university-level research

- **AI Working Group** - helping to develop AI literacy and skills training within NGP and program-wide AI usage policies

- **NGP Annual Retreat Committee** - helps organize the retreat, select speakers, and plan the social events

- **NGP Annual Research Symposium Committee** - organizes the symposium, chooses speakers, and handles logistical event-related planning

- **Distinguished Speakers Committee** - selects academic and non-academic leaders to give in-person workshops and talks at NGP

Graduate school can be challenging, but our goal is to make it empowering, supportive, and community-driven. We are committed to creating meaningful opportunities for connection, professional development, and growth. I look forward to getting to know each and every one of you during this academic year!

Warm Regards,
Jessica Morrel
Neuroscience Graduate Forum President

II.   Introduction to the Graduate School

The mission of the USC Graduate School is to provide a distinguished educational experience at the graduate level for an outstanding and diverse student body, to support and celebrate graduate student achievements, and to lead in establishing and communicating policies, standards, and processes related to graduate education.

Purposes of the PhD Program Handbook

Graduate student success is the result of a collaborative effort among students working at their highest levels, faculty dedicated to high-quality mentorship, and staff who coordinate and advise. One of the most important ingredients in this cooperative effort is a shared understanding about what is required and what resources and supports are available.

This document serves as a roadmap for PhD students. It offers a review of expectations for students and for the faculty and administrative staff who support them. The handbook provides three types of information: 1) guidance on program requirements, including university and departmental policies, resources, and expectations; 2) practical advice for common challenges at USC; and 3) information about relevant support services and professional development opportunities.

We hope that the handbook serves as a valuable resource for PhD success, providing students with the information to complete their programs while maintaining academic momentum and personal well-being.

The handbook includes policies and practices noted in the university's catalogue, collective bargaining agreement, and other sources. It does not fully address the terms of the collective bargaining agreement, which is available for your reference on the Graduate School's website.

The PhD at USC

The Doctor of Philosophy at USC is a full-time program. It is a rigorous course of study that requires original research, professional maturity, sustained intellectual focus, and academic discipline. Students are expected to devote full-time study to this degree and not undertake employment or other time-consuming commitments during the academic year, from the end of August through mid-May.

During the summer, you are expected to work intensively in the laboratory, engage in full-time research, take courses to fulfill program requirements, or participate in a national course to learn a new discipline or skill set

III.   Program Overview and Requirements

NGP is an interdisciplinary, university-wide training program that is administered with an independent budget from the Office of the Provost, with each school and affiliate contributing to NGP based on faculty and student distribution. Most NGP-relevant information, including the roster of faculty, courses, events, and seminars, can be found on the NGP website.

Key program leadership includes:

Contact	Title	Responsibility
Dawn Burke UPC: HNB 117 HSC: CHP 201 (213) 740-4551	Director of Student Services	NGP Program Support
Charly Viola UPC: HNB 120-H (213) 740-2245	Graduate Program Manager	NGP Student Support
Ruth Wood UPC: HNB 117 HSC: BMT 410	Director of NGP	Program Oversight Advisement
John Monterosso UPC: BCI 252	Associate Director	Program Oversight Advisement

Graduate study in NGP is designed to provide each student with a broad, fundamental background in neuroscience coupled with detailed knowledge and expertise in their chosen area of concentration. The coursework in Neuroscience centers on two core courses, two concentration courses, a communications course, quantitative methods training, and an ethics in research course. Because neuroscience involves multiple disciplines, selection of courses to fulfill concentration area requirements are flexible. In addition, various faculty members give advanced courses and seminars on specialized research topics each semester. Each student's curriculum can therefore be tailored to the particular area of interest of that individual. Regardless of your research area, NGP expects all students to achieve core competency in the discipline of neuroscience and expertise in specialty areas.

Please see the Timeline to Degree for an overview of all required coursework and program milestones. A list of courses pre-approved to satisfy the NGP Curriculum Requirements is listed on the NGP website. This list is updated each semester and is a helpful resource when considering course selections.

NGP Program Events

Distinguished Speaker Series
An important part of your training is the opportunity to attend and participate in research seminars and colloquia given by visiting scientists. The NGP Distinguished Speaker Series brings student-hosted neuroscientists to visit the program during the fall and spring and typically includes lunch or a reception with students. **Irrespective of the campus location, all NGP students are expected to attend the NGP Distinguished Speaker seminars.**

Seminars provide an opportunity to broaden your scope of interests and knowledge in the many diverse subfields of neuroscience. You will develop skills in articulating your research interests and research progress and make important contacts for future training and advancement. You may also want to review seminar offerings from other departments and academic units:
- Brain and Creativity Institute
- Hearing & Communication Neuroscience
- Keck School of Medicine
- Neurobiology Section
- Stem Cell

Annual NGP Retreat
NGP sponsors a weekend retreat at an informal offsite location in the Los Angeles area. The retreat is free for all NGP students, and **all students are required to attend.** Through informal social gatherings, meals, and discussions, the retreat is an opportunity for all new students and their senior peers to exchange experiences as NGP students and learn about the diversity of neuroscience research at USC. Talks are given by a few NGP faculty and graduate students. For first-year students, the retreat can assist in making decisions about potential rotation laboratories.

Annual NGF Symposium
Every spring the Neuroscience Graduate Forum (NGF) sponsors a graduate-student symposium consisting of student talks, faculty talks, and poster presentations that **all NGP students are required to attend**. These presentations are an opportunity to show the NGP community the research that students are presenting and provide a forum for students to learn to deliver scientific presentations.

All NGP students are required to give a talk or present a poster at the Annual NGF Symposium. First-year students may present materials from their rotations, undergraduate research, other prior research, or from a peer-reviewed paper that they wish to introduce to the NGP community. Awards are given for outstanding student posters in a variety of categories. Awards for the Spirit of Adam Mezher Travel Fund and the Bosco Tjan Faculty Mentor Award are also presented.

Journal Clubs
Journal clubs and similar gatherings will be an important part of your academic and professional development. Fair and scholarly critiquing of research reports is an activity that will persist throughout any science-related career. Journal clubs provide an opportunity to develop these skill sets. While not required, you should plan to attend a journal club regularly throughout your time as an NGP student.

Journal clubs are informal meetings of students, postdocs, and faculty who share interests in a particular field. The usual format is to discuss a recent research paper. The styles of the journal clubs vary; one participant may be asked to present the paper and lead the discussion, or the group in attendance participates collectively in discussions. Active participation in a journal club is a reflection of your own commitment and interest in performing world-class neuroscience research in a chosen area. Your motivation for attending a journal club speaks to your commitment to pursue rigorous, highly competitive research for your dissertation. Reading current literature helps to place your own research in a context of current advances in your chosen area of neuroscience. These extremely important skills and experiences are essential in your transformation from graduate student to professional.

Academic Requirements

Quantitative Methods Boot Camp

The NIH has instituted robust requirements for graduate students to receive advanced training in quantitative methods and research reproducibility. NGP requires all entering first-year students to participate in a "boot camp: to learn basic methods to manage, analyze, simulate, and visualize research data. The training is based in MatLab but designed to have broad application. Participation in boot camp is required, but is not graded. Students who can demonstrate substantive experience in quantitative methods, including programming with computer languages typically used for data analyses may instead serve as informal "TAs" for the camp, in coordination with the student instructors. This training provides NGP students the requisite background to take graduate-level courses offered at USC, and thus fulfills part of the quantitative training requirement of the Program. All NGP students are also required to take a graduate-level course in quantitative/statistical methods (see below).

Grades

At no time should the overall GPA drop below 3.0. A minimum grade of C (2.0) is required in a course to receive graduate credit. Work graded C- or below is unacceptable for subject or unit credit toward any doctoral program.

If your GPA falls below 3.0, you will not qualify for a Teaching or Research Assistantship or a fellowship, and you will be at risk of being dismissed from NGP as a graduate student in good standing. It is possible to receive a one-semester exception, to provide the student with an opportunity to raise their GPA to 3.0 or greater. **It is your responsibility to work with the NGP Administration to petition the Director and Graduate School to obtain the one-semester exception**.

Note that in addition to the University requirement, NGP requires that you achieve a cumulative 3.0 or better for the core courses NSCI 524 and NSCI 525. Failing to achieve this GPA in the two courses will trigger a review by the NGP Administration to determine whether dismissal from the program is warranted.

Unit Requirements

The minimum number of units for a doctoral degree is 60, including at least four units of 794ab Doctoral Dissertation. In NGP, at least 24 of the 60 units must be in the form of formal course work; the remainder may be in the form of research/dissertation units. At least 24 units must be completed at USC (excluding Doctoral Dissertation 794).

To take advantage of the many relevant courses offered by USC and the graduate program, students may take more than 25 units of coursework. Students are urged to discuss course plans with their mentor and can consult the members of their Qualifying Exam Committee about coursework that will enhance progress towards completion of the degree.

NGP Curriculum Requirements (25 units)

1. Advanced Neurosciences: NSCI 524 and 525 (8 units total)
   These required neuroscience core courses, taken during the first year, offer an advanced overview of brain research, from molecular biology to cognitive neuroscience. The courses are purposefully broad, intending to provide students from different disciplines the basic language to approach all of brain research. The goal is to provide students with the tools to read and critique any article published in the Journal of Neuroscience, the official journal of the North American Society for Neuroscience.

2. Neuroscience Communication: NSCI 539 (4 units total)
   Taken during the first four semesters, it provides each student with an opportunity to organize and give presentations to peers, receive constructive feedback to improve presentation skills, provide constructive feedback to their NGP student peers, and develop skills in science communication.

3. Responsible Conduct of Research: INTD 500 (1 unit)
   The purpose of this course is to engage current research trainees in discussions about the responsible conduct of science.

4. Statistics*: PM 510, PSYC 501, or equivalent (4 units)
   Students with a strong background in statistics may submit a petition to Dawn Burke to take a 500-level computer science, informatics or another relevant course that addresses probabilistic approaches to quantitative research. The course syllabus for the substitute course must be provided, as well as evidence of previous formal, advanced statistics training to obtain approval from the Director.

5. Quantitative and Computational Course* (4 units)

6. Additional Neuroscience-Related Course* (4 units)

*The following rules apply to the Statistics Requirement, Quantitative and Computational Requirement, and the Additional Neuroscience-Related Requirement:
   o Two requirements must be fulfilled by 4-unit courses. One requirement may be fulfilled by either two 2-unit courses OR a 3-unit course (for a total of 24 units).
   o Two requirements must be fulfilled by 500-level courses. One requirement may be fulfilled by a 400-level course.

- o Review the [list of courses pre-approved to satisfy the NGP Curriculum Requirements](). Courses not on this list must be approved by NGP Administration prior to enrolling in the course to confirm if it will satisfy any of the requirements.

While only one 400-level course can be used to satisfy the NGP Curriculum Requirements, the Graduate School allows up to 8 units of 400-level courses to be applied to the 60-unit degree requirement.

Lab Rotations

Choosing a Laboratory Rotation

The process of selecting a laboratory for a research rotation involves taking the time to set up a meeting and discuss potential research projects with an NGP faculty member. All first-year students are encouraged to meet with several faculty to establish a dialogue regarding research projects and lab availability. We strongly recommend scheduling all meetings with faculty in advance. The conversation with faculty should include the following:

- o Is the faculty member accepting rotation students?
- o Does the faculty member have funding to support a student from year 2 forward?
- o Do the lab research projects align with personal research interests and goals?

If any answer to the above questions from the faculty member is no, you cannot select that laboratory for a rotation.

Students can begin contacting potential rotation laboratories for a first rotation prior to the start of the fall semester. There is no need to commit to the 2nd and 3rd rotations until you've had discussions with NGP faculty. It is important to emphasize that the conversations with prospective faculty commit neither the student nor the faculty member to agree to the rotation. You likely will meet with multiple faculty members about a possible rotation. Once you decide to rotate with one specific laboratory and the head of the laboratory agrees, you must notify the other faculty with whom you met that you will not be joining their lab for that rotation. This can be done by email or an in-person meeting.

Laboratory Rotation Protocol

Students rotate through three labs during the fall and spring semesters, and each rotation lasts 9 weeks on average. However, students may petition the Director if they wish to do two rotations in the same lab, which generally means the student will join that laboratory in year 2. This requires petitioning the Director for permission and a written letter from the laboratory mentor stating that they will commit to financially support the student in year 2.

A fourth rotation only occurs as necessary when a student has difficulty identifying a dissertation lab before the end of the spring semester of their first year. The student must consult with Charly Viola as soon as possible to obtain approval for the additional rotation. At the end of each rotation, students should have a discussion with the laboratory PI about their rotation performance and if the laboratory is a good fit for their dissertation research. Students cannot make their final mentor selection until the end of the third rotation.

Laboratory Performance Expectations

Pursuing a PhD as a student in NGP is a wonderful opportunity to grow and mature as a first-class researcher, but it is challenging. Our faculty are high performance scientists and expect graduate students to put in the necessary time and energy to be successful, while at the same time doing well in coursework. Rotations will be flexible with respect to the lab work. In your first year, there typically will be 5 hours of scheduled class time/week. Along with attending a journal club, seminars, and the required and ancillary course readings and study time, the majority of your time will be spent in the laboratory doing rotation research.

The laboratory in which you perform your rotations often will have ongoing, small projects. To make sure that you have hands-on laboratory experiences, students usually work on one of these projects as part of the rotation. While rotation students often are trained by senior graduate students, postdoctoral fellows or research faculty in the laboratory, you should expect to meet regularly (individual and laboratory/group meetings) with the laboratory PI during the rotation. If a PI is rarely available to meet, this an indicator of limited future access during the important years of dissertation research. Keep in mind that the rotation should provide you with insight regarding the research focus of the laboratory, the style of the laboratory PI with regard to mentoring, and other members (graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, research staff) of the laboratory with whom you will interact daily. This information will help you make an informed decision regarding your final selection.

At the end of each rotation, the PI will provide a written evaluation of your performance. This evaluation is part of the criteria used for evaluating students to receive appointments on training grants and for monitoring student progress in their first year in NGP. Please note that the evaluation is not tied to getting a specific experiment to work. Rather, demonstrating a serious commitment to spending time in the laboratory, proficiency in reading original literature in the area of research, the ability to learn new methodologies and analytical skills, and participation in laboratory-specific activities contribute to the evaluation. Poor performance in a laboratory rotation is taken as seriously as poor performance in a core course. Multiple poor performances in rotations may be grounds for dismissal from NGP.

The specific time periods for each rotation are indicated in the Rotation Documents that must be completed and signed by the lab PI and student. **The rotation contract form must be submitted before the start of each rotation.** This is the only mechanism through which the program can track your research progress in the first year. **You cannot start a rotation early or end late.** Upon completion of each rotation, students must submit a rotation summary form within one week summarizing their project and experience in the lab. These forms are located on the NGP website under Current Students.

The laboratory rotation schedule for 2025 – 2026 is as follows:

        Lab Rotation #1: September 8th – November 7th

                Rotation Contract #1 Due: September 2

                Rotation Summary #1 Due: November 14

        Lab Rotation #2: November 17th – February 6th

Rotation Contract #2 Due: November 10

Rotation Summary #2 Due: February 13

Lab Rotation #3: February 16th – April 17th

Rotation Contract #3 Due: February 9

Rotation Summary #3 Due: April 24

Students should consult the faculty member regarding lab schedules and expectations during holidays that fall within a rotation. If you have a pre-planned personal activity that will take you away from the laboratory, you must inform the laboratory PI prior to the beginning of the rotation. In addition, be sure to contact the laboratory PI if you encounter an unexpected health or other personal issue that may interfere with your time in the laboratory. Faculty look for red flags, and not showing up to the laboratory regularly, or being unengaged while there, is a major concern that can be addressed by open communication.

Laboratory Final Selection - Mentor Matching
Students are responsible for securing their preferred dissertation research laboratory during May of the spring semester. Like rotations, consent by both student and laboratory PI are required. In order to complete the final selection process, ensure that all 3 sets of the Rotation Documents (Rotation Contract and Rotation Summary) are complete and submitted to the NGP office. Once the selection has been made, email Charly Viola, noting your proposed faculty mentor. Charly will contact the identified faculty member to request written approval and letter of financial support. Unless there is an approved petition for a fourth rotation, mentor selections must be finalized by the end of the spring semester. While the NGP Administration and other faculty are here to be as helpful as possible, ultimately it is each student's responsibility to secure a dissertation laboratory. Failure to do so is grounds for dismissal from NGP.

Mentors are responsible for your stipend and health insurance support after you complete the first year of study (beginning August 16th of year 2). Contact their appropriate department officer for information regarding stipend payment and health insurance, beginning in year 2.

Advisement

For students who have joined a lab, their mentor will be their primary resource for advisement, including guidance on course enrollment decisions. First-year students will meet with the NGP Director or Associate Director for advice on course enrollment and rotations.

For students who do not have an established mentor (primarily, students in their first year) the NGP administrative team will serve as an advisement resource. To this end, students will meet with either the Director or Associate Director during each semester of their first year. These meetings can be quite helpful in selecting students' rotation laboratories and maximizing opportunities for joining a dissertation laboratory that matches their research interest. Throughout the first year, students are encouraged to consult with the NGP administration about grades, course selection, rotation selection, and program milestones and expectations.

NGP Students' Options for Handling a Problem with Mentor

On occasion, a student may encounter difficulty with a mentor. In many cases, open communication with the mentor will lead to resolution of the problem. But of course, not always. When a problem persists, NGP students have several additional options:

1. For students who have a formed committee, consultation with the committee chair can be a good option. The committee chair will often have relevant knowledge, and the discussion can be kept private (if that is preferable). In some cases, the student and chair may agree that it is best to meet with the full committee to discuss the issue.

2. Students can meet with the ombuds at either UPC or HSC

3. Students can meet with the NGP Director or Associate Director

A student must hold a graduate trainee position in good standing in a laboratory of an NGP faculty member as their mentor, or their appointment in the program will be terminated. When a decision during a semester is made by either the student to move to a new laboratory, or by the faculty member to terminate their role as mentor, a new laboratory must be identified and agreed upon by the student and new mentor; a plan of dissertation research must be in place at or before the start of the following semester.

Student Evaluations

The NGP Administration reviews the performance of each student each semester. Prior to joining a lab, the program evaluation of research progress occurs through laboratory rotations by faculty.

Once a student has joined a lab, their mentor will submit an evaluation each semester, taking into account their grades, participation in classes, research progress, TA performance (if applicable), progress in satisfying degree requirements, meeting NGP milestones, the extent to which the student followed previous recommendations, and other matters relevant to professional advancement are considered during the review process. Students will receive an evaluation letter from the NGP Director containing one of three ratings:

1. Acceptable performance

2. Acceptable performance, assuming you take certain actions

3. Unacceptable performance

Students should meet with their mentor at the end of each semester to discuss their overall progress and review the evaluation. A rating of '2' or '3' triggers a meeting with either the Director or Associate Director to discuss remedies. Evaluations serve to monitor student progress and are used solely for internal tracking and making decisions about status in the program. They are <u>not</u> placed in the student's official records or transcripts that are shared outside of the University. Two or more semesters with a rating of (3) over the course of the program is grounds for dismissal from NGP.

Annual Progress Report (APR)

Starting in year 2, all students are required to meet with their Qualifying Exam or Dissertation Committee at least once every academic year (August - July).

Schedule a meeting time well in advance (4-6 months) and make sure that all committee members can attend. This must be made in advance because faculty travel and may have many responsibilities outside of their laboratory. If your mentor or another member of your Qualifying Exam or Dissertation Committee will be on sabbatical, you still must schedule an annual APR meeting. For this situation, the faculty member may join by video or audio conferencing. Keep in mind that the committee chair and the mentor must be present for the APR. Notify Charly Viola if you encounter difficulty scheduling the meeting. The Qualifying Examination serves as the required APR meeting for that academic year. Only committee members and the student are allowed to attend the APR meeting. You may request that the NGP Director or Associate Director also attend, but that is the only exception.

The APR meeting is organized for the student to provide an update to their committee, including details of research and academic progress, to receive constructive feedback, to raise any concerns, to hear about future experimental plans, and for the committee to help solve problems that may have arisen since the last meeting. Note that students are encouraged to seek out research, academic or personal advice by meeting individually with members of their Qualifying Exam or Dissertation Committee at any time.

The student is responsible for submitting the APR summary form at the time of the annual meeting. The committee chair must submit a written summary, and all committee members must sign the completed form. The completed/signed form must be submitted within 2 weeks of the meeting. The APR form is on the NGP website under Current Students.

Individual Development Plan (IDP)
The Individual Development Plan (IDP) is a planning tool designed to help students identify annual progress, professional development needs, and career objectives. The IDP also serves as a valuable communication tool between PhD students, their research mentor, and their Qualifying Exam or Dissertation Committee. Students have the option of using the NGP IDP form (modified from Vanderbilt University with permission) or My IDP Science Careers, offered by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Both forms are available on the NGP website under Current Students.

The IDP is part of NGP's mentoring and professional development activities for each student, and is meant to:

o   Self-identify progress in training and accomplishments and goals from the previous year
o   Identify short-term solutions for improving performance
o   Set goals for the upcoming year, which may include learning new methods, defining specific research, academic, and professional development activities, and the time commitment needed to reach these goals
o   Define ways to develop specific skills and experience needed to complete research training and prepare for individualized long-term career goals

The IDP is not used to evaluate students. Rather, self-identification of short-term goals will

provide a clearer sense of expectations and help identify milestones for achieving objectives. The IDP provides a framework for long-term career planning by initiating ongoing conversations between the mentor, student, and Qualifying Exam/Dissertation Committees members.

Beginning in year 2, all students must complete the IDP with their mentor each year and submit a copy of the completed document to NGP administration by September 15th.

Qualifying Exam Committee

The Qualifying Exam Committee is responsible for supervising the student's preparation for the Competency and Qualifying Exams and for the fair and timely administration and evaluation of the written and oral parts of the Qualifying examination.

Students must establish their Qualifying Exam Committee prior to the end of the third semester. Students entering the program in 2025 must establish their Qualifying Exam by **October 15, 2026**. The *Appointment or Change of Qualifying Exam* or *Dissertation Committee* forms, available on the NGP website under Current Students, establish the committee for the qualifying exam. The form requires the signatures of each committee member and the NGP Program Director.

The Qualifying Exam Committee will oversee the Competency Exam in year 2 and the Qualifying Exam in year 3. Communicating with your committee about their expectations for your academic and research progress is imperative.

Choosing a committee is important and you should consult closely with your Mentor about the committee composition. Discuss key concepts, domain expertise, and research areas that would be beneficial to your short- and long-term research plans, particularly those that should be explored during the competency exam. Identify a short list of faculty whose research will complement your goals or help you consider pertinent issues, and meet with them to discuss how they would contribute to your committee. Ideally, you will develop a close professional relationship with these faculty members, which will be mutually beneficial throughout your academic and professional career.

The Qualifying Exam Committee is composed of five members. The committee chair and at least two additional members must have an appointment in NGP.

- o **Member 1 – Chair:** Must be NGP faculty; cannot be NGP Associate Member or your mentor.
- o **Member 2 – Mentor:** Must be NGP faculty.
- o **Member 3:** Must be NGP faculty.
- o **Member 4:** May be NGP, non-NGP, or External faculty.
- o **Member 5 – Outside Member:** Must be USC faculty. If NGP faculty, must be in a different department than your mentor. If non-NGP faculty, may be in your mentor's department.

A non-USC faculty member from another university can serve as an **External Member** (Member 4). They cannot serve as or replace the Outside Member and require approval from the

NGP Director. To request approval, email Charly Viola their current CV or resume and a short statement on the value they will add to your committee. All committees must have an **Outside Member**, and committees may only have one External Member.

The NGP Director has final approval over proposed Qualifying Exam Committees.

Changes in Qualifying Exam Committees
The *Appointment or Change of Qualifying Exam* or *Dissertation Committee* forms, available on the NGP website under Current Students, must be completed whenever there is a change to a Qualifying Exam committee.

Changes to the Qualifying Exam Committee must be made well in advance of the qualifying examination. Informal substitutions for the qualifying examination's written or oral parts are not permitted. Changes in a Qualifying Exam Committee are not permitted between the written and oral portions of the examination. Modifications made without the prior approval of the NGP Director are not recognized and may invalidate the examination.

A student may not change committee members after failing the qualifying examination the first time. The same faculty must reexamine the student on the same subject matter. If a faculty member is unable to serve on the committee, the NGP Director must be notified in writing in advance of the rescheduled exam to approve the change. The faculty replacement must be approved by the Director, and the student must file a change of committee form well in advance of the exam.

Competency and Qualifying Examinations

The Competency Exam (year 2) and Qualifying Examination (year 3) are meant to test students' core competencies in neuroscience and their ability to develop and conduct a dissertation research project. The exams are challenging but are not designed to trick students. Historically, almost all students have passed.

Scheduling the Competency and Qualifying Exams
Contact Charly Viola to begin the examination scheduling process. **There are specific semester deadlines for completing each exam.** Should there be any issues about meeting these requirements, you must make an appointment with the Director or Associate Director as soon as possible.

Competency Examination
Students will complete the Competency Exam before completing 24 units. Students must pass this examination to continue in the PhD program. Students who fail the competency exam will be given a written academic warning and are allowed one attempt to retake and pass the examination. If a student fails to pass the retake examination, they will be dismissed from the PhD program. Students who fail the Competency Exam are entitled to appeal pursuant to the Academic Dismissal Appeal procedure set forth in Section IX of this Handbook. The NGP Competency Examination is equivalent to a Screening Examination.

The Competency Examination provides an opportunity for students to express a deeper

understanding of the area of neuroscience that is relevant to their chosen research focus. The Competency Examination serves as a way for the student to become familiar with relevant research literature and eventually, to become able to place the experiments described in the dissertation proposal (written component of the Qualifying Examination) in the context of the larger field. This ability speaks to the background and significance of the research, an important component of any grant application.

The Competency Examination must be completed before the end of the summer semester in year 2. The Qualifying Exam Committee chair will obtain one question from each committee member, excluding the Outside member, for a total of four questions. The chair must approve the questions and then e-mail them to Charly Viola.

Charly will email the student the exam, instructions, and deadline the morning of the student's start date. Answers are due back via email by 11:59 PM PT exactly 4 weeks after the student received the exam questions. **There are no exceptions.** Turning in the answers after the established deadline will result in automatic failure, and the student will have to retake the exam. Students will dedicate significant time to completing the exam, which will greatly reduce the time and effort available for laboratory research and coursework. Ideally, students would be able to suspend their lab work entirely while completing the exam, although for some projects this is not feasible, and a small amount of lab work may be required. Students should discuss time allocation with their mentor and Qualifying Exam Committee chair prior to beginning the competency exam and refer any remaining questions to the Director.

Students can ask for clarification only from the chair or the Qualifying Exam Committee member who submitted the question. They may not discuss the questions or their answers with anyone else prior to submission. Each answer should be approximately 5 single-spaced pages in length, not including references.

Any primary research publications, references, or source material can be read by the student to facilitate answering the exam questions but must be acknowledged. Plagiarism is unacceptable and is grounds for failing the exam, as well as dismissal from the University. Students are expected to familiarize themselves with the full list of academic integrity standards and examples of violations outlined in the USC Student Handbook and sign the following Plagiarism Prevention Agreement:

> *I hereby accept that I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above Terms and Conditions relating to the competency examination procedures of the Neuroscience Graduate Program. I understand that I am expected to familiarize myself with the full list of academic integrity standards and examples of violations outlined in the USC Student Handbook. I certify that I will not plagiarize any portion of my NGP Competency Examination, nor will I engage in plagiarism at any point in my graduate studies at USC.*

Competency Examination – Preparation
We highly recommend students have their APR meeting with their Qualifying Exam Committee one month prior to the exam start date to discuss their general research area of interest, likely

topic, and question format(s) with their committee. Share the key concepts, related topics, or new information that would be beneficial to explore more deeply. This will help committee members write relevant questions and ensure the information is beneficial for future grant proposals and/or your written Qualifying Exam. Please keep in mind that the questions will not focus on the research project; rather, they will challenge students to demonstrate a fundamental and current understanding of research that has contributed to specific neuroscience principles. Sample question format styles include:

- o   Write a brief review of a specific topic
- o   Summarize, critically evaluate, and synthesize a large body of knowledge

Competency Examination – Grading
Each committee member will grade their question on a scale of 1.0 – 5.0 using 0.5 increments if necessary (1.0 as poor and 5.0 as exceptional). Students must receive a mean score of 3.3 or above **and** a minimum grade of 3.0 on each question to pass the exam. There are 3 possible outcomes:

- o   **Mean score 3.3 or above _and_ no grade below 3.0:** Pass.
- o   **Mean score between 3.3 and 3.0 _and_ no grade below 3.0:** The full committee must vote pass or no pass. Two or more negative votes by the committee will result in not passing.
- o   **Mean score below 3.0 _or_ one or more grade below 3.0:** No pass.

Failure to Pass the Competency Examination
Should the student not pass, they will receive a written warning and must meet with their committee chair to review the critiques of the exam answers. The student must retake and pass the Competency Examination under the following guidelines:

- o   For all questions scored under a 3.0, a new question from the committee member must be submitted for the retake examination.
- o   The student must retake and complete the examination within 3 months of receiving written notification of failure.

A second failure will result in dismissal from NGP and the University. Qualifying Exam Committee members may not be changed between first and second attempts at passing the exam, except in an exceptional circumstance, such as a committee member leaving the University.

The Qualifying Examination
The qualifying examination is designed to assess a student's readiness to undertake independent research for their dissertation. It is comprehensive and, in most programs, includes both written and oral parts. The goal of the qualifying exam is to ensure that the student, with the guidance of their Mentor, has developed a dissertation plan that the committee agrees would, if executed well, provide a sound basis for a dissertation.

Before taking the qualifying examination, the student must have met all of the university's and program's requirements for the PhD degree, except the dissertation. The student must have a GPA of at least 3.0 on all USC coursework available for graduate credit and the approval of their

Qualifying Exam Committee to proceed to the exam.

The qualifying examination has two portions that must be completed: the Writing Component and the Oral Component. The purpose of the Writing Component is to ensure that the student's dissertation research proposal is sound and likely to yield substantive and original findings. Students are encouraged to utilize the written component as a basis for fellowship grant applications, which is the typical format. The Oral Component is of particular importance for students to demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the proposed research. Students should be able to defend the written proposal, including the rationale, experimental design, data analyses, interpretation of results and potential pitfalls and solutions. Students should be able to answer questions that relate to topics tangential, but nonetheless relevant to the proposal. In addition, the oral exam is used to discern that any weaknesses identified in the written exam have been corrected.

If the student's written examination is satisfactory, the student may proceed to the oral portion of the exam. The student must complete the oral portion within 60 days of submitting the completed written portion to the Qualifying Exam Committee. If additional material is to be covered in the oral portion, the committee should notify the student of the content expectations in advance.

Students must submit the *Request to Take Qualifying Examination Form* no later than 30 days prior to the exam date. The form can be found on the NGP website under Current Students. All committee members may participate remotely, and remote participation should be indicated in writing on the Report on Qualifying Examination. Remote attendance policies are subject to change per the Graduate School.

The writing component in conjunction with the oral component must be completed before the end of the summer semester of year 3.

The Written Component
The Written Component is a research proposal, preferably in the format of a common federal funding source, e.g., an NIH NRSA pre/post-doctoral fellowship, NIH R01/R21 research grant, or NSF grant. After consultation with the mentor, the student will determine the agreed upon format choice. The subject will be the student's dissertation project. The final draft must be emailed to the committee, cc-ing Charly Viola, **no later than 3 weeks before the oral exam is scheduled**. There are no exceptions to this deadline, as faculty must have adequate time to carefully evaluate the written proposal. If a student feels they cannot meet this deadline, they must immediately contact their committee chair, mentor, and the NGP Director to arrange an adequate solution. Failure to meet this deadline will require rescheduling of the oral exam.

The written proposal should be viewed as a solid framework for the dissertation research project. New data often can inform a necessary change to experimental approaches, or even the introduction of new experiments. There should be preliminary data to support the proposal, but it need not be excessive, and the NGP and faculty recognize that the dissertation project may change to varying degrees. This flexibility is a normal part of the scientific process and should not delay submission and completion of the Qualifying Examination.

The written proposal must include preliminary/pilot research results obtained by the student, as

expected for any grant application. This pilot data should accomplish at least one of the following goals:

- o   Demonstrate some familiarity with techniques to be used
- o   Establish the validity of underlying hypotheses
- o   Justify the experimental design

Note that it may not be necessary to obtain positive results to meet these goals.

Students often underestimate the time needed to write a proposal, so ensure that there is sufficient time dedicated to writing. Speak to your mentor or committee members about typical time allotments that they use for writing grant applications. The research data in the proposal should be original and performed by the student. In addition, while you must write a complete initial draft of the document, you are encouraged to seek advice from your mentor in revising subsequent versions. This is a learning opportunity, and it is expected that such interactions will improve the final document submitted to your committee for evaluation. Students have the opportunity to take grant-writing workshops offered by the Graduate School. Typically, workshop formats consist of drafting fellowship proposals that can help the student with proposal organization, quality and clarity of the science writing.

The Oral Component
The date for the oral component of the exam is scheduled by the student through the NGP office after consultation with the Qualifying Exam Committee. The examination must be scheduled when it is possible for all committee members, including the outside member, to participate. All Qualifying Exam Committee members may participate remotely.

Arrange a mock oral exam with post-qual students or postdocs with similar interests to prepare for the oral component Remember that no one, including NGP faculty, can answer every question perfectly. Maintaining composure during the exam is important and will help you focus on the research.

Common topics that your Qualifying Exam Committee may ask include:

- o   The rationale for performing the proposed studies
- o   Specific details of experimental design, including statistical methods
- o   The scientific or technical basis of methods used
- o   Data interpretation, experimental pitfalls, and alternative approaches
- o   The global significance or health-relatedness of the project
- o   Relation of your project to other work in the field
- o   Your knowledge of literature relevant to the project
- o   Your ability to synthesize and summarize ideas

In preparing for the exam, remember that it is a unique opportunity to receive constructive feedback regarding your proposal from seasoned scientists, which is exactly what successful researchers experience throughout their careers.

NOTE: Only committee members and the student taking the examination may be present during

the oral component, although the Director or Associate Director may choose to attend. Other students, faculty, or guests may not attend.

Grading Procedures for the Qualifying Examination:
The status of the Qualifying Examination (pass/fail) will be determined by the student's committee after a short meeting of committee members immediately following the oral examination. The decision is determined by a majority vote of all Qualifying Exam Committee members. The committee chair should write a summary representing the opinions of those who voted 'pass' and those who voted 'no pass'. Should the majority of committee members vote 'no pass', the student will be informed in person and then receive a written letter of the outcome.

Outcomes of the Qualifying Exam
There are three possible results of a qualifying exam:

A. Pass, and proceed to candidacy based on a favorable vote by a majority of committee members.

B. Fail, with the option to retake either specific sections of the exam or the whole exam, at the discretion of a majority of the committee. The student should not be required to repeat parts of the qualifying examination passed on the first administration. The retaking of a failed qualifying examination or any portion of a qualifying exam must occur between one and six months from the date of the first examination. If not otherwise enrolled, the student must be enrolled in GRSC 800abz *Studies for the Qualifying Examination* in the term in which any portion of the exam is repeated.

C. Fail, resulting in dismissal from the program. If a majority of the committee concludes that the written portion of the exam is so weak that the oral portion cannot compensate for it, the student does not proceed to the oral portion, and the exam is failed. The committee may provide the option of a retake, but is not required to do so. If a majority of the committee determines that a retake is not warranted, the student will be dismissed from the program.

A student may not take the comprehensive or qualifying examination more than twice and must be appropriately enrolled at USC during the semester in which any such examination is taken or retaken. A student who fails the qualifying examination a second time will be dismissed from the degree program at the end of the semester in which the second examination was taken. No exceptions are permitted.

Report on the PhD Qualifying Exam
At the end of the oral component, the committee will inform you of the outcome of both the written and oral components of the qualifying exam. All committee members must sign the Report on Qualifying Examination Form, certifying that: (1) the exam was appropriately rigorous; (2) the student's performance on the exam was at the doctoral level; and (3) the entire qualifying examination process was fair and in keeping with USC's academic and ethical standards. NGP Administration will facilitate sending the *Report on the PhD Qualifying Examination* to the committee.

Advancement to Candidacy

Graduate students are officially advanced to candidacy for the PhD degree when they have completed the residency requirement (24 units of coursework) and passed the written and oral portions of the PhD qualifying examination.

Application for the PhD

After advancing to candidacy, the program will initiate an online degree check that will be transmitted to the Degree Progress Department. Degree Progress counselors will prepare a Degree Audit Report (STARS Report) listing any remaining requirements. Programs must apply all appropriate courses in the Student Information System for the degree to be conferred.

Dissertation Committee

The Dissertation Committee is formed following successful completion of the Qualifying Examination. It is appointed as soon as possible but no more than 6 months after the qualifying examination has been passed. The committee may be composed of a subset of faculty of the student's Qualifying Exam Committee or different faculty members.

The Dissertation Committee is composed of at least three and no more than five members. The committee chair must have an appointment in NGP. All committees must have a majority of members from NGP.

- o **Member 1 – Chair**: Must be NGP faculty. Cannot be your mentor or NGP Associate Member.
- o **Member 2 – Mentor:** Must be NGP faculty.
- o **Member 3 – *Optional***: May be NGP, non-NGP, or External faculty.
- o **Member 4 – *Optional***: May be NGP, non-NGP, or External faculty.
- o **Member 5 – Outside Member:** Must be USC faculty. If NGP faculty, must be in a different department than your Mentor. If not NGP faculty, may be from the same department as your Mentor.

The committee may also include a faculty member from an institution other than USC, referred to as an "**External member**." They cannot serve as or replace the Outside Member and require approval from the NGP Faculty Director. To request approval, email Charly Viola the external member's current CV or resume and a short statement (one paragraph) on the value they will add to your committee. All committees must have an **Outside Member**, and committees may only have one External Member.

PhD students may take advantage of the full array of faculty expertise available at USC. This includes the expertise of tenured, tenure-track, and RTPC (i.e., research, teaching, practitioner, clinical) faculty.

Any faculty member – external, outside, or from the student's home program – who serves on PhD Dissertation and Qualifying Exam Committees must have a professional profile that demonstrates academic impact on the field in significant, measurable ways. The judgment about these qualifications will be made using the following guide:

- o For NGP faculty and external faculty members (who are professors at universities other than USC), the NGP Director will assess a professor's qualification to serve
- o For outside faculty (who are professors outside NGP but internal to USC), the judgment of qualification to serve will be made by the dean or dean's designee of the school/college of the outside faculty member's primary appointment.

In both cases, the CV of the external member must be uploaded to the Thesis Center along with the appointment of committee form and will become part of the official record. Judgments of demonstrated impact will be based on evidence: for example, peer-reviewed publications in major journals and presses, grant funding, and exceptionally influential practice in a given field, taking into account the person's total career, current stage of career, and any changes in performance in a more recent period.

Faculty who are evaluated based on criteria other than those noted above will not normally be considered appropriate members of PhD and Qualifying Exam Committees, except with the explicit permission of the Vice Provost for Academic Programs acting on the advice of the NGP Director.

Emeriti faculty appointed to a Qualifying Exam Committee when they were full-time faculty at USC may continue to serve on the Dissertation Committee as "internal" committee members until the student has graduated. Similarly, a former USC faculty member who was appointed to the Qualifying Exam Committee while they were a full-time faculty member may continue to serve on the Dissertation Committee as an internal committee member until the student graduates.

The committee must be appointed at least one month before the dissertation defense. The *Appointment of Dissertation Committee* form, available on the NGP website under Current Students, establishes the Dissertation Committee. The form requires the signatures of each committee member and the NGP Director. The completed form is filed in the NGP documents, and a signed copy is provided to the student.

Dissertation and Defense

After passing all required courses and the qualifying examination, and after meeting all other requirements, the candidate must write and defend their dissertation.

Dissertation Composition
A dissertation is an original contribution to knowledge in the field and a demonstration that the PhD candidate has sufficiently mastered the field to pursue independent research and scholarship. A dissertation represents the individual candidate's research and writing. In fields where collaborative research has become the norm, the candidate is the sole author of the dissertation. When a paper included in a three-paper dissertation has co-authors, the dissertation candidate must specify their contribution to the research and delineate the contributions of their colleagues.

Dissertations are required to be written in English. Exceptions require the approval of the Vice Provost for Academic Programs or their designee before beginning the work. The exceptions will be granted only when there is scholarly justification.

NGP does not require a specific format for the dissertation, though all chapters should be formatted consistently throughout the dissertation to ensure a uniform format (text, references, figures, tables).

The following is a general discussion of the approach one should take when writing the dissertation. NGP Dissertation Committees typically request that the dissertation include general introductory and summary chapters. The chapters that form the bulk of the dissertation, which report original research, should be written in the form of a manuscript suitable for publication in a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

Published manuscripts for which a student is the first or co-first author may serve as chapters of the thesis. Students must receive approval for the content and organization of the dissertation by their mentor and Dissertation Committee members in advance of writing.

While not a program requirement, NGP expects that all students will have at least one first author, original data publication prior to their dissertation defense. Irrespective of your professional goals, your research publications contribute greatly to postgraduate success for obtaining academic or private sector positions. Your annual IDP should set goals to achieve first author publications prior to the dissertation defense.

Visit the Thesis Center website to begin the Graduate School Thesis/Dissertation Submission process.

Before You Start Writing
- o Select a journal: Consider the format, appropriateness, prestige, and costs of journals in your field. Concentrate on refereed journals that publish full-length papers based on the chapters in your dissertation that report original experiments and data. Brief communications typically do not serve as an individual chapter of your dissertation. The introductory chapter of your dissertation may eventually be appropriate for a book chapter or review article in a journal.

- o Be cautious of very high-profile journals (e.g., Science and Nature): These are prestigious, but chances of acceptance are very low, and the selection process is capricious and can take a long time. Seek impartial opinions about the significance of your work before deciding whether it's worth the effort.

- o Consider authorship carefully: You should be first author or designated co-first author on papers that compose your dissertation. In the field of neuroscience, the dissertation mentor generally is the senior and corresponding author when the manuscript is submitted. For submitted manuscripts on which you serve as first author, the senior author is typically the corresponding author to the journal (because students may graduate and move prior to the article being accepted for publication). In addition, the senior author (laboratory PI) is responsible for ensuring that research conducted in their

laboratory meets the expectations and standards of the funding agency (internal or external) and ensuring responsible conduct in research guidelines are followed. The senior author (typically your mentor) is responsible for making the final determination for authorship, and typically will seek your input. NGP recommends following the [International Committee of Medical Journal Editors' definition of authorship](), but many journals have their own guidelines for determining authorship. Most journals now require each author's role in the research reported in the manuscript to be specified. Students should understand these rules before discussing authorship decisions with your mentor. Keep in mind that writing a manuscript is a collaborative process that often requires discussions and negotiations so that in the end, all authors will endorse the contents, as required by the journal. Please keep in mind that ultimately, the university owns the data generated from intramurally or extramurally funded research. USC has guidelines regarding shared credit for intellectual property by those involved in conceptualizing, performing and/or managing the research studies. The laboratory PI is responsible for all aspects of research project oversite.

o Practice your writing and start early: Most students grossly underestimate how long it will take to finish writing. Start outlining your papers early; this is often the most effective way to determine what experiments still are needed. NGP incorporates a number of writing experiences through coursework, qualifying exams, and workshops. Thus, we expect that all NGP students will improve their writing skills during their time in the Program. Manuscripts often are edited substantially. Find peers who are willing to read and comment on early drafts. Do the same for them. Mutual editing of this sort may be among your most valuable experiences to hone your writing skills.

o Great communication is the key to success, and it helps avoid misunderstandings: Discuss everything with your laboratory mentor. Come to agreement on the nature and scope of your dissertation. How many chapters will there be? Which publishable data will be included? If certain data are not included, understand your rights to co-authorship of the eventual publications. Learn your rights regarding intellectual property, which can be found on the USC website.

o Discuss everything with your Dissertation Committee: Committee members, along with your mentor, are charged by the University to approve the dissertation document. They expect to be involved and committed early on to your success. In addition to the required academic year meeting for the entire committee, we encourage you to meet with members of your committee individually to seek input and advice. While conflicts between students and their mentors are uncommon, your committee members, Director, and Associate Director can help in such instances.

o Consider certain practical matters: Will you need technical support for graphics, digital micrographs, statistics, or special access to other equipment or supplies? What word processing, data analysis, and graphics software will you use? Who will pay publication costs, including paper reprints if desired? Discuss all of these issues with your mentor prior to embarking on writing.

While You Are Writing

Write your chapters as journal articles. From the start, write each chapter in the format of a paper in your chosen journal. Published full-length papers may serve as individual chapters but will need to be reformatted to achieve common organization for the entire dissertation document.

Provide drafts of the papers to your mentor and committee members. Since they are separate papers, each chapter should be self-contained. However, there may be detailed experimental results, or simulation data, that would unduly lengthen the paper. Consider including these in the Appendices of your dissertation. Moreover, the journal may accept them for electronic-only publication as Supplemental Materials. Submit the articles individually to your committee members for their preliminary approval. As a courtesy, provide them with plenty of time to read and respond. This may save you much aggravation later.

Think about your dissertation dedication and acknowledgments section well in advance and include all who have made important contributions. Be tactful and do not offend anymore. While being constructively critical is perfectly acceptable, a vitriolic or personal attack on the published work of others is never a good idea. Publishing early is OK. Sometimes, competition from others or the need to show progress for continued grant funding will require you to publish papers well before the dissertation. This is a good idea.

Your dissertation should be coherent. A bundle of re-formatted papers or, even worse, a stack of published reprints, is not acceptable for the dissertation. Your chapters should be thematically related. Most dissertations of NGP students include general introductory and summary chapters. The Dissertation Committee may make this recommendation to the student. The introductory chapter may be in a different format. This may be a literature review, a summary of background work done by others, etc. In some instances, the questions that you answered in the Competency Examination, or the introduction to your thesis proposal, can help to start the process of writing this section. A concluding chapter summarizes and discusses the significance of your work. Students often include a discussion of their ideas regarding future research directions.

Publish as soon as possible. As a warning, the more time that elapses from the primary research being completed, the more difficult it is to generate publications (bearing in mind it may take more than a year to finally see your work in print from first submission). In your new position as a postdoc, faculty member, or industrial researcher, you may not have the time to complete manuscripts from your dissertation work. Publishing your thesis research will reflect well on your future, regardless of which professional path you choose to follow.

Steps Before Your Defense

The USC Graduate School requires at least two semesters of dissertation coursework before the dissertation defense. Please see Dawn Burke with questions.

At least one semester before a student is planning on defending, it is imperative to make sure that you are on track to graduate. On the NGP website students can find the Dissertation and Defense Checklist that will serve as a guide for all necessary steps to defend. The checklist includes links to all documents that must be submitted, as well as links to the Graduate School Thesis and Dissertation Center. There is also a list of information needed for NGP to generate and distribute

the dissertation announcement to the Neuroscience community.

Begin the process of scheduling the defense date with the Dissertation Committee early, as faculty calendars get booked well in advance. The student, committee chair, and faculty mentor must be physically present for the dissertation defense, unless the Director and the Vice Provost for Academic Programs provide written permission for remote participation. Students must notify NGP staff of requested remote attendance at least 3 weeks in advance of the dissertation defense so NGP can petition for written approval. Remote attendance policies are subject to change per the Graduate School.

The Dissertation Defense
Friends, family, and other faculty are welcome to attend the presentation portion of your defense. Following your presentation and committee questions, your Dissertation Committee may convene privately to discuss the outcome of your defense. While the oral examination is open to the general university community, only the members of the Dissertation Committee have the authority to recommend acceptance of the dissertation. Their recommendation must be unanimous. You may request that the NGP Director or Associate Director also attend the committee discussion, but that is the only exception. The Dissertation Committee will reconvene with the defending student to share the final outcome.

For the dissertation defense, some committee members may participate remotely. The committee chair and the student must be present in person, unless the Director and the Vice Provost for Academic Programs provide express written permission for remote participation.

Final Approval of the Dissertation
After the dissertation defense has been completed, and the committee determines that no further edits or revisions are required of the dissertation manuscript, each member of the committee electronically certifies on the *Approval to Submit Defended and Final Copy of Doctoral Dissertation* that: (1) the defense was appropriately rigorous; (2) the student's dissertation makes an original and substantial contribution to its field of study; and (3) the defense process was fair and in keeping with USC's academic and ethical standards. This includes adherence to departmental formatting requirements. No changes can be made to the manuscript's content after the *Approval to Submit f*orm is complete. The *Approval to Submit* form is electronically available through Thesis Center, the Graduate School's online thesis and dissertation processing system. Only minor revisions can be made following the dissertation defense; substantial changes or adding new content are not permitted.

Dissertation Submission
Doctoral dissertation manuscripts must be submitted to the Thesis Center on the Graduate School website. At the time of submission, all manuscripts should be formatted consistently. Students have three months from the date the committee chair signs the electronic *Approval to Submit* form to complete any required formatting corrections in the Thesis Center. After the Graduate School has approved the dissertation manuscript, a copy is sent to the USC Libraries. All dissertations will be made available digitally via the USC Libraries.

Completing the Dissertation
The Graduate School provides a schedule for completing the dissertation on its website. Students

must submit complete documentation and finish all corrections to the manuscript before the degree can be conferred. Upon completing all requirements, the official USC transcript will serve as evidence of the degree until the student receives their diploma.

Accessing Your Dissertation
The dissertation manuscript will be available for search and download from the USC Digital Library shortly after completing all of the steps in the Thesis Center, or after any requested restriction expires.

Commencement and PhD Hooding Ceremony
USC Commencement is a weeklong celebration honoring the achievements of our graduating students and officially welcoming them into the Trojan Family as alumni. Over four days, the university hosts more than 100 ceremonies, receptions, and special events across campus and beyond. For a comprehensive list of event dates, times, and locations, visit the full schedule of Commencement events.

Graduating NGP PhD students are also invited to participate in the USC Dornsife PhD Hooding Ceremony held each spring semester in May. NGP students are eligible to participate if they defend their dissertation in the spring 2026, summer 2026, or fall 2025.

Official Transcripts and Diploma
The Registrar's Office oversees the distribution of university diplomas and transcripts, in compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Most diplomas are mailed to the permanent address on record six to eight weeks after a degree is conferred. More information is available on their website.

IV.   Registration and Enrollment

Enrollment

To be considered full-time, a doctoral student must be enrolled in at least six units of 500-level and above coursework each semester. Most students enroll in 12 units to make timely progress toward their degree. **Please be aware of registration deadlines. Students should not exceed registering for 12 units in any semester, as students will be financially responsible for any additional units.** Announcements and reminders will be sent regarding registration procedures and deadlines. Students are responsible for following all deadlines and instructions. Students wishing to carry more than 12 units must have prior permission from the NGP Director; such permission will be granted only in exceptional circumstances.

There are two exceptions to this six-unit requirement:

1. A student who has completed all coursework for the doctoral degree will be considered full-time during the semester in which the student is preparing for the doctoral qualifying examination, provided the *Appointment or Change of Qualifying Exam or Dissertation Committee* form has been completed and submitted to the program and the student is enrolled in GRSC 800abz, Studies for the Qualifying Examination.

2. Doctoral students who have been advanced to candidacy, that is, who have completed all coursework and have passed the qualifying examination, will be considered full-time when enrolled in 794 Doctoral Dissertation.

In the first semester, all students are required to take a set NGP curriculum (NSCI 524, NSCI 539, and NSCI 790) and cannot make course substitutions or take additional courses. In the second semester, all students are again required to take a set curriculum (NSCI 525, NSCI 539, and NSCI 790) but may also take an additional course so long as it does not conflict with one of the required NSCI courses. Students are strongly encouraged to focus on their rotations and should only take an additional course if they are confident it would not be a detriment to their rotations.

In the summer, you will register for GRSC-802 or NSCI 790, depending on your financial support. GRSC-802 is a 0-unit course that allows students to maintain access to the Student Health Center during the summer.

NGP Administration has the final approval of all course enrollments, including those offered by other departments, each semester.

Enrollment Information for F-1 and J-1 International Students

F-1 and J-1 international students on student visas who are not enrolled in either GRSC 800abz or 794 must be enrolled in at least six units or receive authorization from the Office of International Services to enroll in fewer than the minimum units. International student with questions about their registration should consult the Office of International Services.

Immigration regulations require F-1 and J-1 student's physical attendance for classes during each fall and spring semester of their program. If the summer term is the student's first or last semester at USC, then physical attendance for classes is also required.

No more than one online class (up to 3 units) per semester can be counted towards the full course of study for an F-1 or J-1 student. If you only need to be registered in one course to complete your degree program during your final term, it must be in-person.

794ab Doctoral Dissertation

794ab Doctoral Dissertation confers full-time enrollment status on students who have been admitted to candidacy. Students are expected to be enrolled in 2 units of 794 each semester, except summer sessions, for a minimum of two semesters, until all degree requirements are completed. Students are expected to complete and defend their dissertation in less than five semesters of 794. No more than eight units of 794 will be applied toward the PhD degree.

Course Waivers and Substitutions

Petitions to waive required coursework will be deferred until the student has established their mentor and set a course of study. Course unit credit for advanced courses that you may have taken as an undergraduate at other institutions are not considered. Advanced graduate courses

that have been taken in a Master's or another PhD program may be considered, by petition only to the Director. The form can be found on the NGP website. While a specific required course may be waived because of a strong background in a particular area (e.g., statistics), another relevant course must be taken in order to meet the 25-unit minimum requirement.

If a student would like to fulfill a course requirement with a course that is not on the pre-approved list, they must submit a request to the NGP Administration and attach the course syllabus prior to enrolling in the course. In no case will a student be allowed to complete less than one course. Approval of the petition is not guaranteed. The substitution will only be considered if the argument for an alternative course clearly meets the value of "breadth with depth" embedded in the NGP curriculum.

Dual Program Enrollment Policies

The USC Graduate School rarely permits students to enroll concurrently in NGP and in another graduate or certificate program. NPG students must first obtain approval from the NGP Director and provide evidence of the research mentor's approval to petition enrollment in another program. Failure to follow these procedures is considered a basis for dismissal from NGP. Please note that NGP has no financial obligations with regard to the secondary program. Thus, students will be solely responsible for tuition fees. **The final decision is made by the Vice Provost for Graduate Studies.**

Concurrent Enrollment

If a student is simultaneously enrolled elsewhere, they may not transfer credits to USC without advance permission from the NGP Director. Failure to obtain permission will invalidate coursework taken during periods of unauthorized concurrent enrollment.

Transfer of Credit

The Degree Progress Department in the Office of Academic Records and Registrar determines whether coursework taken elsewhere is available for transfer credit. The NGP Administrative team determines whether such credit is applicable toward a specific graduate degree, subject to approval by the NGP Director. NGP will decide by the end of the second year.

Continuous Enrollment

Students are considered to be pursuing advanced degrees only when formally enrolled. PhD students must be enrolled at USC for fall and spring semesters each year until all degree requirements have been satisfactorily completed within the time limit.

Enrollment in graduate-level course work is necessary to meet the continuous enrollment requirement. Graduate students who fail to register are no longer considered to be enrolled in a graduate degree program. After an unauthorized absence, formal readmission is required. Students who have been granted an official leave of absence do not need to apply for readmission following the approved leave. However, students who fail to return at the conclusion of any form of leave without obtaining an approved extension violate the continuous enrollment policy.

A doctoral candidate who has passed the qualifying examination must enroll each fall and spring semester in 794 Doctoral Dissertation until the dissertation has been approved. Students are expected to complete and defend their dissertation in less than five semesters.

Some courses with no academic credit, including 794z, require payment of tuition.

Pass/No Pass Coursework

Graduate students may elect to enroll in courses on a pass/no pass basis with Director approval. However, coursework taken on a pass/no pass basis cannot be applied toward a graduate degree. Students should consult their mentor before enrolling in any course on a pass/no pass basis. Because coursework taken on a pass/no pass basis cannot be applied toward a graduate degree, it cannot be used to fulfill the NGP curriculum requirements.

Incompletes

An incomplete (IN) is assigned when work is not completed because of a documented illness or another emergency occurring after the 12th week of the semester (or 12th week equivalent for any course scheduled for less than 15 weeks).

If a student receives an incomplete, the instructor will fill out the *Assignment of an Incomplete* (IN) and *Requirements for Completion* form, which will specify the work remaining to be done, the procedures for its completion, the grade in the course to date and the weight to be assigned to the work remaining to be done when computing the final grade.

One calendar year is allowed to complete an IN. If the IN is not completed within the designated time, the course is considered "lapsed," the grade is changed to an "IX" and will be calculated into the grade point average as 0 points. Courses offered on a Credit/No Credit basis or taken on a Pass/No Pass basis for which a mark of Incomplete is assigned will be lapsed with a mark of NC or NP and will not be calculated into the grade point average.

Completing the IN within the one-year period should be the student's highest priority. A student may petition the Committee on Academic Policies and Procedures (CAPP) for an extension of time for the completion of an IN. Extensions beyond the specified time limit are rarely approved if the student has enrolled in subsequent semesters.

In all cases, a petition for an extension of time to complete an IN must have departmental approval and include a statement from the instructor explaining what is needed to complete the course and why the instructor believes the student should be given additional time for completion.

Audited Courses

Students who wish to audit a course at USC must register for the course on Web Registration and select the Audit grade option. Audited courses will not receive credit and will not appear on the USC transcript or grade report. However, tuition is charged. In NGP, tuition remission does not cover Audited courses, so students would be responsible for tuition charges. As noted in the USC

Student Handbook, attending a course without being officially registered in it is prohibited.

Time Limit for Degree Completion

Progress is measured from the beginning of the first course at USC applied toward a specified degree, and all requirements for that degree must be completed within a specified time. The university's time limit for completing the doctoral degree is eight years. For students who earned an applicable master's degree within the five years before admission to the doctoral program, the time limit for completing the doctoral degree is six years from the date of admission to the doctoral program. Approved leaves of absence (up to two years or four semesters) are not counted in the time allowed to complete degree requirements.

Extensions may be granted in extraordinary circumstances. If granted an extension, NGP will allow registration for the specified extension period.

V.　　Leaves of Absence, Sick Days, and Bereavement

Students in good standing and making satisfactory progress toward a degree who must interrupt studies for compelling reasons may petition for a leave for a stated period, usually one semester. A leave must be requested before the drop-add deadline and approved by the committee chair, and the NGP Director. The request should include a plan for academic progress upon return. During the leave period, a student is not entitled to assistance from the faculty or use of university facilities.

If granted, the leave is recorded on the student's transcript, and the leave period is not counted in the time allowed to complete degree requirements. A leave of absence may be allowed for one semester at a time, up to a maximum of four semesters. Students who fail to apply for a leave of absence or for whom a leave has been denied (or has expired) are subject to policies governing continuous enrollment and readmission.

International students should consult with the Office of International Services before considering a leave of absence.

Parental Leave for PhD Students

PhD students are eligible for a one-semester paid parental leave if they:

- o Are pregnant or are the primary caregiver of their newborn child or adopted child under six years of age
- o Have completed at least one semester in the PhD program and are making good progress
- o Were admitted with a Multi-Year Funding Offer (MYFO) letter that includes a four or five-year "package" consisting of support through any combination of teaching assistantship, research assistantship, and fellowship.
- o F-1 and J-1 international students must additionally qualify for a medical reduced course load (RCL) if they plan to remain in the U.S. while taking parental leave

Parental leave may be taken during the semester in which the child is born or adopted, or in the

semester immediately following. A student on an approved parental leave will receive tuition, fees, and a stipend. The Graduate School provides the base stipend. Schools and programs provide the tuition, fees, and a top-off the base stipend to the level specified in the student's Multi-Year Funding Offer letter.

Students should enroll in GRSC 804 to ensure continued access to health insurance and the monthly stipend. While on parental leave, students are not eligible for federal financial aid. Students with loans should consult with the Office of Financial Aid before beginning parental leave. F-1 and J-1 international students should consult with the Office of International Services to discuss parental leave and ensure there are no unforeseen issues related to their visa status.

Students interested in taking parental leave should consult with the staff graduate advisor in their department or program. The program will submit a petition to the Graduate School and will be asked to provide a copy of the initial funding letter, a statement as the primary caregiver, and one of the following:

- o Verification of pregnancy signed by a US doctor (available at USC Student Health Center), or
- o Birth certificate for the infant child, or
- o Statement of adoption from an adoption agency

Health Leaves for PhD Students

Health Leaves are administered by USC Campus Support and Intervention (CSI) in consultation with the student's program and the Graduate School, pursuant to the university's Student Health Leave of Absence Policy.

PhD students interested in a health leave should meet with a CSI health leave coordinator to develop an individualized health and academic plan. These plans are developed through an interactive process involving the Health Leave Coordinator, the student, the academic unit, and the Graduate School.

F-1 and J-1 international students are eligible to request a health leave. They must meet with an advisor in the Office of International Services (OIS) before finalizing plans for the health leave. Students can either return to their home country or, if a doctor recommends, remain in the U.S. for medical treatment. The student should request the health leave through a CSI health leave coordinator, who works with the student, their healthcare provider, and the Office of International Services (OIS) to determine the necessary steps to approve the leave request.

A paid health leave, including tuition, fees, and at least the minimum stipend, is available for one semester. A second semester covering tuition and fees may be available if necessary. The Vice Provost for Academic Programs must review and approve additional health leaves beyond two semesters.

Sick Days and Bereavement Leave

PhD students may use up to five days of sick leave per Academic Year due to illness or to care

for a family member. Students may also have up to five days of bereavement leave per Academic Year for the loss of a family member. In NGP, students should work with their faculty mentor to request sick and bereavement leave.

Readmission

A PhD student who leaves the university without obtaining a formal leave of absence, or otherwise violates the continuous enrollment policy, is not automatically readmitted. A student wishing to apply for readmission to a graduate degree program must first obtain the recommendation of the department chair or program director and submit an Application for Readmission to the dean of the degree program.

If the student's cumulative GPA is below 3.0 or if readmission is sought after more than two years of an unapproved absence, the Application for Readmission must be sent to the Graduate School for approval.

The readmission approval process must be completed by the first day of classes for the term in which the resumption of graduate studies is sought. Approvals to be readmitted are based on the academic merits of the student's request and the likelihood of academic success and completion of the degree. If readmitted, the student will be subject to all of the current University Catalogue requirements for the degree in effect at the time of readmission. Individual exceptions to the Catalogue year require the approval of the dean of the degree program. Students seeking readmission after an absence of more than 10 years may be required to reapply to the university.

A student may not be readmitted into a terminated program of study. The student must either be subject to retroactive enrollment or admission to the new program of study with the corresponding catalog requirements.

VI.   Funding & Financial Support

PhD students at USC benefit from fellowships, assistantships, and scholarships administered by the Graduate School and various academic units.

The NGP stipend for 2025-2026 is $42,250 for all students; exceptions may apply if a student receives an external fellowship. **Students are responsible for implementing a personal budget based on the schedule of stipend payments.**

First-year students will receive one of the following financial awards during the 2025 – 2026 academic year, which will cover your first year of research and rotations. The award type and specific terms will be outlined in your offer of admission letter.

- o NGP Fellowship Award
- o Dornsife Fellowship Award
- o Direct Admit Funding from a laboratory

Upon completion of the first year, students join a dissertation laboratory and are funded by their

faculty mentor beginning August 16 of their second year.

There are four main sources of support for graduate students:
- Graduate Assistants
- Fellowships
- External Fellowships
- Training Grants

Graduate Assistant (GA)

GA is an overarching term used to describe Teaching Assistants (TA), Research Assistants (RA), and Graduate Assistant Lecturers (AL). GA appointments include tuition, fees, and a stipend at or exceeding the university's minimum rate. A 50% GA appointment requires an average of 20 hours per week, which is considered "full-time" for a graduate student, as the remaining 20 hours per week should be dedicated to coursework and scholarship leading to the degree. A 25% appointment requires an average of 10 hours per week.

GA appointments are confirmed through an official offer letter generated via the university's TARA system or the Dornsife Student Database. The offer letter should be sent to the student at the beginning of the academic year or the start of a semester. These letters must use the standard Graduate School-approved template and detail the length of the appointment, the time commitment, the department's expectations, and benefits. Ideally, the offer letter should include the total stipend the student will receive, including top-offs. The student should sign the letter, which will be shared with the appropriate financial staff and archived by the Program.

The university requires GAs be enrolled in a minimum of 6 units every semester or in equivalent full-time courses such as GRSC 800abz or Dissertation 794.

Fellowships

Fellowships provide financial support to PhD students pursuing their degrees. A fellowship is equivalent to a 50% appointment as a Graduate Assistant and includes tuition, fees, and a stipend at or exceeding the university's minimum rate.

PhD students with a fellowship are expected to commit 20 hours per week to their research. PhD students receiving fellowships may not undertake employment or other time-consuming commitments during the academic year from mid-August through mid-May. The Vice Provost for Academic Programs will review exceptions to this policy through the Graduate School's Petition system. Students on fellowships may not receive funding as GAs simultaneously.

Note: There are a limited number of USC Fellowships available to PhD students during their course of study. Students compete for fellowships through an application process overseen by the USC Graduate School. Internal or University fellowship announcements sent to NGP will be forwarded to students and faculty in the program. Check the USC Graduate School website to become familiar with the different institutional fellowships.

External Fellowships

PhD students are encouraged to seek external fellowships and support that encourage intellectual independence and enhance a student's record. The USC Graduate School provides a variety of resources to support PhD students seeking funding, including information sessions, boot camps, and proposal review workshops. Students who receive one of several designated national awards may be eligible for stipend top-offs from the Graduate School.

PhD students applying for external fellowships that are "institutionally limited," meaning that there is a limit placed on the number of students who can apply, or whose applications require the approval of a university official, should contact the Graduate School well in advance of any deadlines.

NGP strongly encourages all students to submit at least one application during their training, particularly to NIH, NSF, or private foundations. Detailed information about fellowships can be obtained from the [NGP website](#) and the [Graduate School](#).

Your mentor can work with you on producing a competitive application, and fellowships often require a mentor statement of a training plan. NGP can provide generic descriptions of program activities which can be used to describe the training environment. The Director and Associate Director can work with first-year students who wish to apply for an NSF grant prior to joining a laboratory.

The stipends provided by these extramural awards are often less than NGP's minimum stipend. For students who receive nationally competitive extramural fellowships or are selected for a position on a training grant, the USC Graduate School provides a stipend 'top-off' of either $10,000 or up to a total stipend of $41,200, whichever is less.

Training Grants

The National Institute of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF) sponsor pre- and postdoctoral training grants. Federal training grants require US citizenship or permanent resident status to be eligible for appointment. These grants may support general neuroscience training or focus on an area of neuroscience (e.g., aging or audition). Typically, only a subset of NGP faculty may be appointed to a particular training grant. This means that only NGP students performing research in those faculty laboratories will be eligible for an appointment on a particular training grant. Each training grant has specific guidelines for the nomination and selection process. Currently, there is one training grant at USC focusing on neuroscience: the NIH Hearing and Communication Neuroscience (HCN) Training Grant. There are other NIH training grants in which NGP faculty may participate (e.g., Developmental and Stem Cell Biology; Aging). Speak to your mentor about your eligibility to be nominated for a position on these or other training grants.

As noted above, the NIH-mandated annual stipend for pre-doctoral trainees is less than the NGP stipend. For those NGP students on training grants, the USC Graduate School will provide a 'top-off' of your extramural award. Please contact Dawn Burke for specific details on the top-off amount for your award.

Stipend Distribution

The first stipend of the academic year will generally be available in August. To receive the stipend, students must be registered for classes well in advance of the start of the fall semester. Students are encouraged to work closely with the staff in their programs to ensure their stipend is processed appropriately.

Students switching from Graduate Assistant appointments to a fellowship or vice versa should be aware that the stipend schedules and distributions are different. However, they should still receive the university's mandatory stipend for the academic year. Additionally, stipends may be disbursed in 10 or 12 monthly installments, depending on the school where your mentor holds their primary appointment.

Stipends are processed through Payroll. Students are highly encouraged to sign up for direct deposit through Workday. Instructions on how to sign up for direct deposit can be found here. Students who do not sign up for direct deposit will have their stipends mailed to the current address listed in myUSC. International students must also have an up-to-date Glacier account to receive their fellowship stipend.

Stipends are not processed on the same day every month. Students on fellowship should expect the stipend early in the month, while students receiving stipends for GA appointments will receive the stipend towards the end of the month. Stipends are not considered late until after the 26th of the month.

After joining a laboratory, each student will need to work with the faculty's business office to ensure they are set up correctly for the fall semester of year 2.

Summer Support

Your decision to be a PhD student is a **12-month commitment** until you complete your dissertation and graduate. Summer TA-ships are not available, so you must be supported by your mentor or on a training grant, if available.

During the summer semester (mid-May through mid-August), students receiving support as GAs with a 50% appointment and PhD students with fellowships may work additional hours beyond the 20-hour maximum, up to an average of 40 hours per week in other on-campus or off-campus roles.

Students who have received offers of full-time employment off-campus during the summer semester may not simultaneously hold positions as Graduate Assistants or PhD Fellows.

Students who wish to decline summer support from USC in favor of full-time off-campus employment or internships will be asked to confirm their decision in writing. This information will be archived in the student's Advise USC file. International students should review the Office of International Services website for information about Curricular Practical Training.

Students who serve as GAs during the summer receive a stipend and tuition remission

proportional to the appointment. The health center fee will also be provided, and the student will have access from the first day of the appointment until the end of the summer. (The spring coverage period for the USC student health insurance includes January through the end of the summer as well.)

Mandatory Fees, Health, and Dental Insurance

Graduate Assistant appointments and fellowships include tuition, a stipend at the university's minimum rate or higher, health and dental insurance, access to the student health center, the Student Programming Fee, Norman H. Topping Student Aid Fund Fee, the Transportation Fee, and the New Student Fee. Contact NGP Admin with any questions about fees prior to paying them or if any of the above fees appear on your bill. Fees to be paid by the student are done so online through the myUSC portal.

Parking and Transit Benefits

PhD students may participate in USC's Student U-Pass program. USC offers PhD students a limited number of permits for 2 or 3 days a week (partial week permits). These passes are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Permits are subject to availability at either UPC (150 campus permits total) - Shrine, Figueroa, and Grand, or HSC (50 campus permits total) - Valley and Lot 71.

Support for Conferences

Travel and professional development grants may also be available through USC's Graduate Student Government.

Collective Bargaining Agreement

Graduate students at USC are represented by the Graduate Student Workers Organizing Committee-UAW Local 872. All graduate students enrolled at USC who are employed as Teaching Assistants, Assistant Lecturers, Research Assistants, or internally-funded Fellows in STEM programs are considered part of the union. The Collective Bargaining Agreement is available on the Graduate School website.

You can learn more on the union's website, including frequently asked questions. For specific questions, you can also reach out to the NGP program student representative. Since this position can change yearly, please contact NGP Admin for the up-to-date contact information of the student union representative.

VII. GA Appointments and Responsibilities

Eligibility

To be eligible to serve as a Teaching Assistant (TA), Research Assistant (RA), or Graduate Assistant Lecturer (AL), students must:
   o   have been admitted to a graduate degree program with regular graduate standing

- o be enrolled full-time
- o be in good academic standing with a GPA of no lower than 3.0
- o be verified by NGP to be making satisfactory academic progress toward the degree
- o have met the university's standards for proficiency in the English language

The university requires GAs to be enrolled in a minimum of 6 units every semester or in full-time equivalent courses such as GRSC 800abz or Dissertation 794.

Types of GA Appointments

Research Assistant (RA)

RAs are the main mechanism by which students will receive their stipend while in NGP. RAs are funded by research grants or other institutional funds awarded to a faculty member or group. There is no citizenship requirement for student support on federal research grants awarded to NGP faculty. Please note that an RAship is not equivalent to a university staff position.

RAs are responsible for the accuracy, validity, and integrity of the research on which they are contributing. The quality of the research reflects on the student, the faculty supervisor, and the university. Deliberate falsification of research results may result in dismissal from the university. RAs must maintain the confidentiality of the faculty mentor's professional activities and research before presentation or publication, in accordance with existing practices and policies in the area of research activity. In the publication and presentation of research produced as an RA, the student must acknowledge the contributions of the faculty supervisor and other members of the research team. RAs should assume responsibility for making proper use of the intellectual, instructional, and physical environment in which they are conducting research. The nature of some research projects may require that the RA be available during holiday periods or semester breaks. Students and their faculty supervisors should discuss expectations and time off before the appointment is accepted.

Teaching Assistant (TA)

In NGP, students may not TA until they have passed the Competency Examination in year 2. Only rarely will the Director consider a petition for special permission to TA prior to passing the Competency Examination. NGP does not require that students TA, but at least one semester is encouraged as a valuable experience for your future as a scientist and educator. NGP places a restriction that students may TA for a maximum of 3 semesters, and requests to TA beyond this limit must be approved by the NGP Director.

NGP has a limited number of TA opportunities, which are assigned by NGP Admin in consultation with the course directors. Other TAships are offered by various departments; NGP does not assign these TA positions but will work in consultation with the various departments to assist students in securing a TAship. The workload associated with TAships is variable, depending on the course and the familiarity of the TA with the subject matter. Whatever course you are assigned, you must take your responsibilities seriously. By accepting a TA position, you are expected to meet the requirements set by the course director and to do your best for students in the course.

The responsibilities of TAs are carried out under the established supervision of the departmental faculty. The duties of TAs may include the following: reading course texts and materials, assisting during lectures, leading discussion sections or lab meetings, holding office hours each week, responding to student concerns, grading course assignments and exams, leading and monitoring lab exercises, participating in regular meetings with supervising faculty and other TAs, designing and leading review sessions, serving as a liaison between the instructor and students, upholding the university's policy on academic integrity, and assisting with the management of the course details. The Center for Excellence in Teaching is a good resource for support and information.

As with faculty at USC, TAs are evaluated by their students. TAs should review evaluations at the end of each semester, after grades have been submitted. TAs are encouraged to keep a record of student feedback for their teaching portfolio. TA positions may be terminated for poor performance in the classroom.

TA Training is required for all NGP students who will TA for courses offered by Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences. All students who plan to be a TA will be informed by a Dornsife administrator regarding registration for the required coursework.

All International TA's must take the ITA Oral Exam offered through the American Language Institute, unless they qualify for one of the specified exemptions.

Expected Effort

A graduate student's first responsibility is to their doctoral research and studies. For this reason, GA awards cannot exceed 20 hours per week for a 50% appointment or 10 hours per week for a 25% appointment, averaged over a semester. Students receiving a 50% GA appointment may not undertake employment or other time-consuming commitments during the academic year from mid-August through mid-May. Students receiving a 25% GA appointment during the academic year may be eligible for part-time, off-campus employment.

F-1 and J-1 International students with a 25% GA appointment may be eligible for part-time Curricular Practical Training (CPT), if they meet the CPT eligibility requirements, and if academic department signs off on the CPT request. The Vice Provost for Academic Programs reviews exceptions to this policy through the Graduate School's Petition system.

Appointment Periods

Semester	Approximate Start Date	Approximate End Date
Fall	August 16	December 31
Spring	January 1	May 15
Summer	May 16	August 15

Financial Support

All TA, RA, and AL appointments include tuition units, health insurance, access to the student health center, and a stipend. Each year, the Provost sets the base stipend for GAs. Schools, programs, and PIs may offer appointments with higher amounts. To ensure consistency among NGP students, NGP sets a standard stipend rate each academic year. All NGP students are expected to receive the same stipend regardless of stipend differences across schools, programs, or mentors.

Tuition Benefits and Tuition Remission

The tuition allowance is non-transferable from semester to semester and will be applied to the student's account in the amount appropriate for the courses s/he takes. Students should contact the program of appointment if the tuition is not credited to their account.

A 50% TA, RA, or AL appointment includes tuition remission up to 12 units per semester of the appointment and six units of tuition remission for the summer following the assignment.

A 25% TA, RA, or AL appointment includes tuition remission up to 8 units per semester of the appointment and four units of tuition remission for the summer following the assignment.

Tuition Refund Insurance

Students should opt out of Tuition Refund Insurance when their tuition is being covered as part of an assistantship or fellowship. If a student has already accepted Tuition Refund Insurance but would like to decline it, they can do so here. Students should opt out of Tuition Refund Insurance before late fees are assessed.

Health Insurance and Health Center Access

The Engemann Student Health Center website provides information about the USC health insurance, on-campus medical services, student counseling services, and wellness. Students can also make appointments through the website. The Engemann Student Health Center is used primarily by students based at UPC.

The Eric Cohen Student Health Center website provides information about the USC health insurance, on-campus medical services, student counseling services, and wellness. Students can also make appointments through the website. The Eric Cohen Student Health Center is used primarily by students based at HSC.

For all NGP students, the student health center, student health insurance, and dental insurance fees are paid by their fellowship or mentor as long as students are enrolled in classes and considered full-time (6 units or more). These benefits begin on the first day of classes. You are automatically enrolled in the USC Health Insurance Plan if registered for 6 or more units.

GA-related Warning and Dismissal

PhD students serving as a GA may be disciplined, suspended or discharged for absenteeism;

lateness; failure to adhere to stated course or research deadlines; failure to aid in the preparation of course or research materials; failure to hold sections, labs, or office hours; failure to grade, failure to perform assigned lab duties, willful abandonment of teaching or research assignments; failure to comply with applicable policies. Students and their faculty supervisors should discuss expectations and time off before the appointment is accepted. Discipline will only be for just cause and each case will be taken very seriously, recognizing that the Collective Bargaining Unit also may need to be involved.

When possible, a conference meeting will be held with the student and their supervisor before a suspension or discharge. The student may request to have Union representation present at the conference meeting. The University will notify the student and the Union in writing of the issuance of discipline or any investigative leave.

VIII. Tax Information

Taxable Income and Withholding

General tax information for PhD students is available on the [Student Financial Services website](#). USC staff cannot provide tax advice. We strongly advise students to contact the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) or consult with a tax professional for tax-related questions.

International Student Considerations

International students may wish to consult the [Office of International Services](#) (OIS) website, which offers general information about tax exemptions, tax-related forms, and access to Sprintax, a tax preparation software. OIS cannot advise on tax-related issues. Students should consult with a qualified tax professional for individual assistance.

Graduate Students Supported by Fellowships

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) provides information regarding the tax treatment of fellowship awards. The IRS also provides information regarding the 1098-T form. Some education-related items that are included in your fellowship may not be taxable, for example, tuition remission. Other items, such as living expenses including room and board, transportation, and entertainment, are generally considered taxable.

While receiving a fellowship, domestic students will not receive a W-2 form. However, according to the IRS, you must report all taxable amounts, whether or not you received a Form W-2. If you have taxable income from your fellowship, you may need to make estimated tax payments. For more information, see Pub. 505, Tax Withholding and Estimated Tax, and the IRS help on estimated taxes.

International students (non-resident aliens for tax purposes) on fellowship receive their stipends through University Payroll Services. The stipend may be treated as taxable income by the IRS. Therefore, the university may be obligated to withhold income taxes. The amount of this tax withholding depends on the individual's circumstances, including their total stipend and the status of the tax treaty between their home country and the United States. Tuition remission

provided to an international student on fellowship is not taxable.

Graduate Students Supported by Graduate Assistantships

The stipends provided via the University Payroll Services to domestic and international students who are serving as TA's, RA's, and AL's are treated as taxable income by the Internal Revenue Service. Therefore, the university may be obligated to report the income and withhold income taxes. The amount of this tax withholding depends on the individual circumstances of the student, including the total stipend, the instructions provided by the student on Form W-4, and, if an international student, the status of the tax treaty between their home country and the United States, as well as Form 8233. Tuition remission provided to a TA, RA, or AL is not reportable or taxable.

Students Hired as Graduate Student Workers (Hourly)

The payment that domestic and international students receive as hourly graduate student workers is treated as taxable income by the Internal Revenue Service. The amount of this tax withholding depends upon the individual circumstances of the student, including the total amount paid per pay period, the instructions provided by the student on Form W-4, and, if an international student, the status of the tax treaty of their tax residence country and the completion of IRS Form 8233.

IX. Progress to Degree

Terminal Master's Degree

The USC Neuroscience Graduate Program (NGP) is a PhD-granting advanced program in the interdisciplinary study of the neurosciences. On very rare occasion and for a variety of reasons, a graduate student in NGP will be unable to complete the full course of study for a PhD, but nonetheless will have done a significant amount of work in the Program. The student may petition the NGP Director to obtain a terminal Master's degree. The student also must inform the NGP administrative staff to file the necessary paperwork and petition with the university. The Director may bring the petition to the Executive Committee for deliberation. The student will be notified of acceptance or rejection of the petition. A student opting for a terminal Master's degree may not receive University support (RA or TA) once the petition is granted, and they may not remain enrolled in the Neuroscience PhD program.

In order to receive the Master's degree, a student must fulfill the following requirements:

- o Students must complete the minimum 25 units of coursework required of PhD students. The units must include the NGP core course and additional course requirements when the student entered NGP.
- o Students must successfully complete the required NGP Competency Examination, which demonstrates discipline and research competencies.
- o The student is fully responsible for initiating the process with NGP Administration and completing the necessary petition within the allocated timeframe to ensure it can be processed by the USC Graduate School for final approval.

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity depends on our collective commitment as a university community. Reporting academic integrity issues helps reinforce academic standards and preserves the value of USC degrees. If faculty suspect academic misconduct on any work that a student submits (in final or draft form), they are required to submit a report to the Office of Academic Integrity (OAI).

Information about the university's academic integrity policies is available in the USC Student Handbook and from the Office of Academic Integrity.

Because PhD students have already earned a bachelor's degree and are enrolled in advanced academic training, they are held to a higher standard of integrity in all academic work. This standard reflects the heightened ethical expectations of advanced scholarship, the student's potential role as a mentor and instructor to others, and the impact of their conduct on the broader research and academic community.

OAI is responsible for investigating and adjudicating academic integrity violations. If OAI determines, by a preponderance of the evidence, that a PhD student has committed an academic integrity violation, there is a presumption that dismissal from the academic program without conferral of the degree is the appropriate outcome. This presumption applies regardless of whether the violation occurred in coursework, research, examinations, or instructional settings.

In such cases, doctoral students are not entitled to a Review Panel under the general disciplinary process. Instead, the findings and determination of responsibility will be referred directly to the student's academic program. The program will issue a decision letter that includes outcomes and any additional information relevant to the student's academic standing. No prior written warning is required to support dismissal under this policy. The program's decision will be provided to OAI for record-keeping, and a transcript notation indicating program dismissal for academic integrity reasons will be entered.

PhD students may not appeal the findings or sanctions through the general academic integrity appeal process. Instead, their sole opportunity to challenge the finding or rebut the presumption of dismissal is through the Academic Dismissal Appeal process described in the Student Handbook.

PhD students are expected to familiarize themselves with the full list of academic integrity standards and examples of violations outlined in the USC Student Handbook, including but not limited to plagiarism, cheating, unauthorized collaboration, falsification, misrepresentation, and misuse of instructional materials. Ignorance of policy or lack of intent is not a valid defense.

In cases where a student has registered for a course on a Pass/No Pass (P/NP) basis and an academic integrity violation has occurred, a penalty letter grade will be assigned when a grading option exists. A Pass or No Pass determination is only issued in these circumstances when a letter grade cannot be issued. A student may not withdraw from a course in which they committed or were accused of committing an academic integrity violation.

Currently, USC does not have a universal policy on the use of generative AI tools for academic work and assignments. Although professors are encouraged to support ethical and responsible uses of generative AI, each professor and class will have their own policies regarding the use of generative AI. When in doubt about using generative AI in your class or for a particular assignment, students are encouraged to speak with their professors. Using generative AI inappropriately can result in reports to the Office of Academic Integrity and potential disciplinary measures. NGP is currently developing a policy for the use of generative AI on the Competency and Qualifying Examinations.

Academic Warning Dismissal

Students are expected to maintain satisfactory progress towards their degree. NGP takes multiple factors into consideration in determining a student's qualifications for an advanced degree, including academic GPA, demonstration of specific research skills and aptitudes, regular research progress, ethical conduct in research, the mentor's semester evaluation, Qualifying Exam/Dissertation Committees' annual reports, and timely completion of program milestones. Continuation in NGP is determined by the above standards. Please keep in mind that the Program is very heavily research-focused, with expectations of substantive accomplishments through a significant time and effort commitment. All progress in performing dissertation research is monitored closely by the laboratory mentor and Qualifying Exam/Dissertation Committees.

If a student fails to make satisfactory progress, the NGP Director will notify them in writing. Written letters should a) explain how the student is falling short of the satisfactory progress standard and b) include specific benchmarks describing how the student can succeed in the program within a reasonable timeframe. Warning letters are sent as early as possible so the student can take advantage of the recommended actions. Students who do not meet the established benchmarks may be dismissed.

If a student has a question or concern about their progress, they should consult with their faculty advisor or PhD program coordinator.

Academic Dismissal Appeal

The USC Student Handbook includes information on how to appeal a dismissal. The Graduate School Dismissal Appeal provides the final consideration of a student's dismissal from a graduate program when the dean of the relevant school has upheld the dismissal. This does not include students who have not met the conditions for continuing registration or those who have violated the Student Code of Conduct. The Graduate School will schedule the appeal once the student provides written verification of dismissal and states in writing that they want to proceed with the appeal within 30 days of the dismissal. For more information, please visit the Graduate School website.

X.   Academic Calendar

Holidays
PhD students with graduate assistantship (GA) appointments will observe the academic holiday

schedule. If a student serving as a GA is unable to observe a holiday due to the obligations of their appointment, they will be provided with an alternative day off instead of the missed holiday during the same semester, with the advance agreement of their designated faculty supervisor and, as needed, the Director of Graduate Studies.

XI.   Resources, Support, and Problem Resolution

NGP Forms

NGP forms, guides, and resources are available on the [NGP website](#) under Current Students.

USC Student Handbook

The [USC Student Handbook](#) outlines the rights, responsibilities, and obligations you have as a student member of this community.

Child Care Fund

A childcare subsidy of up to $1,800 is available per semester for each child under the age of six. The subsidy is considered taxable income and is subject to reporting on the appropriate forms. The student is solely responsible and liable for any tax liability resulting from the subsidy provided to the student or their dependent.

If a student has a loan, particularly Direct Loans, the Child Care grants could reduce the student's loan eligibility. Students should contact the Financial Aid Office to confirm.

International students should note the following:

- To remain eligible for this grant, students must maintain valid F-1 or J-1 status, and their dependents must maintain F-2 or J-2 status.
- This grant cannot be used as proof of funding for bringing dependents (spouse and/or children) to the U.S. under F-2 or J-2 status. Information regarding proof of funding for dependents is available on the Office of International Services [website](#).
- J-1 students who receive this grant must request a new DS-2019 with updated funding information by submitting a Financial Update Request through the [Trojan International Portal](#). Once processed, a new DS-2019 will be issued.
- Students in F-1 status on post-completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) or STEM OPT Extension, as well as J-1 students on post-completion Academic Training, are not eligible to apply for or receive this grant.

Child Care Fund Eligibility Criteria
The student must be a graduate student worker in the union bargaining unit in the semester in which the provider expense was incurred. Applicants must furnish supporting documentation as reasonably requested by USC. Eligible childcare providers include:

- A licensed childcare center
- A licensed family childcare provider

- o   A licensed after-school program
- o   A daytime summer camp program
- o   An in-home provider with a Social Security or Tax I.D. number. An in-home provider cannot be a spouse, relative, child under age 19, or anyone who lives in the same household as the student. Nannies and nanny shares are covered if the caregiver has a valid Social Security number or Tax ID Number.

Funds are not available for overnight camp, team registration fees, extracurricular activities, or club sports. The program's primary intent must be to provide childcare while the parent is working. Summer programs can be considered a childcare program if they meet the requirements above.

Applications are processed in the order received. Applications will not be accepted or processed when funds for the academic year have been exhausted. More information is available on the Graduate School Website.

Short Term Hardship Grant

Short-term hardship grants are available to students with dependents. Grants are subject to a cap of $2,500 per graduate student worker per semester. Grants may not be used for expenses that are covered by another fund or account. The grant is taxable income and is therefore subject to taxation and reporting on the appropriate forms. The student is solely responsible and liable for any tax liability resulting from the grant.

Short Term Hardship Eligibility
The student must be a graduate student worker in the bargaining unit in the semester in which the provider expense was incurred. The student must have a dependent, and they must furnish supporting documentation as reasonably requested by USC.

Hardships may include, but are not limited to, events resulting from a sudden or unexpected illness, imminent loss of housing, loss of property due to natural disaster, or medical, dental, and vision expenditures not covered by any other source.

If the dependent is covered by a health insurance plan, unanticipated emergency or short-term out-of-pocket expenses are not covered by the insurance plan. If the dependent is not covered by a health insurance plan, unanticipated emergency or short-term out-of-pocket medical expenses incurred by the Graduate Student Worker.

Applications are processed in the order received. Applications will not be accepted or processed when funds for the academic year have been exhausted. More information is available on the Graduate School Website.

Resources for International Students

The Office of International Services (OIS) supports F-1 and J-1 international students, helping them maintain immigration status, navigate complex immigration regulations, and succeed academically and personally. Key services include immigration advising, travel advising, and

guidance on employment rules, such as on-campus work, CPT, and OPT.

With expertise in F-1 & J-1 immigration regulations, OIS advisors collaborate with government agencies and university departments to ensure students comply with their visa requirements while at USC. For more information, please visit the OIS website.

OIS advisors are available for one-on-one meetings daily via Zoom - no appointment is necessary:

- o Mondays, Wednesdays, & Fridays: 1 PM-3 PM
- o Tuesdays & Thursdays: 10 AM-12 PM
- o J-1 advisors are available Tuesdays, Wednesdays, & Thursdays

Many international students are from countries where English is not spoken as a native language. The **American Language Institute (ALI)** provides classes and other resources to assist international undergraduate and graduate students in improving their English and adapting to an American university program. Before they can be cleared to begin teaching at USC, all international Teaching Assistants are required to take part in a training program run by ALI.

Lactation Support

PhD students have access to spaces for expressing and storing breast milk. Rooms on the UPC and HSC campus are listed here.

Center for Excellence in Teaching

The Center for Excellence in Teaching (CET) is the university's think tank for innovative teaching. As a faculty-led initiative, CET draws upon the talents of experienced faculty to promote a commitment to excellence in teaching, learning, and scholarship. CET provides training and resources to improve teaching at USC, including supporting faculty and Teaching Assistants as they devise new courses and develop enriching out-of-class activities. CET offers seminars and lectures throughout the semester on a variety of topics and provides a training session at the beginning of each semester for Teaching Assistants.

Library Resources

Accessibility Training for Teaching Assistants at USC

Organized and developed by a collaboration between the Undergraduate Student Government (USG), Graduate Student Government (GSG), and USC Libraries as a resource for accessibility training for teaching assistants.

Accommodations

The University provides reasonable accommodations to PhD students who are disabled or become disabled and need reasonable accommodations to perform the essential functions of their job. More information is available from USC's Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS).

Graduate Student Government

The mission of GSG is to enhance the graduate and professional student experience by serving as the face of the student body. GSG is responsible for managing student resources efficiently, providing a voice for the student community, building a community that fosters interdisciplinary exchanges, and informing students about their rights, resources, and opportunities. Elected officers, senators who represent all schools and departments, and special interest committees tackle issues specific to graduate and professional students and provide venues for interaction beyond the academic realm. An Executive Board of 29 officers is selected every spring by the GSG senators and outgoing executive board members. The Executive Board oversees the daily operations of GSG and works closely with the Senate to promote graduate and professional student interests within the USC administration and academic departments. More information is available from the [Graduate Student Government](#) website.

Other Support

Campus Support and Intervention (CSI)
CSI connects with members of the USC community when they need support in achieving their academic, professional, and personal goals.
(213) 740-0411
uscsupport@usc.edu

USC Kortschak Center for Learning and Creativity
KCLC offers outreach, programming, and individual coaching services to USC students and departments to promote a campus-wide understanding of learning differences and their potential to facilitate creativity and academic excellence.
(213) 740-7884
kortschakcenter@usc.edu

Office of the Ombuds
Available to faculty, staff, and students experiencing University-related concerns, conflicts, or challenging situations.
(213) 821-9556 (University Park Campus)
upcombuds@usc.edu
(323) 442-0341 (Health Sciences Campus)
hscombuds@usc.edu

Counseling and Mental Health
Provides counseling and support for all students.
(213) 740-9355 (WELL)

Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS)
Provides support services for individuals with disabilities.
(213) 740-0776 (University Park Campus)
(323) 442-1000 (Health Sciences Campus)
osasfrontdesk@usc.edu

Emergency, Crisis, and Reporting Resources

USC offers several resources and services to support you in case of emergency, crisis, or assistance navigating concerns, including:

- [Urgent Matters](#)

- [Counseling & Mental Health Crisis Support](#)

- [Confidential and Private Resources](#)

- [USC Report & Response](#)

- [Department of Public Safety (DPS)](#)

- [Campus Support and Intervention](#)