

Graduate Program Handbook

M.S. in Applied Economics
Department of Agricultural Economics & Economics
Montana State University

2025-2026

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Introduction

This handbook has been prepared to provide a clear and comprehensive overview of the policies and procedures governing the M.S. program in Applied Economics in the Department of Agricultural Economics & Economics (DAEE) at Montana State University. Students enrolled in the program are required to comply with these policies and procedures.

A goal of this handbook is to address the most frequently asked questions from prospective and currently enrolled students. The content is aligned with the current policies of The Graduate School, as outlined on the Montana State University (MSU) website (<https://www.montana.edu/gradschool/>).

Oversight and administration of the DAEE graduate program is the responsibility of the Graduate Program Committee. In the event of procedural ambiguities or conflicts, students should first consult the Chair of the Graduate Program Committee, followed by the Department Head, and, if necessary, the Dean of The Graduate School.

Graduate students are expected to demonstrate a strong commitment to their academic and research responsibilities and to make consistent, satisfactory progress throughout their program. The awarding of a graduate degree by the DAEE is based on demonstrated scientific productivity and excellence. Our primary objective is to support students in developing expertise and competence in their field of study.

Information on graduate student advising and resources can be found at the following webpage: <https://www.montana.edu/econ/studentresources/index.html>.

DAEE Office and Personnel

DAEE office: 306 Linfield Hall

Graduate Program Committee

Dr. D. Mark Anderson, Chair (104 Linfield Hall, dwight.anderson@montana.edu)

Dr. Chris Stoddard (313B Linfield Hall, cstoddard@montana.edu)

Dr. Andrew Hill (313 Linfield Hall, andrew.hill6@montana.edu)

Student Success Coordinator

Beth Thorsen (303A Linfield Hall, elizabeth.thorsen@montana.edu)

Business Operations Manager

Zoica Miesen (310C Linfield Hall, zoica.miesen@montana.edu)

Budget Analyst

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Yvonne Williams (311A Linfield Hall, yvonne.williams1@montana.edu)

Department Head

Dr. Eric Belasco (307A Linfield Hall, eric.belasco@montana.edu)

Graduate School Dean

Dr. Deborah C. Haynes (104 Montana Hall, dhaynes@montana.edu)

DAEE faculty and staff directory:

<https://www.montana.edu/econ/directory.html>.

Admission to Graduate Program

General policy statement

All inquiries regarding graduate studies within the DAEE should be directed to the Chair of the Graduate Program Committee and, if necessary, will be reviewed by the appropriate faculty members.

Students admitted to the M.S. program are required to comply with all requirements and regulations set forth by the Graduate School as well as those established by the DAEE. Requirements must be satisfactorily completed before a graduate degree is conferred.

General description of M.S. program

Through a combination of rigorous coursework and collaborative research with faculty, the M.S. in Applied Economics equips students with a strong foundation in economic theory, as well as advanced skills in quantitative and econometric data analysis. These tools are applied to a wide range of contemporary economic issues. The program culminates in the completion of an intensive, faculty-guided research thesis that addresses a significant and relevant economic problem.

Minimum course requirements

- Intermediate-level micro- and macroeconomics (both calculus based).
- At least one year of calculus.
- At least one semester of linear or matrix algebra.
- At least one semester of econometrics (or an equivalent course in regression analysis).

Strongly recommended courses for an application to be competitive

- Multivariable calculus
- Differential equations
- Additional calculus coursework and courses in real analysis
- Coursework in probability and statistics

Average undergraduate GPAs of incoming students accepted with funding (2020-2024)

Admission year	Average GPA
2024	3.74
2023	3.66
2022	3.69
2021	3.76
2020	3.53

Application materials

- Unofficial undergraduate transcripts (official transcripts will be requested for formal admission)
- Three letters of recommendation
- Application fee of \$70

- Non-native English speakers: evidence of English language proficiency (<https://www.montana.edu/international/admissions/englishproficiencygraduate.html>)
- A tailored personal statement is recommended but not required.
 - Describe research interests and how they relate to the research agendas of specific faculty members.

Deadlines and dates

The DAEE M.S. program in Applied Economics generally has 5 to 10 available funded slots each year.

- Applications to be considered for funding are due no later than January 15th. Initial award and acceptance letters are sent in February.
- International applicants must apply by January 15th to have a decision in time for visa processing.
- Applications submitted between January 15th and March 15th will be considered for admission only (not for funding).

Admission process

The Graduate Program Committee reviews all completed applications and may make any of the following decisions:

- **Accept (funding offered)**
- **Accept (funding not offered)**
- **Deny**
 - Admission may be refused for a number of reasons. Due to the highly competitive nature of the application process, meeting minimum (or even recommended) course requirements does not guarantee acceptance.

Funded offers

Students accepted with funding will have a large percentage of their tuition waived and will be responsible for the remaining portion.¹ Funded students will also work as research and teaching assistants, receiving additional funding in the form of a monthly stipend. While the stipend amount varies, it is commensurate with the cost of living.

The Graduate School

For general information on graduate admissions from the Graduate School, please refer to the following webpage: <https://www.montana.edu/gradschool/admissions/howtoapply.html>. Here, you will find information on items such as:

- Tips for getting the best letters of recommendation
- The admission process for international students
- Drop-in online sessions for prospective students

¹ In the past, up to 70% of tuition has been waived.

Departmental Requirements

The M.S. in Applied Economics is awarded upon successful completion of a structured 18- to 24-month program. The program consists of two semesters of coursework, followed by the development, writing, and defense of a master's thesis.

Coursework structure¹

Year	Term	Course Code	Course Title	Credits
First year	Fall	ECNS 594	Seminar I ²	1
		ECNS 594	Seminar II ³	1
		ECNS 561	Econometrics I	3
		ECNS 503	Microeconomic Theory I	3
		ECNS 560	Advanced Data Analytics in Economics	3
First year	Spring	ECNS 502	Macroeconomic Theory	3
		ECNS 504	Microeconomic Theory II	3
		ECNS 562	Econometrics II	3
Second year	Fall	ECNS 590	Master's Thesis	1–10
		ECNS 569	Research Methodology ⁴	1
¹ Timing may change in some years due to faculty schedules ² Math camp (held during week prior to start of fall semester) ³ Problem-solving seminar ⁴ Writing camp (held during week prior to start of fall semester)				

Students will be registered for all coursework by the Student Success Coordinator. Students planning to take a course schedule different from that listed above must have their courses approved by the Graduate Committee Chair.

Supplementary coursework

Students may supplement their studies with additional courses. Students who intend to pursue a Ph.D. in economics will often take courses in mathematics and/or statistics during the second year of the M.S. program. To register for these courses, students will need to receive approval from the offering department and should work with the DAEE's Student Success Coordinator for assistance. For more information on registration, please see [Registration Process](#).

Credit requirements

In total, 21 course credits and 10 thesis credits are required to graduate. Students generally continue into the spring semester of year 2 to complete and defend their theses.

For second-year students:

- Current out-of-state tuition policy: If you are assigned as a full-time RA/TA (19 weekly hours), out-of-state tuition will be waived (you pay in-state tuition). To be assigned as a RA/TA by the graduate committee, you must be enrolled for 6 credits or more.
- To be considered a full-time student, you must be enrolled for 9 credits or more.
- You need a total of **10 thesis credits** for the program.
- **At a minimum three of these credits need to be in the semester in which you file for graduation** (but still need to meet 6-credit minimum for a TA- or RA-ship)

- If you do not defend your thesis by the Graduate School deadline (see below for more information), you have two options:
 - Option (1): Take a one-credit extension – this gives you several extra weeks to finish. If you were going to graduate in May and missed the deadline, the one-credit extension would be charged at the Spring Semester rate.
 - Option (2): If you need the summer to finish your thesis, you will need to sign up for 3 credits. TA/RA assignments end in the spring, so you will be responsible for the 3 credits of tuition. If you are not an in-state student, this will be charged at the out-of-state rate.

Graduation requirements

Students are required to maintain a 3.0 grade point average overall in their core courses and the courses in their graduate program. Failure to meet these requirements, as well as receipt of more than one grade less than a “B-” in the core courses will be grounds for termination from the program.

Students must pass a comprehensive qualifying exam (two attempts) and an oral defense of their thesis. The thesis defense is administered by the student's graduate committee and is open to all members of MSU. Students are expected to present a final draft of the thesis to each member of their graduate committee at least seven days prior to the scheduled date of their oral defense. The thesis must be approved by the Graduate School.

For information from the Graduate School regarding being placed on academic notice, warning, or suspension, please see [Grades and Academic Standing](#).

Comprehensive exam

Master’s students will have two opportunities – at the beginning and end of the fall semester during their first year – to pass a comprehensive exam assessing aptitude in undergraduate microeconomic theory. Students are required to attend and fully participate in ECNS 301 (Intermediate Microeconomics) to help prepare for the exam, but students who pass the exam on the first attempt are exempt from this requirement. The passing standards are set by the Graduate Affairs Committee. Failure to pass the comprehensive exam on the second attempt will be grounds for termination from the program.

Schedule for comprehensive exam (fall semester of first year)		
Attempt	Week of semester	Day of week
First attempt	Second week	During first ECNS 594 class, which generally meets on Mondays, 3:10-4:00pm. ¹
Second attempt	Finals week	The exam will be scheduled by the Graduate Affairs Committee after the final exams for all core courses have been completed.
¹ Because the fall semester usually starts on a Wednesday, the first ECNS 594 class is held during the second week of the semester.		

Thesis

All students are required to complete an original research project, culminating in a thesis defense during their second year. In collaboration with faculty, each student forms a thesis committee, which

includes a primary advisor (serving as the committee chair). The selection of a primary advisor is an important step in the process of graduate education.

With guidance from their primary advisor and thesis committee, the student selects a viable research topic, conducts rigorous original research, and writes and defends a thesis that reflects both the program's standards and the student's academic interests.

Departmental seminar attendance

Departmental seminars are an important part of the training for a master's degree. Seminar attendance is considered mandatory for both first- and second-year graduate students.

Dates and deadlines set by the Graduate School

See the following link for a comprehensive list of dates and deadlines set by the Graduate School:

<https://www.montana.edu/gradschool/datesdeadlines.html>

Financial Assistance

The primary form of financial aid is a graduate assistantship, which includes a stipend and partial tuition waiver. The tuition waiver covers up to 7 tuition credits but does not include fees associated with those credits. Assistantships are competitively awarded and renewed based on academic progress and job performance. Students are assigned to one or two faculty members to assist with research and/or teaching, with duties varying by instructor and semester. Assignments are coordinated by the graduate program chair.

General Timeline of Graduate Program

First year (fall)

Math camp and orientation	Week prior to official start of fall semester
Comprehensive exam (first attempt)	Taken during first meeting of problem-solving seminar (ECNS 594)
First-semester coursework • ECNS 503 (Micro Theory I) • ECNS 560 (Adv. Data Analytics) • ECNS 561 (Econometrics I) • ECNS 594 (problem-solving seminar) • ECNS 301 (Intermediate Microeconomics; attend for no credit, unless exempt based on passing comprehensive exam)	Weeks 1 - 16
First-semester final exams for ECNS 503, ECNS 560, and ECNS 561	Finals week (typically the second week in December)
Comprehensive exam (second attempt)	Finals week (after final exams in core courses)

First year (spring)

Second-semester coursework • ECNS 502 • ECNS 504 • ECNS 562	Weeks 1 - 16
Second-semester final exams for ECNS 502, ECNS 504, and ECNS 562	Finals week (typically the first week in May)
Committee Selection and Program of Study	These are due the last day of the spring semester. Committee selections must be made before program of study can be submitted.

First year (summer)

Presentation of preliminary M.S. thesis proposal in writing camp (ECNS 569)	Presentations will be on the last day of writing camp, which is held the week prior to the official start of the fall semester.
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Second year (fall)

Thesis proposal meeting with entire committee	Deadline for this meeting is second week in October
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Second year (spring)

Graduate application	Applications for spring are due Feb. 5 th .
Pre-defense meeting with entire committee	Deadline for pre-defense is second week in March. Ideally, this meeting is held earlier in the spring semester
Submit draft of thesis to Graduate School for preliminary approval for formatting	Due week before classes end. See the link for exact deadline in any given semester: https://www.montana.edu/gradschool/datesdeadlines.html
Final thesis defense	Generally last week in April. See the link for exact deadline in any given semester: https://www.montana.edu/gradschool/datesdeadlines.html

Graduate Certificate in Applied Economic Analysis

In addition to the M.S. program, the DAEE offers a 12-credit Graduate Certificate in Applied Economic Analysis, providing advanced training in econometrics and data analysis.

Advanced undergraduate students may complete the certificate by setting aside graduate course credits. The program does not require a thesis, and credits earned may be applied toward the M.S. in Applied Economics. While the department does not fund the certificate, students may use scholarships to cover its costs.

This program is ideal for:

- **MSU undergraduates** seeking to enhance their degrees with graduate-level skills in economics and data analysis.
- **Professionals and MSU employees** interested in advanced economics coursework without the commitment of a thesis-based master's program.
- **Graduate students in other quantitative disciplines at MSU** looking to strengthen their expertise in econometrics and applied economic analysis.

Prerequisites

- Intermediate-level micro- or macroeconomics (calculus based).
- Calculus I and II
- Econometrics (or an equivalent course in regression analysis)
- 3.25 GPA or higher in required courses

Certificate requirements (12 credits in total)

- ECNS 560: Advanced Data Analytics for Economics
- ECNS 561: Introduction to Econometrics
- ECNS 562: Econometrics II
- Elective: ECNS 502 (Macroeconomic Theory) or ECNS 503 (Microeconomic Theory)

Sample plan for undergraduate students

- Junior year (spring): ECNS 502 and 12 undergraduate credits
- Senior year (fall): ECNS 560, ECNS 561, and 12 undergraduate credits
- Senior year (spring): ECNS 562 and 12 undergraduate credits

Note: Students may not double-count courses for their undergraduate and graduate programs and must obtain a “B” or higher in all certificate-related coursework.

For more information on the Graduate Certificate in Applied Economic Analysis, please visit the following link: <https://www.montana.edu/econ/graduatecertificate.html>.

Academic Code of Conduct

Montana State University expects all students to uphold the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity. The **Academic Code of Conduct** fosters an environment of professionalism where students receive fair recognition for their own work and learn to make ethical decisions similar to those they will face in their professional careers.

This commitment to integrity allows faculty to evaluate student performance fairly and maintain a just, supportive learning environment. It also enables faculty to serve not only as instructors, but also as mentors and colleagues. Academic honesty extends beyond the classroom to any setting in which students conduct research or represent their academic unit. Graduate students are responsible for knowing and adhering to the Academic Code of Conduct.

Academic Misconduct

Academic misconduct involves misrepresenting one's academic work or undermining others' ability to be evaluated fairly. Allowing someone else to submit your work, or submitting another's work as your own, are equally serious offenses. Common forms include cheating, forgery, bribery or threats, fabrication, and plagiarism.

For full details on the University's policy regarding graduate student conduct, please see [Graduate Student Rights and Responsibilities](#).