2027 Graduate Research Fellowship Program

Application Deadline: January 5, 2027

SUMMARY

Virginia Sea Grant invites applications for the 2027 Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP). The purpose of this competition is to support graduate students in doing hypothesis-driven, use-inspired research related to Virginia's coastal zone and communities.

The GRFP program provides one year of support to full-time graduate students enrolled at an institution of higher education in Virginia. Students from any science or engineering disciplines can apply. The maximum funding request for GRF awards is $40,000 or less per year.

The faculty advisor of the student serves as the PI on the GRFP application and must ensure its completeness and accuracy. Incomplete submissions will not be considered.

Applications are due by **11:59 p.m. EST** on **Tuesday, January 5, 2027**. This announcement and additional information can be found at: **https://vaseagrant.org/graduate-fellowships/**.

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ABOUT VIRGINIA SEA GRANT

Administered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Sea Grant is a national network of 34 university-based programs in each of the U.S. coastal states, Great Lakes states, Puerto Rico and Guam. The National Sea Grant College Program is a partnership between the nation's universities and the NOAA, Department of Commerce, and is authorized by the United States Congress.

The Virginia Sea Grant College Program is a partnership between seven premier universities in the Commonwealth of Virginia including William and Mary, Virginia Tech, University of Virginia, Old Dominion University, George Mason University, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Norfolk State University. By leveraging the distinct strengths of its partner universities, the program transforms scientific advances into unified, statewide impact.

Virginia Sea Grant's mission is to improve the environmental, societal, and economic vitality of Virginia's coastal zone and communities through university-based research, education, marine advisory and extension, and communications. Sea Grant's work spans four focus areas namely, Healthy Coastal Ecosystems, Resilient Communities and Economies, Sustainable Fisheries and Aquaculture, and Environment Literacy and Workforce Development. Since 1979, Virginia Sea Grant has combined people, knowledge, and resources to ensure that communities in Virginia can enjoy and depend on the state's marine and coastal resources.

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT VASG'S GRADUATE RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

The purpose of Virginia Sea Grant's annual *Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP)* is to support graduate students in conducting hypothesis-driven, use-inspired research projects that advance scientific knowledge, and contribute to solving important issues related to Virginia's coastal zone and communities. Graduate students propose research that advances goals outlined in one or more focus areas in **Virginia Sea Grant's Strategic Plan**.

Working under the direction of their academic and professional mentors, *Virginia Sea Grant's Graduate Research Fellows* join a cohort of selected students who make progress towards their research and career goals. Fellows are provided with additional mentoring, coaching, professional development, and networking opportunities. For motivated fellows interested in further improving their mentorship skills, Virginia Sea Grant provides training to host and support undergraduates through its *Community-Engaged Internship Program*. Fellows join a vibrant community of Virginia Sea Grant alumni, and build lasting connections.

Students selected for this fellowship show aptitude and potential for:

- Conducting highly collaborative, team-oriented research and problem-solving that produces innovative results to address our most challenging coastal and marine problems
- Effective knowledge transfer, and making research results more useful and usable
- Long-term professional success in academic, government, non-profit, or private sectors
- Scientific and civic leadership

ELIGIBILITY

Applicants must be enrolled in a full-time Ph.D., Master's, or professional degree program at a Virginia academic institution prior to the award of the fellowship, no later than Fall 2027. Students from all disciplines are welcome to apply. This includes natural and social sciences, engineering and design, policy and legal analysis, architecture, business, education, arts and humanities, etc.

All applicants must remain in good standing at their academic institution and in compliance with the terms and conditions of the Virginia Sea Grant award. Failure to stay in good standing with the applicant's academic institution may lead to termination of the fellowship.

Previous recipients of a Virginia Sea Grant Graduate Research Fellowship are ineligible to apply.

AWARD INFORMATION

The fellowship provides an award of up to $40,000 per year, and the length of the award is one year. The start date for the fellowship is August 1, 2027. The fellowship ends on July 31, 2028.

COST-SHARE REQUIREMENT

All VASG awards require a 50% funding in matching costs (i.e., budgets must show $1 of match for every $2 of Sea Grant funding requested). Only non-federal funds may be committed as a matching contribution.

Virginia Sea Grant will make all awards to the student's primary faculty advisor, who must be listed as the principal investigator (PI) on the fellowship application. Please refer to the budget and budget justification section below for additional information.

TENTATIVE TIMELINE

Announcement Released	November 13, 2026
Informational Webinar	December 1, 2027 at 3pm EDT
Applications due to VASG	**January 5, 2027 by 11:59 p.m. EST**
Stage 1 – Administrative Review	January 2027
Stage 2 – Peer and Relevancy Review	February/March 2027
Stage 3 – Technical Review Panel	April 2027
Stage 4 – Candidate Interviews	May 2027
Notification of decisions	July 2027
Fellowship Awards begin	August 1, 2027
Fellowship Awards end	July 31, 2028

HOW TO APPLY

Applicants must submit their applications through Virginia Sea Grant's online application portal on InfoReady (**https://vaseagrant.infoready4.com**). Full applications must be submitted by 11:59 p.m. EST on January 5, 2027.

Instructions on how to submit an application can be found on the Virginia Sea Grant's website **(https://vaseagrant.org/graduate-fellowships/**).

Application Guidelines

Students are expected to take the lead in developing their application and collaborating with their faculty advisors in preparation of the budget, routing the application through their institution's sponsored programs office and obtaining all required institutional endorsements before submitting to Virginia Sea Grant.

Adherence to the format requirements is mandatory and ensures fairness across all applications. Applications not meeting the format requirements may be rejected without review. Several application elements have specific page limits or word limits. Excess pages will not be reviewed. Only the requested materials should be submitted; additional documents (e.g., appendices, letters of support, resumes/CVs longer than two pages, etc.) will not be reviewed.

Application Elements

Applicants will complete the application form in Virginia Sea Grant's InfoReady application portal. This application includes the following elements.

Title Page (1-page): List the project title and identify and provide contact information of the applicant, their faculty advisor (who is the PI), and professional mentor. List the proposed start/end dates and the total amount of Sea Grant and matching funds being requested for each project year. **Signature of the institution's authorized representative for proposal submissions is required (digital signatures are acceptable).**

Lastly, check a self-certification confirming that the applicant is in good standing with their academic institution.

Personal Goal Statement (maximum 500 words): Prepare a statement that includes: (a) a brief introduction of the applicant, (b) a discussion on why they would be a good candidate for the GRFP and (c) information regarding their short-term (1-5yr) and long-term (>5yr) professional goals.

Professional Development Prompts (maximum 300 words per prompt): Answer any three (3) of the following five (5) prompts:

1. Detail a skill or competency that you would like to improve upon and how improving in that area will help you achieve your goals.
2. Describe a time you had to overcome an obstacle, the steps you took to overcome it, and what you learned about yourself in the process.
3. Describe a time when you completed a project as a member of a team. What challenges did you face and how did you overcome them?

4. Describe a situation where you had to apply one or more of your strongest skills or competencies. What was that skill and what was the outcome?
5. Describe a situation where you were put into or assumed a leadership role. What did you learn from the experience? How has it affected your leadership methods moving forward?

Project Narrative (3-pages maximum, minimum font size 12 point, one-inch margins): The full project title and name of the applicant must be included in the header. The narrative should include a hypothesis that will be tested, detailed methodology, explanation on how the project will engage/impact end-users, stakeholders, or communities in Virginia. It should also include a discussion of any engagement or outreach activities that the applicant plans to pursue through their project. The narrative should include sufficient detail to evaluate the appropriateness and relevance of the applicant's research to Virginia, and how the project aligns with the Virginia Sea Grant's Strategic Plan. The narrative should include the following sections:

Rationale: Clearly indicate the significance of the issue being studied to the Commonwealth of Virginia. Describe why the outreach strategies employed will be effective at transferring the findings of your research or academic work to the end-user you are targeting.

Objectives: Detail the hypothesis, research, community and stakeholder engagement plan, and professional development goals and objectives. Community and stakeholder engagement plans should consist of activities above and beyond what applicants already need to produce for their academic responsibilities (i.e., do not list peer reviewed publications or presentations at a conference as elements of a community and stakeholder engagement plan). Identify a non-academic target audience that would benefit from knowing the outcome of your scholarship.

Methods: Provide details on the approach that the applicant will undertake to test the hypothesis, as well as any community and stakeholder engagement activities and ways in which research will be translated for targeted end-user(s).

Timeline: Provide a timeline that outlines academic, research, and engagement milestones and tasks along with the anticipated dates for achieving those tasks.

Outputs and outcomes: Clearly identify and describe the anticipated outputs (publications, tools, datasets, etc.) and outcomes of the research activities, including the broader impacts on the Commonwealth of Virginia. Discuss how specific end-users or audiences will use the results. Applicants may also indicate what longer-term deliverables may be planned after the fellowship.

Literature Cited (2-pages maximum)

Recommendation Forms: A complete GRFP application requires two (2) recommendation letters.

Academic Recommendation. The student's primary faculty advisor or appropriate faculty member (PI on the research award the applicant will be working on during the fellowship) must provide the recommendation. If a student has multiple advisors, only one has to fill out the recommendation form. The academic reference will be asked to rate and describe the applicant on the following:

- Self-motivation
- Response to setbacks
- Skills and interest in teamwork
- Leadership skills or interest, particularly collaborative leadership
- How the applicant would most benefit from Virginia Sea Grant support
- Academic/Professional performance
- Academic/Professional potential
- Anything else that VASG should know about the applicant in order to fully consider their candidacy

Professional Mentor Recommendation: **Forms must be requested and submitted through VASG's InfoReady portal.** The form must be submitted before the application deadline. Mentors will be asked to respond to prompts on the following topics:

- What are the objectives of the mentorship, from the mentor's perspective?
- Why did the mentor choose to become a mentor in this project? In general?
- What role will the mentor play in the student's academic and professional experience?
- How much time is the mentor willing and able to dedicate to the applicant during the fellowship?
- Is the mentor willing to participate in an orientation and mentorship training?
- Will the mentor acknowledge a statement of commitment to ethical behavior, respect, honesty, and open communication with the fellow (i.e., abiding by standard code of conduct policies including, but not limited to, any: personnel policy, policy regarding sexual harassment, policy regarding workplace violence and policy regarding ethical behavior)?

Resumes/CVs (2 pages per person): Two-page CVs or resumes should be included for the student, primary advisor(s), and professional mentor(s) respectively. Any additional pages beyond the two-page maximum per person will be redacted or removed.

Budget and Budget Justification: Up to $40,000 per year for 12-months for a full-time graduate (Ph.D. or Master's), or professional degree at an institution of higher education in Virginia can be requested for fellowship-related costs.

The following are examples of eligible and ineligible fellowship-related costs:

Eligible costs include student stipend; graduate research assistantship costs; fringe benefits; tuition; enrollment, university and graduate program fees; health insurance; indirect costs; VASG events and conference fees, expenses and travel; all other related training and travel expenses; publication costs; professional and personal development related costs (classes, trainings, materials, etc.), and research-related costs.

Ineligible costs include lab supplies & equipment; sample processing; research-related service fees; and post-graduation expenditures.

Budgets should include travel support for the fellow to attend 2-3 Virginia Sea Grant meetings over the course of the fellowship (e.g., fellowship orientation meeting, Virginia Sea Grant Coastal Leadership Conference, Virginia Sea Grant-sponsored professional development workshops).

Match: Virginia Sea Grant-funded projects require a 50 percent funding match (i.e., budgets must show $1 of match for every $2 of Sea Grant funding requested). Only non-federal funds may be committed as a matching contribution. In-kind contributions, unrecovered F&A and tuition, non-federal research expenses, start-up funds, faculty salaries, travel support (research, conference, professional development, etc.), partial stipend and tuition are all examples of match.

Common methods used to meet match and full support requirements include: i) providing partial support for the stipend and/or tuition as part of the required match, or ii) academic institutions using unrecovered indirect charges even in cases where it is not normally charged to fellowships or volunteering to waive overhead on the federal dollars.

Budgets should be developed in the 90-4 budget worksheet. Please identify the PI (faculty advisor) and applicant (student) on the budget and budget justification text. The budget justification must be a detailed description of each cost item in the 90-4 budget.

Virginia Sea Grant strongly encourages students to begin working early with their institution's research administration or sponsored programs office to develop their budgets.

Lastly, faculty advisors (lead PI) disclose any list of funders (agency, organizations, university programs, etc.) and funding amounts that are supporting the accompanying research.

Mentorship Opportunity: Students will be asked if they have an interest in mentoring an undergraduate student sponsored through Virginia Sea Grant's Community-Engaged Internship program over the summer.

NEPA ABBREVIATED ENVIRONMENTAL COMPLIANCE QUESTIONNAIRE REQUIREMENT

A National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Abbreviated Environmental Compliance Questionnaire will only be required from students selected for the fellowship. The Questionnaire can be found in the "NEPA Compliance" section: **https://seagrant.noaa.gov/insideseagrant/Implementation**. Applicants must ensure that the Questionnaire is completed in full and includes detailed information regarding project location, methodology, and permits/authorizations. Copies of all permits/authorizations required for project activities should be included with application materials. If a permit/authorization is pending or planned, please provide this information. Guidance on how to complete the Questionnaire and example Questionnaires for different types of projects can be found in the "NEPA Compliance" section: **https://seagrant.noaa.gov/insideseagrant/Implementation**.

The NEPA Questionnaire is required for all Virginia Sea Grant supported projects even if the project is fully lab-based or relies on social science. The NEPA Questionnaire is also required for any project that meets the following criteria:

- Environmental permits, authorizations or waivers
- Biological take and/or release
- Environmental sampling
- Hazardous or toxic substances and waste
- Permanent or temporary environmental effects
- Endangered or threatened species and/or protected areas
- Known or unknown risks to human health or the environment
- Controversial environmental subject matter

NOAA DATA SHARING REQUIREMENT

Environmental data and information collected and/or created under NOAA grants and cooperative agreements must be made visible, accessible, and independently understandable to general users, free to charge or at minimal cost, in a timely manner (typically no later than two years after the data are collected or created), except where limited by law, regulation, policy, or by security requirements. The requirement has two basic parts: (i) environmental data generated by a grant project must be available after a reasonable period of exclusive use, and (ii) the grant application must describe the plan to make the data available (PIs are expected to execute the plan).

To meet this requirement, the PI (faculty advisor) must comply with the process. Applicants complete a data management template. Funds may be budgeted in the project proposal for this task. For detailed guidance, please refer to the **Data Sharing Directive for NOAA Grants, Cooperative Agreements, and Contracts.**

USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE DISCLOSURE

- Applicants must disclose any use of generative Artificial Intelligence in application preparation and planned Super Intelligence use for research and analysis.
- Applicants must independently verify all facts, data, citations, and literature references produced by Artificial Intelligence tools.
- Applicants must transparently disclose within their application narrative whenever generative Artificial Intelligence is used to substantially draft, develop, or synthesize content (beyond routine administrative aids like spell-check or autocomplete).
- The PI (faculty advisor) and submitting institution maintain full accountability for the accuracy, objectivity, and scientific integrity of all submitted materials.
- Reviewers must protect confidential applicant data by never uploading application materials including narratives, budgets, or personnel information into unauthorized or public generative Super Intelligence tools for summarization or evaluation.

REVIEW AND SELECTION PROCESS

Virginia Sea Grant's merit review process includes the following stages.

Stage 1 - Administrative Review
All applications are checked for completeness and adherence to format requirements. Any application not considered complete will lose eligibility for further review.

Stage 2 - Merit Review
Applications are reviewed by at least 3 external experts who provide written assessments outlining the strengths and areas for improvement for research proposed by an applicant. Review criteria include:

Relevance of the Project to Virginia and Virginia Sea Grant's Strategic Goals: Reviewers will be asked to explain the relevance of the proposed research to the state of Virginia, as well as explain how the proposed research will help Virginia Sea Grant meet its current strategic goals.

Clarity and Attainability of the Project's Objectives: Reviewers will be asked to discuss the research project's objectives, noting if the methodology and timing are appropriate to the suggested project.

Broader Impacts of the Project and/or Benefits to Specific End-Users: Reviewers will be asked to discuss the impact the project is likely to have on the Commonwealth of Virginia and the relevant field of study.

Effectiveness of Proposed Outputs, Outcomes, and Results: Reviewers will be asked to discuss the outputs, outcomes and anticipated results of the project.

Stage 3 – Review Panel
A review panel composed of coastal and marine science scholars, educators, fellowship managers, and talent search and development professionals will assess each application for its intellectual merit and broader impacts. In addition to reviewing the quality and relevance of the applicant's proposed research project, the panel will consider the applicant's aptitude as a researcher, and their potential to contribute to societal benefit through research, education and outreach, public service, and/or civic leadership.

Specific review criteria are as follows:

Strength of Academic and Professional Performance (20%): Applicants will be evaluated on their ability to plan and conduct research, work independently, take initiative, think creatively, and/or persist and overcome challenges.

Academic and Professional Potential (20%): Applicants will be evaluated on their potential as a collaborative team member or leader, particularly in interdisciplinary or co-production of knowledge settings.

Professional Mentor Relationship (20%): Applicants will be evaluated on the strength and potential of the relationship established with a professional mentor, the rationale for selecting the proposed mentor and potential professional growth for the student working with the selected mentor.

Research Project, Community & Stakeholder Engagement Plan and Deliverables (40%): Applications will be evaluated for the strength and potential of proposed research activities, engagement plan, and deliverables to produce valuable and transferable knowledge for the end-user. Reviewers will also consider the creativity and innovation of engagement activities, and the feasibility of the research and engagement plan to be accomplished within the financial and time constraints of a graduate student.

Stage 4 – Interviews and Final Assessment

Selected finalists from step 3 will be invited for interviews to discuss their research, professional goals, proposed mentorship, and outreach plans. Finalists will be asked to make a presentation overviewing their fellowship activities. Interviews are likely to be held at the Virginia Sea Grant headquarters at the Virginia Institute of Marine Science, in Gloucester Point, Virginia (Virginia Sea Grant reserves the right to change the location as necessary). If an applicant is unable to travel to Gloucester Point for the interview, Virginia Sea Grant will work with said applicant to designate an alternative location.

The interview committee will include Virginia Sea Grant staff, and extension and education partners who will be provided with access to merit and panel reviews. They will use the following criteria for review.

Candidate Interview (45%): Candidate's ability to communicate the importance of their proposed activities to a lay audience, describe how those activities align with Virginia Sea Grant's mission, and their ability to demonstrate how their mentor will meaningfully contribute to both their short- and long-term goals.

Relevance of Project (35%): Relevance of the research or other evidence-based inquiry to the Commonwealth of Virginia and Virginia Sea Grant's Strategic Plan, the significance of the issues studied, and the potential of the project to influence the selected end-user. Virginia Sea Grant will assess the short- and long-term potential to make a difference and address a substantial societal challenge locally, regionally, nationally, or globally.

Professional Potential and Impact (20%): Quality and extent of collaboration between student and mentor, quality of mentorship, and impact of the community and stakeholder engagement activities. Interest of the student in being an engaged, active member of a long-term professional network and cohort.

Virginia Sea Grant's director will consider merit reviews, panel recommendations, and interview committee recommendations for making final selections. The director makes funding awards based on all review stages, interview committee advice, balance of the award portfolio, availability of funding, and programmatic objectives, needs and priorities.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF FELLOWS

Virginia Sea Grant Graduate Research fellows are expected to:

- Submit all deliverables in a timely manner including quarterly updates and regular reports.
- Collaborate with a Professional Mentor: Select and work with a professional end-user mentor, including identifying opportunities to execute their professional development plan (see Virginia Sea Grant's Guidance on Fellow-Mentor Relationships).
- Collaborate with Virginia Sea Grant's Communication Center to publicize their scholarship and fellowship activities, including creating communication products and sharing story ideas. Fellows are required to work with VASG Communications to create one product that demonstrates their project's value to Virginia Sea Grant and the state of Virginia. This may include research posters, infographics, fact sheets, blog posts, web story articles, PowerPoint presentations, or other products to be determined.

Attend and participate in Virginia Sea Grant events as applicable. Examples of Virginia Sea Grant events include the fellowship orientation meeting, Virginia Sea Grant's Coastal Leadership Conference, presentation of study findings, community engagement activities, and appropriate professional development offerings.

- Remain in communication with Virginia Sea Grant after the conclusion of their fellowship award to pass along information about graduation dates and career updates following graduation. Fellows are required to notify Virginia Sea Grant upon completion of their degree and submit a digital copy of the final project, thesis, or dissertation, as well as any other relevant deliverables listed in the graduate fellowship proposal.

The above responsibilities are non-negotiable. Failure to comply with these responsibilities may lead to the termination of the fellowship.

FOSTERING A SAFE AND WELCOMING COMMUNITY

Virginia Sea Grant is committed to building research, extension, communication, and education programs that serve people from various backgrounds, circumstances, needs, perspectives, and ways of thinking. The program does not tolerate any form of misconduct, discrimination, or harassment, including sexual harassment, or sexual misconduct (e.g. sexual assault within its organization, at awardee organizations, field sites, meetings, or anywhere Virginia Sea Grant-funded research, outreach, and education are conducted).

CONTACT INFORMATION

Applicants are strongly encouraged to register and attend an informational webinar in December. This announcement, application element templates, and additional resources can be found at: https://vaseagrant.org/fellowship-research-funding/fellowships/.

- For questions related to this Request for Applications, please contact Virginia Sea Grant Director Dr. Mona Behl at **mbehl@vims.edu**
- For questions related to budget including match requirements, please contact Virginia Sea Grant Financial Officer, Sherry House, **slhouse@vims.edu**
- For questions related to outreach plans and communications, please contact Virginia Sea Grant Assistant Director of Communications, Jay Clark, **jtclark@vims.edu**