Choosing a Graduate Program

Dr. Katy Luchini Colbry
Assistant Dean, Graduate Student Services, MSU Engineering
Finding the Right Fit

Academic
- Research Areas
- Faculty Mentors
- Graduate Students

Personal
- Lifestyle
- Community
- Family

Goals?
- Priorities?
- Constraints?
Your research interests
Your academic goals
Available mentors

Opportunities to work collaboratively?
Complementary research, coursework?
Do you like the people in the lab/group?
Do you like the office environment?
What are the typical “working hours”?
Will I be happy?
- Activities that I enjoy
- Resources for my needs (transportation, shopping, arts, sports, nature, etc.)

Can I find a community?
- Similar religious, cultural, geographic, social, and educational backgrounds
- Study groups, support networks, social activities

Impact on my (future) family?
“Start Up” Costs
- Moving Expenses
- Housing Deposit
- Household Items
- License Fees
- Insurance (Renters, Auto)

“Recurring” Costs
- Tuition and Fees
- Books and Supplies
- Housing (rent, utilities)
- Food
- Health Insurance
- Transportation
- Parking
- Fun
Cost of Living Matters!

- East Lansing has a very low cost of living
  - Single room + meals in graduate dorm ~$1,000/month
  - Studio apartment on campus (no meals) ~$1,000/month
  - Private bedroom in shared apartment off-campus ~$500/month

- $28,500 annually at MSU is equivalent to:
  - $28,702 at Ohio State (Columbus +0.7% COL)
  - $31,110 at Georgia Tech (Atlanta +9.2% COL)
  - $33,056 at U Wisconsin (Madison +16.0% COL)
  - $33,099 at U Michigan (Ann Arbor +16.1% COL)
  - $43,764 at Cal Tech (Pasadena +53.6% COL)
  - $46,845 at MIT (Boston +64.4% COL)

Source: https://www.salary.com/research/cost-of-living
### MSU Official Budget

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2021-22 Costs (2 semesters)</th>
<th>In State (Graduate)</th>
<th>Out-of-State (Graduate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuition (9 credits/semester)</td>
<td>$16,394</td>
<td>$30,722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSU Fees and Taxes</td>
<td>$144</td>
<td>$144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room &amp; Board**</td>
<td>$12,278</td>
<td>$12,278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books &amp; Supplies</td>
<td>$1,640</td>
<td>$1,640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/Misc/Car**</td>
<td>$3,140</td>
<td>$3,950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MSU Official Total</strong></td>
<td>$33,596</td>
<td>$48,734</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note that these budgets typically assume that students live in shared housing and rely on public transportation.**
## Grad Assistant Budget at MSU

### 2021-22 Personal Expenses (12 months)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Room &amp; Board ($1,365/month)</td>
<td>$16,380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/Misc/Car ($379/month)</td>
<td>$4,548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Personal Costs</strong></td>
<td>$20,928</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 2021-22 Academic Expenses (9 months)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuition ($16,394)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical (student only)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSU Fees and Taxes</td>
<td>$144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books &amp; Supplies</td>
<td>$1,640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Academic Costs</strong></td>
<td>$1,784</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Grad Assistant Income (12 months)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Half-Time GA Stipend</td>
<td>$28,495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Expenses</td>
<td>-$20,928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Expenses</td>
<td>-$1,784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Taxes**</td>
<td>-$3,205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fun</strong> Budget</td>
<td>= $2,578</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fun** Budget = Half-Time GA Stipend - Personal Expenses - Academic Expenses - Personal Taxes

---

*There are no academic costs in the summer; generally grad students do not take classes but are paid to conduct research. Health insurance extends through the summer without cost to the student.

**Tax expenses vary widely based on your personal circumstances; consider whether you are claimed as a dependent and whether the university withholds taxes or if you have to make estimated payments quarterly.
A Note about Taxes

- Graduate income is taxable income
  - Fellowships are taxable, beyond the required costs of education (tuition, books, fees)
  - You may need to pay estimated taxes quarterly

- Always budget as if you’ll only receive ~88%
  - Assistantships are usually employment, with taxes withheld from your paychecks
  - Fellowships are often lump sums, which may not have taxes withheld – but they’re still owed!
Benefits

- You are connected to faculty, department
- Opportunity to teach or do research
- Typically includes stipend, tuition, benefits

Drawbacks

- Variations in work requirements
- Variations in stipend, tuition, benefits
- Variations in stipend payment schedule
Fellowship Support

Benefits
- You are not required to “work”
- Allows you to focus on coursework, research

Drawbacks
- Wide variations in stipend, tuition, benefits
- Stipend payment schedules vary
- Often, no faculty commitment is required
Examples

- ¼ time assistantship + ¼ time fellowship
- Fellowship for additional tuition, fees
- External fellowship (e.g., GEM, NSF, NASA) + internal fellowship or assistantship to reach ½ time equivalent benefits
- Summer fellowship stipend (no tuition)
- Dissertation completion fellowship
Multiple Year Support

Support often changes over time

- TA first year, RA subsequent years
- Fellowship 1st and 4th, TA/RA for 2nd and 3rd

“Guarantees” are rarely absolute

- Degree progress
- Upper limits on funding, tuition, time
Details can make a BIG difference!

- Tuition (credit limits, in-state vs. out-of-state)
- Health Benefits (travel, family benefits)
- Fees (due dates, payment options)
- Parking (availability, cost)
- Stipend (amount, payment schedule, taxes)
- Technology (requirements, accessibility)
Ask the Right Questions

- What are the conditions for continued support? (degree progress, grades, faculty mentor)
- When does the work obligation begin? (often before the semester starts)
- When would I receive my first stipend?
- When would I receive my first bill?
- When does health care coverage begin?
- What about summer support?
Making the Choice
Manage the fear of “wrong” choices

Choose between good options
Understand the worst-case scenario
Remember: choices can be changed
Where do you fit?

Multiple connections, opportunities
Good support (financial, academic, personal)
Talk to faculty, students, friends, family

Ultimately, the “right” choice will feel right.