

MTSU

Graduate Studies Spring 2026 Newsletter



CONNECT
ENGAGE
ADVANCE
SUCCEED

Dean's Welcome

As dean of the College of Graduate Studies at Middle Tennessee State University, I am proud to create an environment that fosters a bold future for graduate education, embracing innovation and preparing leaders for tomorrow's challenges. Graduate faculty are developing interdisciplinary pathways that emphasize applied research, integrate AI literacy, and offer stackable credentials, positioning our programs at the forefront of educational evolution. MTSU's forward-looking graduate education strategy will cultivate agile thinkers and problem-solvers, ensuring MTSU remains a constant pioneer in graduate studies that drive societal progress and individual fulfillment for the state of Tennessee and beyond.

David Butler, Ph.D.

Vice Provost for Research and Dean of the College of Graduate Studies

Associate Dean's Note

As you explore this issue, you will see how MTSU's graduate community is translating institutional strategy into student-centered outcomes across colleges and programs. The features in these pages reflect a deliberate focus on access, innovation, and academic excellence.

Our Spotlights highlight diverse expressions of impact, from the faculty who founded the accelerated, fully online Digital Media M.S., designed to meet the needs of working professionals, to the Student Spotlight recognizing graduate achievement through prestigious nationwide fellowships and research experiences. Together, these stories reflect innovation and tradition working together.

The News and Updates section highlights how CGS supports students across the graduate lifecycle. Through the rapid expansion of Lightning Track, the launch of Grad-AI to strengthen curriculum relevance, and targeted Thesis and Dissertation Workshops to support timely completion, CGS is aligning structures, curriculum, and support to help students enter, progress, and graduate successfully.

I invite you to help us tell our next great story by using the QR code on the back page to nominate a standout graduate student, program, or colleague.

Racha El Kadiri, Ph.D.

Interim Associate Dean of the College of Graduate Studies



mtsu.edu/graduate

Program Spotlight: Ed.D. in Assessment, Learning, and Student Success

The Assessment, Learning, and Student Success Ed.D. program has over a decade of making impacts in middle Tennessee. Since its inception, over 75 doctoral degrees have been awarded, and graduates have advanced their professional careers to the highest levels of the K–12 world (director of schools) and in higher education (executive vice president). The Ed.D. has partnered with a corporate entity, Solution Tree, to promote professional development and envision possibilities for professional learning communities in higher education and teamed with Concord, a nonprofit organization, on a multimillion-dollar project titled LEADS: Leaders in Education Advancing Data Science, funded by a National Science Foundation grant. This young program embodies what it means to be innovative while staying committed to best practices and a focus on student success.



Q&A: Kevin Krahenbuhl, Ed.D. Program Director, Ed.D. in Assessment, Learning, and Student Success

The ALSS Ed.D. program has made a significant regional impact over the past decade. What core values or guiding principles have driven its growth and success?

The ALSS Ed.D. is driven first and foremost by a commitment to our mission. We develop scholar practitioners who are change agents for improving learning and student success. Everything we do works synergistically around a focus on learning—and thereby student success. This helps keep our work tightly aligned and relevant and also appealing to the world which measures institutions of learning by their ability in these areas.

With more than 75 graduates and thousands of applied research projects completed, what types of real-world challenges are students most often addressing?

Candidates in the program tackle many real-world challenges. This typically involves examining their local context and identifying what we call “problems of practice”—these are not necessarily “problems” but opportunities that they might be able to seize upon and interact with in a deliberate manner to better understand them and to improve their experience. One candidate noticed that students in her school were facing some notable increased challenges of mental health. She adapted a research-based survey, administered it across her school, shared the results with her administration, and then was asked for suggestions on how to help. It led to the creation of a council of students focused on improving student health holistically. She is now the lead of this group, and it has become an operating part of that school’s infrastructure.

The program’s partnerships, such as those with Solution Tree and Concord, are impressive. How have these enriched the student experience and expanded the program’s reach?

We challenge candidates to imagine possibilities by considering “what if.” However, we are also committed to ensuring that we are firmly grounded. Partnerships such as these help in two specific ways: (1) They allow us to share our thinking with professional organizations that serve our candidates to ensure they resonate and are informed by real-world and up-to-date understanding, and (2) they allow us to build networks that our candidates and faculty can capitalize on to scale up our impact and serve one another through building of relationships that are mutually beneficial.

Graduates have advanced to leadership roles at the highest levels of K–12 and higher education. What aspects of the program do you believe best prepare students for these impactful career paths?

(1) We are focused on principled learning that does not simply give if-then types of scenarios that break down when you encounter things that don’t fit neatly into the boxes. By emphasizing principles and giving opportunity to apply them in varied contexts, it strengthens candidates’ understanding of the ideas and their flexibility in use. (2) We demand precision and evidence at every step of the way. Leading effectively means that you are both able to say things that are accurate, but nuanced sufficiently, and also that you can justify your decisions based on evidence. (3) We are firmly committed to doing things not in some arbitrary manner, but with our focus on mission. This helps our candidates leave with a track record of leading change that centers on key aspects of what drives institutions of learning.

Faculty Spotlight: Sally Ann Cruikshank and Ken Blake

These two professors led the development of MTSU's M.S. in Digital Media, which launched in Fall 2025. Designed for working media professionals looking to move ahead without slowing down their careers, the fully online degree has attracted top-tier media professionals across the Nashville region, including James Evans, chief communications officer for Rutherford County Schools, and Jennifer Kraus, investigative reporter and weekend morning news anchor for NewsChannel5.



What motivated you to take a leading role in developing the new accelerated, fully online Digital Media M.S. program at MTSU?

Blake: Public universities exist to make high-quality education both affordable and accessible, and MTSU does an exceptional job. Still, I had long suspected that the three-nights-a-week commute required by our traditional master's program created a significant barrier for many people. When the College of Graduate Studies confirmed that with solid marketing research—and offered to invest in developing exactly the kind of program I believed was needed—the opportunity was too important to pass up.

Cruikshank: I saw the Digital Media master's program as a missing puzzle piece we really needed to complete our graduate programs. The fields we teach—journalism, advertising, public relations, media design, etc.—are rapidly changing. And from my discussions with people still working in the industry, I knew there was a real need for working professionals to be able to learn new techniques and programs.

Looking back over the two-year approval process, what were the most meaningful challenges or learning moments for you personally?

Blake: The most meaningful challenge was designing the program so it could integrate seamlessly with the School of Journalism and Strategic Media's existing undergraduate and traditional graduate programs—without requiring new faculty lines or additional recurring funding. Creating the Digital Media M.S. would have been simple if MTSU had simply handed us a blank check. Creating a program that could sustain itself and pay for its own growth was far more difficult—but ultimately far more rewarding.

Cruikshank: I answered questions about the degree before THEC, which left me with a few sweaty palms. But I walked away from the mic proud of what our University and program accomplished with the degree. The whole process just made me feel so fortunate to get to work with colleagues like Dr. Blake and the rest of the School of Journalism and Strategic Media. We really worked as a team, and it showed.

Dr. Cruikshank, can you share insights from the report about this experience that you created for the 2024–2025 Faculty Leadership Development Institute, and how that work has informed your leadership or teaching?

Cruikshank: Really, this experience turned me into even more of a curriculum nerd! I have done a lot of work developing courses over the years, both for in-person and online, but this was the first time working on a full degree. I realized through the process that faculty don't always fully understand what goes into new degrees and curriculum development. Dr. Blake and I were part of a new degree cohort, and that really gave us access to a lot of information that made the process much smoother. I channeled that into my LDI project, "Demystifying Curriculum Development," which involved creating several resources to help faculty. The response was so overwhelming, I hope to continue working on developing such resources over the next few years!

Since you just welcomed the first cohort of students last fall, what excites you most about supporting working media professionals, and what impact do you hope the program will have on their careers?

Blake: Media professionals with the freedom and knowledge to consistently and courageously speak truth to power are remarkably rare in the world. Even in the United States, pursuing the truth often places journalists, advocates, artists, and other communicators in direct conflict with individuals and institutions who feel threatened by the truth. Supporting ethical media professionals by showing them how to do their jobs better puts us firmly on the right side of that struggle.

Cruikshank: It has really been amazing welcoming the first cohort of students! These are perilous times for journalists and media professionals, between attacks on press freedom, rapidly advancing (but not always in a good way) AI, and misinformation. I hope we are not only helping people advance their careers but also providing invaluable support and resources as they navigate a constantly changing industry.



Student Spotlight: Rebecca Ronan Ph.D. in English

Rebecca Ronan was one of only 10 graduate students selected nationwide to participate in Yale University’s prestigious seminar “Caricature and the Grotesque: Early Modern Prints and Politics.” The experience allowed her to study rare materials in the Yale University Art Gallery and the Lewis Walpole Library alongside leading scholars in the field. She also received the highly competitive Hemingway Society Founders Fellowship, which funded her archival research at the Newberry Library in Chicago.

What did being selected for Yale’s seminar mean to you, both personally and academically?

I received my acceptance letter to the seminar one month before graduating with my Ph.D.—a seven-years-long endeavor—so its timing was both meaningful and poignant. I’d become enthralled with my dissertation’s topic (of thanatology), and I believed it had potential for expansion. I had applied in hopes of having the opportunity to explore studies adjacent to my research so I could broaden its scope and continue learning as an interdisciplinary scholar. Being selected both validated my belief and merited the potential of my future scholarly contributions.

Can you share a memorable moment or discovery from working with rare materials at the Yale University Art Gallery or the Lewis Walpole Library?

I went into the seminar focused on my current research, so I was particularly captivated by Thomas Patch’s 1790s etching *Laurence Sterne, alias Tristram Shandy: “And When Death Himself Knocked at My Door”* and the engravings of moral satirist William Hogarth. But while at the Lewis Walpole Library, I was reminded of how my interests have always had a way of grabbing my attention, as though they pick me rather than I them. One of my prior graduate studies interests—the Bluestockings, an intellectual women’s circle in 18th-century London—somewhat resurrected itself when Hannah Humphrey’s name was mentioned.

Unfamiliar with Humphrey, I learned she was an accomplished female print seller and publisher in 18th-century London—unusual for her time. I was intrigued by her in the same way I had been intrigued by the Bluestockings and their desire to engage in conversations about literature, education, and culture during an era when women’s formal education was so limited. My discovery of Humphrey reminded me of both the connections we can make among our interests and the benefit of pursuing those interests.

You also received the Hemingway Society Founders Fellowship. How did your archival research at the Newberry Library enhance or shape your current scholarly work?

Because my current scholarly work focuses on Ernest Hemingway, the 20th-century American author, and Søren Kierkegaard, the 19th-century religious philosopher, it relies heavily on an intertextual study between fields. The Newberry Library collections offer materials on both the topic of thanatology in Hemingway’s works and the significance of Kierkegaard’s religious philosophies—two niche areas of focus. Personal written correspondence, transcripts of conference call conversations, and school yearbooks are available alongside other unique materials, such as a eulogy Hemingway wrote for a friend and a Danish world register with contents from the Søren Kierkegaard archive. My archival research at the Newberry Library is ongoing, and I’m excited to delve deeper into their collections.

What advice would you give to other graduate students who hope to pursue competitive fellowships or specialized research experiences like the ones you’ve completed?

Go for them. You have nothing to lose. Applications and their required materials are tedious, time-consuming tasks, but those efforts won’t be for naught; in them, you learn to synthesize your background, clarify your focus, and hone your writing. Your education, which can never be taken from you, is absolutely worth the pursuit. So, focus on your purpose, put your best effort toward it, and be yourself throughout the process.





Data Corner

Spring 2026 Graduate Assistantship Snapshot

620 Graduate Assistants

75% Full
20% Half
5% Tuition Only

Funding Package Mix

71% Teaching
18% Research
11% Administrative

Role Type

91% Internal
7% External
2% Hybrid

Funding Source

College Distribution



Opportunities and Deadlines

Graduate Faculty Applications and Curriculum Proposal Deadlines
Jan. 30, Feb. 11, March 14, April 8

Grad Council Meetings
Feb. 27, March 27, April 24

Lightning Track Virtual Sessions
March 3 at 3 p.m., March 4 at 10 a.m.

Thesis/Dissertation Student Workshop
March 4

Graduate Fair
March 17

CGS Scholarship Deadlines
April 1

Graduate Student Appreciation Week
March 30–April 4

New GA Hiring – Summary Form and EPAP Deadline (New Summer and Returning Fall)
April 15

Spring 2026 Thesis/Dissertation Priority Deadline
April 17

Student Travel Funds
Rolling deadline until all funds have been allocated

Spring 2026 Graduate Administrative News and Updates

MTSU Graduate Fair: Pathways to Success

The College of Graduate Studies, in partnership with the Career Development Center and The Next Chapter student association, will host the 2026 Graduate Fair on March 17. The event connects undergraduate students with graduate program pathways, career outcomes, and support services. Department chairs and faculty are encouraged to refer prospective students, particularly juniors and seniors considering graduate studies.



LIGHTNING TRACK

Lightning Track: Accelerated Pipeline Growth

The Lightning Track accelerated admission pathway continues to scale, growing from 11 students in Spring 2025 to 67 total students by Fall 2025. Participation has expanded to 42 graduate programs, strengthening early recruitment and reducing application friction. Eligibility criteria and participating programs are available on the updated Lightning Track landing page.



Grad-AI: Supporting Graduate Curricular Innovation

Grad-AI is an initiative supporting graduate faculty in developing discipline-specific, ethical AI applications within their curriculum. We extend our thanks to the representatives from all colleges whose leadership made this cross-disciplinary framework possible. Faculty may pursue one of three pathways—Enhance, Create, or Certify—to fund curriculum updates or new certificate development.



Thesis and Dissertation Workshops

To better align support with student progress, CGS will offer two targeted thesis and dissertation workshops on March 4:

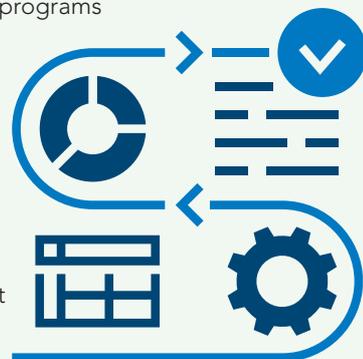
- **Administrative Roadmap:**
For students early in the process; focuses on forms, workflows, deadlines, and institutional requirements.
- **Advanced Writing and Submission:**
For students actively drafting or preparing to defend; integrates writing productivity with formatting, defense logistics, and final submission.



Marketing and Research Resources for Program Growth

CGS continues to support program-level enrollment strategy through research and marketing resources among other efforts.

- **Market Research:** Program-specific analyses via Lightcast and Hanover.
- **Digital Recruitment Campaigns:** We create, fund and manage Google, Meta, and LinkedIn campaigns for targeted programs
- **Consultations:**
One-on-one strategy sessions available for program directors. Program directors may request customized research reports or schedule a consultation to support recruitment planning.



MIDDLE TENNESSEE

STATE UNIVERSITY.

College of Graduate Studies

2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd.

Murfreesboro, TN 37132

2-67865



Nominate Someone for the CGS Newsletter!

Scan the QR code below to submit your nomination for a future edition of the College of Graduate Studies Newsletter.

Help us highlight outstanding graduate programs, graduate faculty, and graduate students at MTSU!



I AM *true* **BLUE**.

1225-8453 / Middle Tennessee State University does not discriminate against students, employees, or applicants for admission or employment on the basis of race, color, religion, creed, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, disability, age, status as a protected veteran, genetic information, or any other legally protected class with respect to all employment, programs, and activities sponsored by MTSU. The Assistant to the President for Civil Rights Compliance has been designated to handle inquiries regarding the non-discrimination policies and can be reached at Cope Administration Building 116, 1301 East Main Street, Murfreesboro, TN 37132; Christy.Sigler@mtsu.edu; or 615-898-2185. The MTSU policy on non-discrimination can be found at crc.mtsu.edu