

## PH.D. STUDENT ASSISTANTSHIP

### Understanding Drivers of Change in Seagrass Ecosystems to Inform Management of Critical Habitats in the Gulf Islands National Seashore

The University of Southern Mississippi  
Ocean Springs, MS

We seek a highly motivated student to fill a funded Ph.D. assistantship at The University of Southern Mississippi's [Gulf Coast Research Laboratory](#) in Ocean Springs, MS. The selected student will be co-advised by [Dr. Zachary Darnell](#) and [Dr. Kelly Darnell](#). This assistantship will begin in either January or June 2026 depending on the availability of the selected student.

The assistantship will be centered on a recently funded project to identify and monitor long-term trends and variability in seagrass-dominated ecosystems in the Gulf Islands National Seashore and identify drivers of change in biodiversity and productivity of these systems to address knowledge gaps and uncertainties prioritized by resource managers. The project will involve substantial field sampling for seagrass and seagrass-associated nekton across the Gulf Islands National Seashore in Florida and Mississippi, as well as laboratory sample processing. Experience working in seagrass beds and familiarity with coastal nekton communities is preferred but not required. This is a collaborative project with researchers at multiple academic institutions and stakeholders from multiple agencies including the National Park Service.

The student selected for this position will pursue a Ph.D. degree in the [Division of Coastal Sciences](#) within the [School of Ocean Science and Engineering](#) (SOSE). The assistantship includes tuition and a stipend of \$29,400 per year for a duration of 5 years. The student selected for the assistantship will be a fully integrated member of the project team and will contribute to study design, collection and analysis of data, and manuscript preparation. Applicants with an M.S. degree are preferred.

The Division of Coastal Sciences is a research and graduate education unit within SOSE, which offers graduate and undergraduate degree programs in Coastal Sciences, Hydrographic Science, Marine Biology, Marine Science, and Ocean Engineering, and a certificate program in Uncrewed Maritime Systems. The faculty and staff of SOSE leverage its location on the Gulf Coast and expertise in marine and coastal science and engineering to address challenges facing coastal and marine environments. SOSE has significant research infrastructure and facilities across four principal sites spanning the Mississippi Gulf Coast: the NASA Stennis Space Center, the Gulf Park Campus at Long Beach, the Roger F. Wicker Center for Ocean Enterprise at the Port of Gulfport, and the Gulf Coast Research Laboratory in Ocean Springs. This position will be located in Ocean Springs at the Gulf Coast Research Laboratory, a marine laboratory featuring comprehensive research programs in coastal and marine biological sciences. Research program support includes state-of-the-art laboratory facilities and instrumentation; a fleet of small and large research vessels; the GCRL Museum collection; facilities at the Center for Fisheries Research and Development (CFRD) and Thad Cochran Marine Aquaculture Center (TCMAC); and the NSF I/UCRC Science Center for Marine Fisheries. [Ocean Springs](#) is a small, coastal town known for its beauty, natural resources, and vibrant arts community. It is home to galleries, restaurants, and schools that are ranked among the best in the state.

Interested students should contact Dr. Zachary Darnell ([zachary.darnell@usm.edu](mailto:zachary.darnell@usm.edu)). Please include a cover letter describing your interests and career goals, a copy of your CV, unofficial undergraduate and graduate transcripts, and contact information for three professional references. Review of applicants will begin on October 15, 2025 and continue until the position is filled.