Two options are open to students who wish to pursue a Master of Science degree in the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences. The M.S. Thesis Option program helps students develop into researchers. Coursework is no longer the primary focus, and students learn how to create, plan, and carry out independent research. The M.S. Non-Thesis Option program guides students in the acquisition of professional expertise beyond the undergraduate degree. The program requires a culminating/capstone experience, which may be satisfied in one of three ways: an individual investigative project, a collaborative, possibly interdisciplinary, group project, or a professional internship experience. The Non-Thesis Option may also be appropriate in special cases where a student executes a major special project which is equivalent to a M.S. thesis, but which does not lend itself to the thesis format. Students on campus are admitted into the thesis option and, under certain conditions, may be allowed to transfer into the non-thesis option by petitioning the Department. In contrast, all students in the online M.S. program are admitted into the non-thesis option and, under certain conditions, may be allowed to transfer into the thesis option by petitioning the Department.

The thesis option requires that the student satisfactorily complete a minimum of 32 hours of graduate coursework, of which a minimum of 12 graduate hours are 500-level courses. This coursework shall include NRES Seminar (500) each semester, minus one, that the student is enrolled, Professional Orientation (594) and 4 to 12 graduate hours of Thesis Research (599), which culminates in the completion and oral defense of a thesis.

A non-thesis option student must satisfactorily complete a minimum of 32 hours of graduate coursework, of which a minimum of 12 graduate hours are 500-level courses, Professional Orientation (594), and 3 to 8 hours of capstone experience in the form of a Capstone Research Project (503), Capstone Internship Experience (505), or Capstone Group Research Project (507). The student must prepare and submit a report analyzing the capstone learning experience and perform satisfactorily on written and oral final examinations.

The online M.S. graduate program in NRES enables students to continue their education in disciplines related to natural resources and environmental sciences through part-time study at locations away from the Urbana-Champaign campus. This program meets the needs of persons currently working or wanting to work in the areas of conservation, ecology, restoration ecology, soil science, sustainable development, urban ecology, urban forestry, urban wildlife management, and water resources management. Students can enroll in individual courses for professional and/or academic advancement, or apply for admission to the M.S. degree program. All online M.S. students are admitted to the non-thesis option, though, under certain conditions, a degree-seeking online student may petition the Department to transfer to the thesis option. Application deadlines and other important information are available at https://nres.illinois.edu/apply.