

**PLANT BIOLOGY GRADUATE
PROGRAM
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN**



"Hibiscus Denudatus" by Lydia Tressel

**2025 – 2026
GRADUATE STUDENT HANDBOOK
Doctoral and Master's Program**

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Welcome and Overview

We the faculty and staff of the Plant Biology Graduate Studies Committee wish to welcome you to the PB Graduate Program. We look forwards to working with you and supporting your progress towards a graduate degree in PB. We encourage you to actively use this handbook throughout your studies as it is a summary of the university, department and graduate program policies and procedures. For more complete information, please refer to our [PB](#) website.

Student Responsibilities

You are responsible for understanding the rules and policies that govern your academic degree. Use all resources available to you and plan well in advance to meet necessary deadlines. Please feel free to ask our Graduate Program Administrator about any deadlines, or issues you may have questions about.

The [Graduate School](#) website is an excellent resource for information on [Grad School Degree Catalog Requirements](#), as well as policies for applying to graduate and deadlines for thesis defenses and dissertation submissions. [Thesis and Defense deadline information](#) is updated the beginning of every semester.

The [College of Natural Sciences \(CNS\) website for Graduate Study](#) is another great resource for graduate students. This website covers college policies, graduate courses offered throughout all CNS graduate programs, professional development and career support options, [Elective Specialty Areas](#) (e.g., Science and Public Policy; Ethics and Social Responsibility; Concentration in Teaching and Mentoring; Concentration in Communicating Science; Data Analysis; Concentration in Leadership and Project Management), and additional Certificates that CNS students can complete in addition to their doctoral degree, such as [Interdisciplinary Portfolio Options](#) (e.g., [Computational Medicine](#)).

This [PB Graduate Handbook](#) is regularly updated and revised; please always consult the most current version of this Handbook posted on the PB website's info for current students. For your required curriculum, the handbook you enter under are your curriculum requirements, although you may switch to the current curriculum if you prefer.

Finally, the most important source of information about the PB Program will come directly from your Graduate Program Coordinators, the Graduate Advisor, and the Associate Chair for Graduate Education. These are the people to communicate with about all the non-research aspects of your graduate degree, including funding, courses, requirements, fellowships, and others. Most of the communication from the PB Program will be sent via email. It is your responsibility as an PB student to stay on top of those communications, check your email daily, and respond promptly.

Email communication

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students may have several email addresses affiliated with UT, but all official correspondence will be sent via their [eid]@my.utexas.edu email address. It is your responsibility to make sure this email is checked regularly for updates from the PB program and UT, otherwise you may miss important information.

Graduate Students Bill of Rights

The [IB Graduate Students Bill of Rights](#) clarifies what graduate students can expect from their advisor(s) and the Department of Integrative Biology (IB). This Bill of Rights applies to all graduate students who are advised or co-advised by a faculty member with an IB affiliation. The IB Graduate Students Bill of Rights clarifies department-level rights not directly specified in the Graduate Students Bill of Rights & Responsibilities passed by the UT Graduate Student Assembly in 2015.

Graduate Program and IB Administrative Structure

The Graduate Studies Committee (GSC)

The Graduate Studies Committee consists of faculty in the Departments of Integrative Biology and Molecular Biological Sciences, as well as faculty from other departments whose interests overlap substantially with the [PB GSC](#). The GSC sets the policies concerning the graduate program curriculum and academic requirements within the guidelines of the Graduate School and the College of Natural Sciences.

Associate Chair for Graduate Education, IB (Dr. Kelly Zamudio, kelly.zamudio@austin.utexas.edu)

The Associate Chair for IB Graduate Programs administers overarching goals pertaining to the education and support of EEB, PB and IB-affiliated (students in IB labs, but not in the EEB or PB graduate programs) graduate students and is the liaison between these programs and the College of Natural Sciences.

PB GSC Chair (Dr. Tom Juenger, tjuenger@austin.utexas.edu)

The PB GSC Chair is a faculty member who oversees PB-GSC policies and PB-GSC meetings and serves as liaison to the Graduate School and the College of Natural Sciences.

PB Graduate Advisor (Dr. Enamul Huq, hug@austin.utexas.edu)

The Graduate Advisor is a faculty member of the PB GSC who advises graduate students, monitors their progress towards their degree, and serves as a liaison to the Graduate School and the College of Natural Sciences.

Graduate Program Administrators (Tamra Rogers, TamraBRogers@utexas.edu; Susan Stanford, susan.stanford@austin.utexas.edu)

The Graduate Program Administrators maintain student records, process, and monitor student funding, and ensure forms and procedures are processed in a correct and timely manner. Questions concerning procedures should be addressed with one of our Graduate Administrators who will consult with the Graduate Advisor, Associate Chair for Graduate Programs, The College of Natural Sciences, or the Graduate School, as necessary.

PB Graduate Program Admissions Chair (appointed annually)

The Admissions Chair oversees the process of recruiting, evaluating, and admitting applicants to the PB graduate program.

PB GSC Faculty Members

Current list of faculty members on the [PB Graduate Studies Committee](#) can mentor PB graduate students, advise and vote on PB GSC policies, serve on the PB GSC sub-committees and dissertation committees.

Assistant Director for IB (Theresa Kelly, theresa.kelly@austin.utexas.edu)

The Assistant Director for Integrative Biology assists the Department Chair and is the office administrator for Integrative Biology. If you need a signature from the IB Department Chair, you should contact the Assistant Director for IB.

Graduate Student Representatives

Each year, two PB students can serve as representatives for the program. The representatives can attend IB departmental meetings as well as PB program meetings. The positions are usually nominated and voted on amongst the graduate students every year at the beginning of the fall semester. Contact information for the current PB Graduate Student Representative, the CNS Dean's Graduate Student Council Representatives, and the Graduate Student Assembly Representatives are listed here:

[Graduate Student Representatives](#)

Student Advising

Each student in PB receives a personalized education, under the supervision of a team of faculty.

Major Professor(s)

Each PB student has a faculty member appointed as major professor (principal investigator, PI) before arriving at UT. The major professor, or professors if co-advised, is responsible for providing the student with academic guidance regarding coursework, research, and the access needed to facilities and resources to conduct research. A major professor must be on the [PB GSC](#). If a student elects to be co-advised, the second co-advisor does not have to be an PB-GSC member and does not have to be affiliated with the university, although in the latter case the co-advisor must be approved by the [PB Graduate Advisor](#) before forming your committee and the Graduate School after your exam.

It is possible to add a co-advisor or to change major professor(s), if a student feels that additional expertise amongst advisors might be beneficial, or that another lab is better suited to serve the student's academic interests. This is not uncommon but can be a stressful decision in some cases. We advise you to consult with the PB Graduate Advisor in these situations. If any changes are made regarding major professor(s), as well as the Dissertation Committee, the student needs to notify the Graduate Program Administrator about the change as soon as possible.

First year students may opt to intern in two or three labs during their first year with approval of the relevant faculty. These internships ("rotations") are not required but are available on an opt-in basis. Internships allow the student to learn a variety of research perspectives and methods, and to ensure that they settle in a lab that best suits their academic interests. Internships may be as simple as attending lab meetings, completing a reading project under the guidance of a professor, or may entail field or lab work. If you and

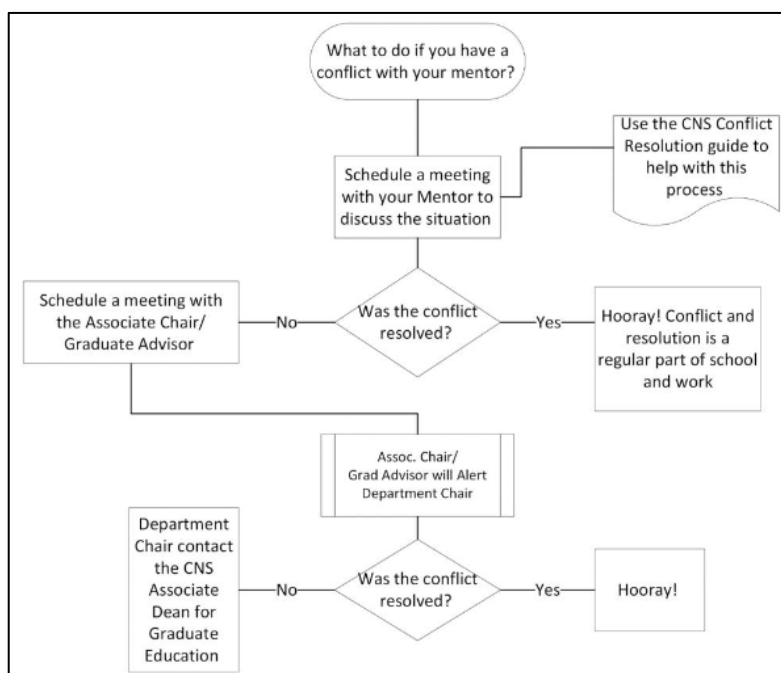
a professor(s) decide on this option, you must notify the Graduate Advisor and Graduate Program Administrator immediately.

Community, Accessibility, and Well-Being

The Mentorship Committee of the Department of Integrative Biology assists in the support of prospective, incoming, and current graduate students through mentorship and community-building; and addresses concerns or complaints about isolation, bias, harassment, mentor-student conflict, or any other well-being related challenges. All graduate students are encouraged to speak with one or more of the Committee members, the GSC Chair, the Graduate Advisor, the Associate Chair for Graduate Education, or the Graduate Program Administrator about any concerns they may have. We will coordinate with students on how to proceed. We will hold all student concerns in confidence, except in Title IX incidents (sexual assault, stalking, sexual harassment, sex discrimination); Texas state law requires that everyone in the UT community is obligated to follow mandatory Title IX reporting to the [University's Title IX Office](#). Further information, as well as a list of all current faculty, staff, and graduate student representatives serving on the [Community, Accessibility, and Well-Being Committee](#) are listed on our website.

Conflict Resolution

All students, faculty, researchers, and staff affiliated with the PB GSC are expected to contribute to a work environment of cooperation, respect, and trust. If any conflicts develop (e.g., student-faculty or student-student conflicts), graduate students are encouraged to speak confidentially about any concerns they may have with their Graduate Advisor(s), one or more of their graduate committee members, the PB GSC Chair, the Associate Chair for Graduate Education in Integrative Biology, or the Graduate Program Administrator. The flowchart to the right was adapted from a similar flowchart developed by the College of Natural Sciences to help navigate conflict-resolution procedures.



Course Advisory and Mentoring Plans

Mentoring Plan Part 1

During the fall semester of Year 1, each first-year student is required to complete Part 1 of a Mentoring Plan. Each first-year student develops this Plan in consultation with the student's Major Advisor, and the Plan is then approved by the Graduate Advisor. The Graduate Administrator will provide the form for the Mentoring Plan Part 1 at the beginning of the first semester, and the completed Mentoring Plan Part 1 is due 1st October. Mentoring plans can be found online at: [Forms](#)

[Mentoring Plan Part 2](#)

At the end of the spring semester of the first year of graduate studies, each first-year student is required to develop and complete Part 2 of their Mentoring Plan in consultation with the major professor and receive approval by the Graduate Advisor. The Graduate Administrator will provide the form for the Mentoring Plan Part 2 at the beginning of the second semester, and the completed Mentoring Plan Part 2 is due 1st March. Mentoring plans can be found online at: [Forms](#)

Amended Mentoring Plans

A student will need to submit an amended Mentoring Plan and possibly a follow-up Mentoring Plan under the following two conditions:

- If a student decides to change the major advisor, it is a requirement for this student to develop a new mentoring plan with the new major advisor.
- If a student's research direction changes significantly, a student may benefit from a new mentoring plan, the student and/or the major professor can then request development of a new mentoring plan.

[Annual Student Self-Assessment](#)

All PB students are expected to make reasonable progress toward completion of all degree requirements. Beginning with the student's second year, each student must meet with their major professor(s) and complete a required Annual Student Self-Assessment of student accomplishments and progress towards completing degree requirements. It is the student's responsibility to set up this yearly meeting and complete the Annual Student Self-Assessment by November 1st each year. Once complete, the Self-Assessment must be routed through DocuSign for signature. [Note that the *Annual Student Self-Assessment* is different from the *Annual Committee Meeting Self-Report* that is discussed below. Both the *Self-Assessment* and the *Self-Report* are written by each student, but while the *Annual Student Self-Assessment* is written by a student to summarize the student's *own views* of accomplishments and progress towards completing degree requirements, the *Annual Committee Meeting Self-Report* summarizes the decisions and recommendations agreed upon during the annual meeting by the student's advisory Committee. Both the *Annual Student Self-Assessment* and the *Annual Committee Meeting Self-Report* are used by the Graduate Advisor in their annual review of graduate student progress, and by the IB Awards Committee when making decisions on fellowships, research and travel funds. Students must be up to date on their Annual Student Self-Assessment and their *Annual Committee Meeting Self-Report* to maintain eligibility for TA or GRA appointments or for fellowship support. Annual Student Self-Assessment is available at: [Forms](#)

Ph.D. Curriculum Requirements

The Graduate School requires 30 credit-hours of graduate-level coursework to complete a Ph.D. This includes classes, seminar courses, research and dissertation hours. The Graduate School policy is that students must receive a minimum grade of B- or higher to receive credit towards fulfilling degree requirements. PB's policy is that students are required to fulfill the following coursework. This is the minimum required coursework required by Plant Biology. However, depending on your research and previous experience, you and/or your committee may decide you need to take additional courses: [Core Course Options](#)

PB 389D – Subjects & Skills in Biological Sciences

This core course is required for all PB graduate students during the fall semester of the student's first year. First-year PB graduate students attend this course together with the first-year graduate students from the EEB graduate program.

Three Additional Lecture Courses

PB students must take a minimum of three additional graduate-level lecture courses. Lecture courses are defined as courses that meet a minimum of two hours per week, including some instructor-led content (e.g., not just student-led reading discussion), and involve both reading and graded assignments leading to a letter grade.

Two of the additional PB courses must be in the student's area of study and one must be outside the student's area of study. Typically, this is defined as organismal students will take two plant organismal courses (IB) and one molecular course (MBS), while molecular students will take two plant molecular courses (MBS) and one organismal course (IB). Courses taught by an IB or MBS faculty or lecturer will count as a PB course. Courses outside of MBS or IB may count by petition to, and approval by the Graduate Advisor.

Course Offerings

The list of course offerings you may take to fulfill your core degree requirements is listed on our website [PB Course Options](#). Any other courses not listed will need approval by the Graduate Advisor.

Advanced Study and Research / Dissertation Hours

Students who have not yet advanced to candidacy should take PB 182, 282, 382, 682 or 982 (Advanced Study and Research) as part of their course load (the first digit, such as 3, 6, or 9 of a course number, such as PB 682, indicates the number of credit hours of a particular course). Enrollment in one of these courses provides credit in recognition of ongoing preparation to do research but does not fulfill the lecture course requirements listed above. If a PB student fails to register for these research credits on a regular basis (e.g., 3 credits per semester), the PB Graduate Advisor will consult with the major professor about the student's research progress. After admission to candidacy, students must register each semester for either PB 399W, 699W, or 999W. Nine credit hours in the long semesters and 3 credits in the summer are required for full time status as graduate student. Please contact the Graduate Program Administrator if you need help deciding which of these courses is appropriate for you in a particular semester or summer.

Summary of Curriculum Requirements

| Required Courses | Number of Semesters | When to Take |
|---|---------------------|----------------------------|
| Subjects & Skills in Biology | 1 | Fall of first year |
| Two PB graduate level courses in your area of study | 2 | Preferred before candidacy |
| One PB graduate level course outside your area of study | 1 | Preferred before candidacy |

| | | |
|---|------------|--|
| Research credit (PB 382, 682,982) | At least 1 | Every semester until admission to candidacy. |
| Dissertation credit (PB 399W, 699W, 999W) | At least 2 | Every semester after admission to candidacy. |

Summary Timeline of Milestones

| Time | Requirement |
|--|---|
| Year 1, fall | Complete Mentoring Plan Part 1 , due October 1st of year 1 |
| Year 1, spring | Complete Mentoring Plan Part 2 , due February 1st of year 1 . |
| Year 2, fall | Form Dissertation Committee before end of the semester |
| Starting with Year 2, by Nov 1 st | Complete Annual Student Self-Assessment form, due each year by Nov 1 st |
| Years 1 and 2 | Take formal coursework towards the Ph.D. |
| Year 2 | Complete Qualifying Exam before end of the summer (can petition the PB Graduate Advisor to take Qualifying Exam in Year 3). |
| Post-Candidacy, by Nov 1 st each year | Annual Committee Meeting Self-Report , each student summarizes in a report the Committee's recommendation after the annual Committee meeting, has this report approved by <i>each</i> Committee member, then files the fully approved report with the Graduate Program Administrator (see below) |
| Year 5 | Thesis Defense , can petition for extension; celebrate Ph.D.! |

Course work completed during Master's studies prior to PB graduate studies

For those coming into the graduate program with a master's degree, you are still required to take the required minimum four courses. Depending on your research interests, your committee may still require additional course work.

Qualifying Exam & Dissertation Proposal

The Qualifying Exam should take place by the end of the student's second year (fourth long semester or the subsequent summer). Students seeking to take their exam in their third year must petition the Graduate Advisor to approve the delay. Students who have not completed the Qualifying Exam before the end of their sixth long semester risk being re-routed by their committee or the GSC to the Master's degree track.

In consultation with the Major Professor and approval by the Graduate Advisor, the student will choose a Dissertation Committee that will administer the Qualifying Exam. The committee must be chosen during the fall semester of the second year (third semester). The student and Major Professor(s) propose a list of at least four faculty to serve on the committee, which will be approved by the Graduate Advisor. The student's PI is considered one of the 4 members of the committee. At least three committee members, PI plus two additional committee members, must be PB GSC faculty members. One of the three PB GSC members must be outside the area of the student's specialization, such as, a student with a molecular or physiological interest would have one organismal faculty member on the committee. The fourth member of the Dissertation Committee must be from outside the PB GSC. If the outside committee member is

from another university or is not an official GSC member with the Graduate School, they will be required to submit a CV to the Graduate Program Administrator for approval by the Graduate Advisor. The CV will then be forwarded to the Graduate School when applying to candidacy after the qualifying exam. One Senior Lecturer from UT-Austin can serve on the Qualifying-Exam committee with the approval of the Graduate Advisor.

A student who wishes to schedule a Qualifying Exam must complete the Qualifying Exam application and prepare the Program of Work for Doctoral Degree. Both forms are available on the website at [Forms](#).

The Program of Work includes an approximate thesis title (in order to give the GSC an indication of the student's interests), but a research abstract is not required at this time. A draft of the Program of Work should be approved by the Graduate Advisor at least two weeks before the Qualifying Exam is scheduled to occur.

The Qualifying Exam Committee described above will administer the exam. A person on the exam committee designated by the Graduate Advisor will serve as the chair on the Qualifying Exam Committee, but that person cannot be the student's PI(s). The role of the committee is to advocate for the student and to help mediate conflicts between the student and PI, particularly related to research progress.

Purpose

The purpose of Qualifying Exam is to assess whether students have the intellectual capacity, maturity, and background knowledge to conduct research. Specifically, the exam is supposed to:

- evaluate student ability to identify and justify interesting research questions, including formulating appropriate hypotheses,
- assess student ability to place research questions in the context of current literature,
- assess student ability to plan strategies to answer research questions,
- evaluate the student's ability to communicate their questions and knowledge in written and oral form,
- identify gaps in student knowledge relevant to their general discipline and to recommend rectification, and
- provide an incentive for student to hone skills and knowledge necessary to proceed with research in their discipline. Assessment of more general subject- matter knowledge is achieved by grades from courses.

Prerequisites

Prior to taking the Qualifying Exam, students should have completed, or at least be currently enrolled, in four courses as required by the program. If a course isn't offered in time to take it before or during the semester of your qualifying exam, and the committee and the Graduate Advisor approve, the student may still go ahead and take the Qualifying Exam.

Scheduling

It is the student's responsibility to set up a date, place and time for the exam when all the committee members can meet. The exam may take up to 3 hours, but you may also want to include additional time when reserving the room to allow for set up.

Qualifying Exam Procedure

At least two weeks before the exam, the dissertation proposal must be sent to the PI for approval. Once approved and at least one week before the exam, the student must email a copy of the proposal to each of their committee members. It is a good idea to remind each committee member the day before or the morning of the exam about the location and time of the exam.

The single oral exam will focus on the proposal focus on the student's development of questions, hypotheses, and experiments. The exam is also an opportunity for the student to get feedback from their committee. The proposal must include an abstract, introduction, questions and/or hypotheses, explanation of significance, proposed methodology, feasibility and potential pitfalls, and a brief literature review. Three or more chapters should be planned. It is the responsibility of the examining committee to ensure that the student has a sound understanding of all aspects of plant biology, that are central to their proposed work (aka General Knowledge, see below).

All voting members of the committee will have the opportunity to ask questions on any topic they deem relevant to the student's research, including General Knowledge questions, until satisfied that the student has sufficient knowledge to conduct the research and interpret it in the contemporary light of the discipline area.

At the end of the exam, with the student out of the room, the faculty consult about a decision. With feedback from the mentor, the committee may choose among the following decisions:

General Knowledge relevant to research goals

1. Pass without conditions.
2. Pass with conditions (e.g., more coursework, a brief monograph of a taxon or concept or discipline to be reviewed by committee).

Dissertation Proposal

1. Pass without conditions.
2. Pass with conditions (e.g., relatively minor refinement of one or more sections of proposal).
3. Major restructuring of Proposal with re-examination at a later date.
4. In extreme cases: Fail, and termination of the PhD program.

When results of both sections of the Qualifying Exam are "Pass without conditions", the overall recommendation shall be to Advance to Candidacy.

The Qualifying Examination Results form must be signed by all committee members. This form is completed through DocuSign, and this process must be initiated by the graduate student after the Qualifying Exam. The student should go to the webpage with [PB forms](#) webpate, then to Qualifying Exam Results, which links to the relevant DocuSign portal. Once initiated by the student, the forms will be forwarded to each committee member for their signatures. If any additional coursework is required by the committee, the student and the major professor(s) should make sure to add this coursework to the student's Program of Work for the Doctoral Degree.

Advance to Candidacy

When the student has passed the Qualifying Exam, the Dissertation Proposal has been accepted by the

committee, and the Qualifying Examination Results form (see preceding paragraph) has been signed via DocuSign by all members of the student's committee, the student must return the signed form of the Qualifying Exam Results to the Graduate Program Administrator, who will then send the student the **online form to apply for Candidacy with the Graduate School**. In the application for Candidacy with the Graduate School, the student must list all official members of the Dissertation Committee, which the student should discuss in advance with the major professor(s) and the Qualifying Exam Committee members. Most PB students keep the same committee members from the qualifying exam as members on their Dissertation Committee. A student is not officially in Candidacy until the online form listing all members of the Dissertation Committee has been approved by the Graduate School.

After the Qualifying Exam, each student should check with the Graduate Program Administrator to be sure all the degree requirements (e.g., coursework) will be met well in advance of the Dissertation Defense.

All students are expected to make reasonable progress toward the degree. Once a student has been admitted to Candidacy for the Ph.D., the Dissertation Committee will meet with the student annually to review progress. It is the student's responsibility to set up these annual meetings. After each of the annual meetings, the student will prepare a written summary of recommendations that emerged from the meeting, the Annual Dissertation Committee Meeting Self-Report. See link to Forms at <https://integrativebio.utexas.edu/current-students>. Each member of the committee will indicate approval by signing the Annual Dissertation Committee Meeting Self-Report, and the final signed document has to be submitted by the student to the Graduate Program Administrator to become part of the student's file. The Annual Dissertation Committee Meeting Self-Report must be submitted by November 1st of each year. Together with the Annual Student Self-Assessment (also due November 1st of each year), the Annual Dissertation Committee Meeting Self-Report is used by the Graduate Advisor in their annual review of graduate student progress, and both reports are important evidence when the IB Award Committee awards merit fellowships and research and travel funds. Flagrant or repeated violation of filing the Student Self-Assessment and the Committee Meeting Self-Report may affect a students' eligibility for TA/RA appointments or fellowships. A formal meeting of the Dissertation Committee can be requested at any time by the student, or any member of the Dissertation Committee. The role of the dissertation committee is to advocate for the student and to help mediate conflicts between the student and the PI, particularly related to research progress and graduation time. Specifically, the committee will:

- Provide scientific input at annual meetings and on a more frequent basis, as warranted.
- Together with the PI, student, and other members of the committee, set expectations for the research projects consistent with the general expectations for a PhD in PB.
- Make sure the expectations of the student are kept consistent.
- Work with the PI and other members of the committee to monitor the student's progress toward this established set of expectations, and to communicate the committee's evaluation to the student.
- Work with the PI to ensure that the student gets the professional development they seek, given their proposed career path (including but not limited to meeting opportunities, appropriate publication authorship, etc).

Dissertation Defense

During the semester the student intends to graduate and defend the Dissertation, a [Graduate Application](#) must be submitted online with the [Graduate School](#). This application is due early in the respective semester, so if you think you may defend, go ahead and submit the application. If by chance you don't

defend that semester, or you are still revising the Dissertation when the deadline passes, you will just need to apply to graduate again the following semester. The Graduate Application is free, and a student can apply multiple times, if necessary.

Each student must meet with their Dissertation Committee on an annual basis once admitted to candidacy (see above). Critically, each student must meet within one year prior to the Dissertation Defense to review progress towards completion and obtain the Committee's approval of an approximate date for the exam.

When the dissertation is essentially in its final form, it is circulated to the Dissertation Committee. When all members of the committee agree, the final oral exam should be scheduled with the Graduate School by completing the [Request for Final Oral Exam form](#) on the PB webpage to route through DocuSign. For additional information on graduation deadlines, submitting materials, etc. see [Graduate School website](#). At this point, all deadlines and paperwork are with the Graduate School, not the PB Graduate Program.

Following the procedures prescribed by the Graduate School, a student should give copies of the complete Dissertation to all committee members at least four weeks prior to the defense. The Request for Final Oral Examination must be signed by all members of the committee and the Graduate Advisor, then submitted to the Graduate School at least two weeks prior to the exam. No committee member is expected to sign the Request for Final Oral Exam until they have had sufficient time to examine the Dissertation. The [Request for Final Oral Exam](#) form is routed through DocuSign for signature. After all committee members and the Graduate Advisor have signed, you will then download the form and email it to [Graduate School Services](#), along with anything else they may request. DocuSign is only for inhouse routing only, not submission to the Graduate School. Please ask the Graduate Program Administrator if you have any questions.

The oral Dissertation Defense consists of two parts. The first part is a public seminar that is open to members of the University and the public at large. Immediately following that seminar, the student meets privately with the Dissertation Committee to answer any questions that the committee members may have, and to discuss possible corrections or amendments to the written Dissertation. Once all corrections have been made to the Dissertation and at least four members of the committee approve, the entire Dissertation Committee and then also the PB GSC Chair or Graduate Advisor need to sign the [Report of Dissertation Committee](#) form (via DocuSign). The Graduate School sends this form via email, with additional instructions. Please use the form in DocuSign for easy signing by your committee, but follow all other instructions on the printed version the Graduate School sends to you. You may also access the [Co-Author Permission](#) form (via DocuSign) on our website too. Once the Report of Dissertation and the Co-Author Permission, if needed, is complete you will download the form(s) and email them to [Graduate School Services](#) to notify the Graduate School Dean of successful completion of the defense and all degree requirements.

Master of Arts Program

The Graduate School has two programs leading to a Master of Arts (MA) Degree that are applicable to Plant Biology and is expected to be completed within two to three years.

- *MA with Thesis*. This is the usual degree taken if a student decides to complete a Masters. A student needs to register for six hours of "Thesis" as part of the minimally 30 hours of required coursework. The student needs to write a Master's thesis that is read by two members of the faculty, the major professor and one other member of the PB GSC.

- *MA with Report.* A student needs to register for three hours of “Report” as part of the minimally 30 hours of required coursework. Instead of writing a thesis, the student writes a Report, which is based on work done in one of the courses completed by the student. The report is read and signed by two members of the faculty, the major professor and one other Reader. The Reader does not have to be a member of the PB GSC, and the Reader does not have to be a faculty member, but the Reader must have the Ph.D. credentials to evaluate the Master’s Report properly. The Graduate Advisor must approve the appointment of a Reader.

Course Requirements for completion of a Master of Arts

- For the Thesis option, 24 hours of coursework, plus PB 698A & 698B Thesis (taken sequentially) which counts for 6 hours for a total of 30 hours. For a MA with Report option, PB 398R must be taken and counts for 3 hours, in addition to 27 hours of coursework, for a total of 30 hours.
- Complete of a minimum of 15 hours of coursework in Plant Biology is required. PB courses are defined as courses taught by an IB or MBS faculty or lecturer. Courses outside MBS or IB may count by petition to, and approval by the Graduate Advisor. Research courses (PB 182, 282, 382, etc.) cannot be used to fill this requirement. The student can use no more than one conference course to fulfill the 15-hour requirement.
- As part of the 15 hours of coursework, the student must take three hours of PB 389D Subjects & Skills in Biological Sciences. This is a core course for first- semester students in the Plant Biology graduate program and is co-taught with the EEB first year students.
- An additional six hours of work acceptable for graduate credit must be outside the major area of Plant Biology.
- No more than 9 hours of senior level college courses may be counted toward the MA degree, and no more than 6 of these can be in PB or the minor area. Courses with a middle digit of 8 or 9 should be chosen where possible.
- No more than six hours of Credit/No Credit courses can be counted. Approval of the Graduate Advisor is required prior to registration for a Credit/No Credit course.

Graduation Application and Program of Work, Master of Arts

The semester the student intends to graduate, an online graduate application and Program of Work must be submitted. The Graduate Application is submitted by the student and the Program of Work is submitted by the Graduate Program Administrator. Contact the Graduate Program Administrator to submit the Program of Work first, once done, then you will be able to complete and submit the [graduation application](#).

Thesis Defense, Master of Arts

Your thesis must be read and approved by the Supervising Professor (major professor) and one other Reader. The Reader does not have to be a member of the PB GSC, and the Reader does not have to be a faculty member, but the Reader must have the PhD credentials to evaluate the Master’s Thesis properly. The Graduate Advisor must approve the appointment of a Reader by submitting a CV. This same CV will then be emailed to [Graduate School Services](#) along with other documents. The complete list of documents and procedures are on the [Graduate School](#) website.

Registration

Students must be enrolled in classes whenever they are receiving services from UT- Austin, such as course instruction, faculty interaction, employment, fellowship or training grant stipends. Please read the following section carefully and check with the Graduate Program Administrator if you have any questions or see [Texas One Stop](#) for complete information for the Registrar's Office and Student Record's.

Full-Time Registration

In most cases, all PB students must be enrolled full-time during the fall and spring semesters. Because the PB program guarantees support for the first five years, students must be registered full-time, which is 9-hours in the long semester and 3-hours in summer. In some cases, students do not have to be registered in the summer. For these few exceptions, the Graduate Program Administrator will inform students beforehand if this is an option. Students need to register in time, to avoid registering late and incurring a late fee.

The University will not pay more than the full-time cost for registration. If you have more than 9 hours in the long semester, or 3 hours in the summer, contact your Graduate Program Administrator for advice in meeting the desired 9 credit hours (long semesters) and 3 credit hours (summer) goal.

Tuition Waiver for TAs and GRAs

Employment as a teaching assistant (TA) or Graduate Research Assistant (GRA) qualifies non-Texas residents to receive resident tuition. The waiver must be requested online and is applied directly to a student's fee bill. Each student needs to apply for a Tuition Waiver every semester when appointed as a TA or GRA.

Tuition Waiver for Fellowships

For students who are supported by a fellowship, please DO NOT fill out the online Tuition Waiver. The Graduate Program Administrator will take care of submitting the forms for your Waiver, as those are processed differently for fellowship recipients. Please contact the Graduate Program Administrator if you are not sure which type of tuition waiver you need.

Tuition Bill

Between the University, CNS and the Department, tuition is covered in full for the first 5-years for a typical 9 credit hour course load per long semester (if a student wants to take more, they must pay for the extra courses). Payments usually happen in stages, as different accounts and departments cover different parts of the tuition bill. If you owe additional fees that are not covered under the regular tuition and required fees, then you will need to pay the remaining balance once the University has applied all other payments. These fees include a \$10 General Deposit required for first-year students (this is a fairly UT specific fee designed to offset the cost of any property loss or damage and nonpayment of any University billing). Because students can request reimbursement for this fee after graduation, the University cannot cover it. Other examples of additional fees are sports packages (for use of sports facilities at UT that a student opts into) and possible late fees incurred by a student.

Confirming Registration

All students must confirm their tuition bill after all payments are applied, or registration will be cancelled. To confirm your registration, go to the tuition payment website and click the "CONFIRM" button. The Graduate Program Administrator will send you a notice when it is time to confirm, but if you happen to log

on and read the prompt to “confirm”, please go ahead and confirm. If your tuition bill is NOT confirmed by the 5:00 pm deadline, then your registration will be cancelled, and you will be charged a late fee when your re-register. In this case, the student is responsible for covering any late fees accrued.

Continuous Registration

The Graduate School requires all students to be continuously enrolled for at least 3 hours for all long semesters (Spring and Fall) until completion of the degree. Students must petition the Graduate School if they intend to take a medical leave of absence during a long semester. The Graduate Program Administrator will be able to help you with the petition.

Add/Drop or Credit/No Credit

Students may add and drop courses without penalty during the add/drop period, which ends on the 12th class day during long semesters and on the 4th class day in summer. After that date, students must petition the Graduate School for late add/drop, but such petitions are rarely approved. If a student must drop a course after the deadline and the petition is approved, the student will have to pay to add another course to maintain full-time status required for TA/GRA support or fellowship support. The cost to add a course is about the same cost as summer registration.

A student may change the grade status to CR/NC until about half-way through a long semester. Courses required in the Program of Work cannot be taken CR/NC.

Academic Appointments and University Fellowships

The primary means of support from the University is through an academic appointment, such as Teaching Assistantships (TAs), Graduate Research Assistantships (GRAs), or various University fellowships. A student appointed as a 20-hour TA or GRA, or on a fellowship of at least a \$1000, qualifies for resident tuition rates. For additional information on graduate [student employment conditions](#) and [fellowship conditions](#) click on the link provided for each.

Teaching Assistantships

TA positions are generally plentiful, but students are not guaranteed their top choice in what they will TA. PB students are enrolled in the Biology Instructional Office Teaching Assistant Matching System (TAMS) to match students with faculty instructing classes that need TA's. The PB Graduate Administer will enroll students that need to TA into TAMS. To increase chances of getting a desirable TA position, students should email relevant faculty at least the semester before the class is taught to inquire what their prospects may be (e.g., some faculty will already have a TA lined up). Students then list their top choices in TAMS and faculty choose from this TA pool by listing their own top choices to TA their class. Generally, TAMS acts to match students and faculty with the best available choices, but this process isn't perfect and many first time TAs, or those who have rarely been a TA, may end up with assignments that are not in their top choices. Reaching out to faculty and informally trying to get a “match” will increase the chances of getting a top choice.

Prior to holding a Teaching Assistant (TA) position, the student must take a short training workshop offered prior to the start of their first semester during which a student serves as TA. The workshop is typically held the Friday during the week before classes start.

Students are considered for available TA positions by the request of each student. Students who serve as TA in one semester must reapply for the next long semester. Once a student accepts a TA position

offered by The Biology Instructional Office (the student signs the contract with that Office), a student is obligated to serve for that teaching position (a student is not allowed to cancel the appointment ad hoc). A student is not allowed to opt out of a TA commitment without finding someone else who is qualified to serve as TA as a replacement. Students should never anticipate they can cancel their TA appointment and automatically find a replacement.

Graduate Research Assistantships

Many faculty members have research grants that allow them to appoint students as Graduate Research Assistants (GRAs). Students should check with their Major Advisor(s) concerning availability of such appointments before submitting a TA request. Once a student accepts to serve as a TA in a particular semester and signs the contract with the Biology Instructional Office, a student is not allowed to switch to GRA support if such support becomes available (e.g., if Major Advisor is awarded new research funds).

Pay Period for Teaching Assistants and Graduate Research Assistants

TA's and GRA's are paid in arrears, so September's paycheck will pay out on 1st October. Appointments are processed by semesters, which are broken down as:

- Fall semester - August 16 – December 31 (4.5 months)
- Spring semester - January 1 – May 15 (4.5 months)
- Summer semester - May 16 – August 15 (3 months)

Appointment as Grader

Each semester, a few grader appointments are available through the Biology Instructional Office. These appointments are made at the beginning of each semester, and all students have an opportunity to request a grader appointment in addition to TA or GRA support, if the student does not exceed the appointment limit. The maximum number of hours allowed for TA/GRA appointments is 30 hours. The two exceptions to this rule are:

- 1) First year students can only be appointed for a maximum of 20 hours per semester.
- 2) International students can only be appointed for a maximum of 20 hours per semester.

University and IB Administered Fellowships

Each fall and spring semester the Graduate School, CNS, and other relevant UT sources hold competitions for various kinds of fellowships. Most [Graduate School fellowships](#) require nomination by the PB Graduate Program or by PB faculty. The Graduate School will notify the graduate programs in advance of the application deadline. These fellowships usually provide a year-long stipend. The IB Awards Committee usually determines whose name(s) will be submitted to the Graduate School for consideration of Graduate School fellowships (e.g., the Continuing Fellowship). But other ad-hoc committees make decisions on other types of fellowships (e.g., the Stengl-Wyer Graduate Fellowships).

Pay Period for Fellowships

Fellowships paid by the Graduate School are paid in advance (i.e., a student receiving a fellowship is paid September 1 for the month of September). These fellowships include some Recruitment Fellowships, Continuing Fellowships, NSF-GRFP support, and any other type of fellowship paid through the Graduate School. Be sure to budget for the *last* month you are supported by one of these fellowships. Also, when your fellowship ends in August, you will receive your August check on August 1, but you will not receive your TA/GRA, or some fellowships from outside sources for September until October 1, so please budget for this extra month accordingly. There is a similar situation for those who serve as a TA or GRA in the spring semester and then are supported by a fellowship for only the summer; in such a case, you will receive two stipends on June 1, so hold funds from one of those checks until September 1.

- June 1 – receive Grad School fellowship for June
- June 1 – receive TA/GRA and some fellowships for May
- August 1 – receive Grad School fellowship for August
- October 1 – receive stipend for the month of September, leaving a two-month gap

Switching from Fellowships to TA/RA and vice versa

Because pay periods and other details differ between TA/RA and fellowship-based appointments, it is highly recommended that students switching between these appointment types contact the Graduate Program Administrator in anticipation of such a switch to ensure payment, insurance, and other details are all taken care of without surprises.

Additional and Outside Employment

Additional and Outside Employment

IB graduate students are not allowed to have outside employment (e.g., part-time positions in restaurants) or any type of job that interferes with the completion of coursework or research. On occasion, students may have 5-10 hours of additional University-related employment if the employment is related to their role as graduate students, such as paid grader positions for courses taught at the University, but such employment is possible only after the completion of the first year. International students are not eligible for additional employment beyond their current 20 hour/week GRA or TA appointment. Before accepting any additional employment, students should first consult with their supervising professor and inform the Graduate Program Administrator. Students are required to disclose all outside activity that may result in a Conflict-of-Interest with student appointment at UT-Austin. Information about Outside Employment and Conflict-of-Interests can be found on the [Conditions for Student Employment](#) on the Graduate School website.

External to UT Fellowships

Students with strong accomplishments in research and broader impacts should apply for federally funded fellowships, such as the NSF GRFP and NRSA fellowships from NIH. We encourage all students to apply to such outside fellowships or international fellowships, and the required course PB 389D Research Skills in Biological Sciences (required for all incoming graduate students in PB) focuses on development and writing of effective fellowship and research-grant proposals. Information on internal, external, and international fellowships can be found on the [Fellowships](#) page of the Graduate School website.

For those with prestigious fellowships, or looking to apply for a fellowship outside UT where the stipend is not as high as the typical stipend paid to PB students, or the health insurance and/or tuition is not fully covered, please let the Graduate Program Administrator know as soon as possible, and payment of full stipend, health insurance, and tuition will be determined on a case-by-case basis with the major professor.

Fellowship Supplements

A Fellowship Supplement is a one-time stipend of \$1000 distributed around September 1st. With this supplement a student may qualify for in-state tuition rates for fall, spring and summer of that academic

year. Students holding a qualifying external fellowship may apply for this fellowship each year. Please write to the Graduate Program Administrator about Fellowship Supplements available through the PB program.

IB Departmental Research and Travel Funds

Every fall and spring semester, the IB-Department provides funds that are allocated competitively to PB and EEB graduate students to help them achieve their career goals. Students can apply for up to \$12,000 during their time as a graduate student, for example to cover purchase of supplies, research-related travel, or workshop fees. Please note that these funds are not guaranteed but awarded by the discretion of the IB Awards Committee. Once funding is awarded to a student, the student has about 6 months to claim these funds, otherwise the funds are forfeited, and the student must reapply during another competition. If the student does not claim all awarded funds, the funds will remain available to them to apply for in future competitions. The deadlines to claim awarded funds are October 1 and March 1 of each year.

Please note, all funds for research and travel awards are taxed (see below), as the funds are paid from endowments directly to a student, and these payments are considered student income.

Research and Travel Awards

Each PB student may apply for up to \$2500 research or travel funds each fall and spring semester to be used anytime through February for the research-award competition in fall, and through September for the research-award competition in spring. Once an award has been made, the student will receive a letter from the Graduate Program Administrator stating the funds are awarded. The student and Major Advisor must then sign the form attached to the award letter certifying that the funds will be used for the intended purpose. Only after the Graduate Program Administrator receives this signed form will the fellowship funds be processed. Once funds are spent, the student awardee must email to the Graduate Program Administrator a single PDF document that includes (a) a budget table summarizing all expenses incurred (including the sum total), signed by the student and Major Advisor to confirm these expenses; and (b) e-copies of all receipts of the expenses listed in that budget table (all receipts have to be included in the single PDF rather than be sent separately). It is a student's responsibility to save all receipts, and document all expenditures listed in the budget table. If a student does not submit this budget table and corresponding receipts, no other funds will be distributed in future award competitions until received.

Funds for research are to be used for research expenditures such as equipment, supplies, microscopy time, DNA sequencing, travel to research field sites, or research-related workshops or training. Research awards cannot be used to cover salaries for undergraduate assistants. If purchases of supplies are made through UT Market, then those purchases will be charged a 5% fee to be reimbursed back to the University in an account for your use. If supplies are purchased through UT Market, then the purchase becomes property of the University. If you purchase outright yourself (i.e., not through UT Market), then the property is yours, since it is being purchased by a fellowship.

Like the research awards, travel awards are capped at a maximum of \$2,500 per application. Travel awards are for students who (a) will present an oral talk or poster at a professional meeting, and (b) are approaching the end of their graduate career and thus need the opportunity to line up postdoctoral fellowships or other job opportunities. Cost-matching by the Major Advisor(s) is encouraged. A student may apply for several travel awards during the time as an PB graduate student, but the total amount in funds received (travel awards *plus* research awards combined) cannot exceed the maximum of \$12,000 of total funds potentially available for each student (see above).

Students who are near their thesis defense and who wish to self-support during their last semester may

apply for a \$1000 fellowship, which then gives them in-state tuition rates. The Major Advisor needs to provide a letter in support of this arrangement, and the \$1000 fellowship must be used to help off-set the cost of tuition. This fellowship is available only to those students who still have unexpended funds available of the maximum of \$12,000.

Fellowship Payments are Taxed

Because UT policy prohibits us from establishing a UT account with endowment funds, research and travel awards are paid directly to the student and therefore are considered taxable income. Payment for services within the University (e.g., DNA sequencing, microscopy time), must be paid from a departmental account, which the student then will need to reimburse from the Research Award. In most cases, the departmental account to be reimbursed will be Integrative Biology (IB) or Molecular Biosciences (MBS). We suggest that awardees create a separate personal bank account for fellowship money to avoid co-mingling personal funds and research-award funds and to facilitate auditing if that were to become necessary.

Health Insurance Benefits

All Graduate Research Assistants (GRAs), Teaching Assistants (TAs), and full Graduate Fellowship recipients are covered by [AcademicBlueSM](#) Student Health Plan through Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBS) of Texas and through Student Health Services. A student will be automatically enrolled in this Student Health Plan each semester when a student has an academic student employee appointment through Workday. If supported by a Fellowship during a given semester, a student must enroll personally (click *Begin Enrollment* at [UT Health Services](#)). The student health insurance offered by the University of Texas at Austin is considered a gold plan under the Affordable Care Act. It is highly recommended that students switching between appointment types contact the Graduate Program Administer in anticipation of such a switch to ensure continuation of health insurance benefits.

Required Student Training

The University of Texas at Austin requires all graduate students to take several trainings at the beginning of graduate studies. Some trainings must be completed only once (e.g., training in the use of a fire extinguisher), but some are required every 2-3 years (e.g., Compliance Training, Responsible Conduct of Research, Laboratory Safety). Students will receive an email notification before the training is due and to complete in [UTLearn](#).

The Graduate Program and the Biology Instructional Office, the office where TAs are assigned, require some additional lab training. You will also receive an email for these trainings when they are assigned to you through [UTLearn](#).

Ethics and Compliance Training

Ethical conduct and compliance are personal responsibilities, and each student will be held accountable for own conduct and own decision making. The PB Graduate Program has a **zero-tolerance policy regarding academic dishonesty**, and students found to be participating in any form of academic dishonesty will face immediate dismissal from the program. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not

limited to, cheating, plagiarism, collusion, and falsification of data or records.

If a graduate students hold a position as a TA, GRA, or another position on any University campus or property, the State of Texas expects these students to uphold certain ethical behaviors. Graduate students must be aware of, and be in compliance with, State law and University policies related to sexual harassment, equal opportunity, human research, recombinant DNA, integrity, IT security, and other such policies. Online training regarding relevant laws, protocols, procedures, and resources is therefore required by the University. The specific training courses assigned to a student can be accessed through the UT Austin's employee training management system at [UTLearn](#). Each student will receive annual email notifications for required training modules that must be completed by a deadline. Additional training courses are also available through [UTLearn](#).

Teaching Assistant Workshop

The Biology Instructional Office requires completion of a teaching assistant workshop prior to serving as a TA. The workshop is given typically on a Friday during the week before classes start each fall and spring semester.

Crisis Procedures

The PB Graduate Program strives to provide a highly supportive environment to aid students through difficulties in the event of crises such as assault, health problems (including mental health problems) or professional conflict (e.g., with the Major Advisor, or with other students or postdocs). Students in need of advice or help may contact any member of the faculty or staff with whom they feel comfortable, but may also contact the Graduate Advisor, the GSC Chair, the Associate Chair for Graduate Education in Integrative Biology, your Major Advisor, the Graduate Program Administrator, or the [Community, Accessibility and Well-Being Committee \(CAW\)](#). Such discussions will be held in complete confidence, and nothing will be disclosed unless the student specifically requests disclosure, within the Title IX constraints that all UT employees are mandatory reporters (see above).

In the event of an urgent issue, students in need of assistance (especially those at risk to themselves) can use the contact list below to call for help immediately.

- Call 911 if you are hurt or in danger
- 24/7 UT Counseling and Mental Health Center Crisis Hot Line, 512-471-2255
- UT Counseling & Mental Health Center, Monday to Friday 8am-5pm, 512-471-3515
- Student Emergency Services, Monday to Friday 8 am-4 pm, 512-471-5017
- University Ombud's Office, Student Ombud's, 512-471-3825

For further information, please visit the PB website under Info Current Student tab.

[Mental Health Resources](#)

[Campus Safety](#)

[Covid Guidance, Center of Disease Control & Prevention](#)

Scholastic Probation and Dismissal

Every graduate student must make satisfactory progress toward their degree or risk scholastic probation or dismissal from the program. Satisfactory progress includes research progress, completion of coursework, and good performance in TA/GRA duties.

- To stay in good academic standing the student must have an overall GPA at or above 3.0.
- To stay in good standing with a GRA appointment the student must be making satisfactory progress in the project that is supporting the GRA.
- To stay in good standing (with or without GRA support) the student must be making satisfactory progress in thesis or dissertation research. Satisfactory research progress will be determined by discussions between the student, the advisors, the student's committee, and the Graduate Program Advisor, including during the annual review process each year.
- To stay in good standing with a TA appointment the student must perform their duties as a TA satisfactorily in the classroom, lab and/or discussion sections, office hours, grading, and/or other TA duties. Satisfactory performance is determined by the instructor(s) of the course(s) and the Director of the Biology Instructional Office. Complaints will be communicated to the student as soon as possible following the report of poor performance.
- If the student's GPA falls below 3.0, the student will be given a full semester's notice to bring their GPA above 3.0.
- If the student is not making satisfactory progress in research or teaching, they will be notified of this by the GSC chair and given explicit guidance on pathways to correct any deficiencies in performance. Students will have the opportunity to correct the inadequacies in their research progress or classroom during the following full semester.
- Failure to perform satisfactorily as a TA or GRA will likely result in the loss of further financial support of that type.
- Satisfactory performance also includes ongoing student engagement and communication with academic advisors, program advisors, or members of the GSC. Students should be pro-active in communicating any challenges that might be delaying progress in PhD and/or the need for accommodations for those challenges.

If a student is not making satisfactory progress in the areas listed above and does not correct the deficiencies within the semester assigned for improvement, the GSC, upon consultation with the academic advisor and graduate program advisor can begin the process of formal request for dismissal with the graduate school. The Graduate Program will follow all timelines and procedures outlined by the graduate school for dismissal, including formal reporting, student grievances, and formal adjudication procedures.