

CHECKLIST FOR ACADEMIC MILESTONES FOR PHD STUDENTS

Updated August 5, 2026

NOTE: These are academic milestones and are separate from TA/RA graduate student worker expectations.

Students should be meeting these milestones to be making satisfactory academic progress. The faculty research advisor and student should be meeting regularly and working closely to keep things on schedule, but meeting all of the steps and milestones below are ultimately the responsibility of the student. All milestones should be communicated to the PBC director and uploaded into [GSP](#). The PBC student handbook and various forms can be found on the [PBC website](#).

YEAR 1

- ☒ STUDENT: Complete most of coursework (if receiving NSF funds, an Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) course must be completed within one year of starting to receive the NSF funds)
- ☒ STUDENT WITH GUIDANCE FROM ADVISOR: Begin identifying dissertation research, with at least three discrete chapters. Plans for publication can be started at this point, and revisited every year.
- ☒ STUDENT WITH GUIDANCE FROM ADVISOR: Form a committee and enter committee members in GSP. The committee must comprise four people, two of whom have appointments at Northwestern (this includes CBG/PBC faculty), one of whom is an outside member not associated with Northwestern, and the 4th member can be an internal or outside member.
- ☒ STUDENT WITH ADVISOR: Fill out the [Advisor agreement form](#) and upload into GSP.
- ☒ STUDENT: **Have first committee meeting** and submit an [annual committee review meeting form](#) in GSP by spring of year 1. At the meeting, schedule for the next committee meeting in fall of year 2 so that updates on summer research can be reviewed in fall of year 2.

YEAR 2

- ☒ STUDENT: Complete remaining required coursework (Note: all students must take RCR course at some point, even if not receiving NSF funds)
- ☒ STUDENT: **Organize committee meeting in fall quarter** to check in on progress from over the summer and lay out a timeline for your qualifying exam and prospectus later in the year. Upload [annual committee review meeting form](#) to GSP.
- ☒ STUDENT WITH GUIDANCE FROM ADVISOR: **Complete your qualifying exam which includes submitting a prospectus to your committee** (at least 2 weeks before the exam) and doing an oral presentation and defense of your prospectus. The prospectus should have a timeline that will be used as a guide to complete PhD within five years. You should build in allowances for possible delays. The qualifying exam with prospectus is recommended to occur in the spring or summer of the 2nd year. If you do not complete them by summer of year 2, you could be placed on academic probation for not making satisfactory academic progress.
- ☒ STUDENT: Upon completing the qualifying exam and prospectus, fill out and **complete the official TGS "PhD qualifying exam" and "PhD prospectus" forms in GSP**. Also, fill out and upload the PBC [qualifying exam form](#) and [prospectus form](#) and a pdf of your approved prospectus to GSP.
- ☒ STUDENT: **Present research updates** to the PBC community in the PBC seminar series. This is typically in the spring and you will be assigned a day to do this.

YEAR 3

- ☒ STUDENT: **Organize a committee meeting for fall quarter to check in on progress**, using the prospectus as a guide. **Upload an [annual committee review meeting form](#)** to GSP. The form should note if the student

is on track or if there have been any setbacks or changes to the prospectus. If so, those changes should be explained

- ☒ STUDENT: **Continue research and making progress toward degree**
- ☒ STUDENT: **Present research updates** to the PBC community in the PBC seminar series
- ☒ STUDENT: If you have not successfully completed your qualifying exam and prospectus by the end of year 3 you will automatically be placed on academic probation and could be excluded from TGS and lose funding.

YEAR 4

- ☒ STUDENT: **Organize a committee meeting for fall quarter** to check in on progress, using the prospectus as a guide. **Upload an [annual committee review meeting form](#)** to GSP. The form should note if the student is on track or if there have been any setbacks or changes to the prospectus. If so, those changes should be explained
- ☒ STUDENT, ADVISOR, AND COMMITTEE: **It should be determined if it is likely the student will need another field season.** If so, make sure there will still be time to complete analyses to be able to defend dissertation by the end of year 5.
- ☒ STUDENT WITH GUIDANCE FROM ADVISOR: **Continue research and making progress toward degree**
- ☒ STUDENT: **Present research updates** to the PBC community in the PBC seminar series
- ☒ STUDENT: **Organize the Dissertation Draft Meeting* for spring quarter (previously called permission to write or dissertation outline meeting).** After the meeting, submit the Dissertation outline form to the PBC office. The form should note if the student is on track or if there have been any setbacks or changes to the prospectus. If so, those changes should be explained
- ☒ STUDENT, ADVISOR, AND COMMITTEE: If the dissertation draft is not approved and/or there have been setbacks or changes to the prospectus, this information should be submitted as part of the form. If there is concern that the student will not be able to defend their dissertation by the summer of their 5th year, a clear timeline should be set and monitored on a regular basis by their advisor. If an extra quarter of funding seems to be needed, the student should start the process for applying by the fall of their 5th year. Keep in mind that there is no guarantee it will be awarded.

YEAR 5

- ☒ STUDENT WITH GUIDANCE FROM ADVISOR: **The student should defend their dissertation** no later than summer of their 5th year, though in some cases it may be advisable to do so by the spring quarter. No funding is guaranteed past the summer of the 5th year
- ☒ Deposit dissertation into [ProQuest Database](#)
- ☒ STUDENT: **Schedule public dissertation** presentation by the summer.
- ☒ *The purpose of the Dissertation Draft Approval meeting is to assess if a student has (or will have) enough data to move forward with final analyses and writing for a defense by the summer of year 5. If a student does not have enough data at the time of the meeting, a clear plan should be put in place to have enough within this timeline.

PhD academic requirements overview:

Complete a minimum of 13 letter graded units, 0 unit RCR course, dissertation, and maintain a 3.0 cumulative GPA. For more info: [PhD Degree Requirements: The Graduate School - Northwestern University](#)

PHD QUALIFYING EXAM AND PROSPECTUS

Before the qualifying exam

Months before the qualifying exam, students should send their committee members a bibliography of papers they are reading/considering as they prepare their prospectus. They should ask if any committee members think anything important is missing.

Two weeks before the qualifying exam, students need to send their Dissertation Prospectus to all committee members. Students should be communicating with and getting input from their advisor as they prepare the prospectus.

Qualifying exam

Each committee can determine the exact format they think is most appropriate, and this should be determined and discussed with the student's advisor ahead of time, but here is a typical approach that can be shared with other committee members ahead of time to explain the process.

At the start of the qualifying exam, the committee will briefly meet without the student to determine if there are any questions or concerns on the student's dissertation research or progress. The committee will also discuss the scope and order that they will ask questions. The student will then be invited into the room.

The student will then present their research for ca. 15-20 minutes, and take questions from the committee during and after the presentation. These questions can cover the student's prospectus, presentation, coursework, or general knowledge in plant biology, especially as it relates (either directly or indirectly) to their research. Each committee member can ask a question or series of related questions and then move on to the next member. There can be several rounds such that all members have a chance to ask their questions, and other committee members may ask follow up questions.

When questioning and discussion is finished, a qualifying exam form and a dissertation prospectus form will be filled out and signed by the student and committee members. In addition to any recommendations that are made for the student's prospectus and research, the committee can recommend any additional coursework that might be necessary. The student will upload the signed forms and prospectus in GSP. If major revisions are necessary, the revised prospectus must be uploaded. The prospectus will then serve as the guiding document for the student's research for the remaining graduate studies. More information (including processes if the student does not pass the exam) can be found in the [PBC Handbook](#). The student must also fill out the official TGS forms for qualifying exam and prospectus in GSP.

Forms:

<https://plantbiology.northwestern.edu/documents/phd-resources/pbc-graduate-phd-qualifying-exam.pdf>

<https://plantbiology.northwestern.edu/documents/phd-resources/pbc-graduate-phd-prospectus.pdf>

COMMITTEE MEMBER EXPECTATIONS

Thank you for agreeing to be a committee member for a student in the Plant Biology and Conservation program at Northwestern University and the Chicago Botanic Garden. This is what you can expect in this role.

PhD Committees

Students should generally hold committee meetings at the following times. Milestones are in bold. Note that students should communicate with committee members outside of meetings as is relevant for their academic progress.

- Spring of year 1 - initial meeting to discuss plans
- Fall of year 1 - research update after first field season
- Fall of year 2 - research update and progress review
- **Spring of year 2 - qualifying exam**
- Fall of year 3 - research update and progress review
- Fall of year 4 - research update and progress review
- **Spring of year 4 - Dissertation Draft Approval meeting**
- **Spring or summer of year 5 - Dissertation defense**

MS Committees

Students should generally hold committee meetings at the following times

- **Spring of year 1 - Research proposal meeting**
- **Spring of year 2 - Proposal Defense**

More details about the milestone items in bold can be found in the [PBC Handbook](#)

MASTER'S GRADUATION CHECKLISTS

See the PBC Handbook and webpage for more details about various processes and milestone events.

Master's Degree – Thesis Track

YEAR 1

- ☒ Complete required courses
- ☒ Submit [Thesis advisor form](#) in [GSP](#)
- ☒ Form thesis committee, with guidance of your major research advisor and fill out advisor and committee information in [GSP](#)
- ☒ Defend [thesis proposal](#) to committee and upload signed form and committee-approved proposal to [GSP](#)

YEAR 2

- ☒ Submit Application for a Degree via [GSP](#) by the [deadline](#) for the quarter you plan to graduate
- ☒ Schedule a thesis defense meeting with your committee for spring or summer. You may choose to have at least one regular committee meeting beforehand but it is not required
- ☒ Complete written thesis and submit to your committee at least 2 weeks before your defense, where you will present your thesis in a public seminar and then have an oral defense of your thesis with just your committee.
- ☒ Submit Master's Degree Completion Form in [GSP](#) by the [deadline](#) for the quarter you plan to graduate
- ☒ Submit completed Thesis Defense Decision form to [GSP](#) along with the signed committee form and pdf of the final approved thesis by the [deadline](#) for the quarter you plan to graduate
- ☒ Upload final thesis to be digitally archived in the [NU library](#) (more details of this process can be found in the PBC handbook)

MS thesis requirements overview:

Complete a minimum of 11 letter graded units, a research thesis, and maintain a 3.0 cumulative GPA. More general graduation information can be found [here](#). Further information on Master's requirements can be found [here](#).

Master's Degree – Internship Track

- ☒ Complete required courses Identify an internship from existing ones you apply for, or work with the faculty internship committee
- ☒ Submit [Host Information and Agreement Form](#) to [GSP](#) in Documents section
- ☒ Complete at least 240 internship hours
- ☒ Submit Application for a Degree via [GSP](#) by the [deadline](#) for the quarter you plan to graduate
- ☒ Submit [Internship Approval Form](#) to [GSP](#)
- ☒ Submit final internship project to PBC Director
- ☒ Submit Master's Degree Completion Form in [GSP](#) by the [deadline](#) for the quarter you plan to graduate

MS internship requirements overview:

Complete a minimum of 9 letter graded units, 240 hours of internship, internship project, and maintain a 3.0 cumulative GPA. More general graduation information can be found [here](#). Further information on Master's requirements can be found [here](#).

