CHECKLIST FOR ACADEMIC MILESTONES FOR PHD STUDENTS

Updated October 9, 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 each milestone below is ultimately the responsibility of the student. Milestones should be uploaded into GSP. The PBC student handbook and forms can be found on the PBC website. The checklist below is an overview and you should refer to the PBC Handbook and TGS Academic Policy and Procedures for full details.

YEAR 1

- Complete most of coursework (if receiving NSF funds, then Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) course must be completed within one year of starting to receive the NSF funds)
- Begin identifying dissertation research, with at least three discrete chapters. Plans for publication can be started at this point, and revisited every year.
- 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.
- Fill out the Advisor agreement form and upload into GSP.
- **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. Targeting fall of year 2 is often good.

YEAR 2

- Complete remaining required coursework (Note: all students must take RCR course at some point, even if not receiving NSF funds. Year 2 is a good time to take it)
- **Have annual committee meeting.** Fall is often a good target for this. It allows for checking in on progress from over the summer and laying out a timeline for preparing for qualifying exam and prospectus later in the year. After the meeting, upload annual committee review meeting form to GSP.
- **Complete your qualifying exam which includes submitting a prospectus to your committee,** and doing an oral presentation of your prospectus. The prospectus should have a timeline that will be used as a guide to complete your PhD within five years. You should build in allowances for possible delays. PBC highly recommends that the qualifying exam with prospectus occurs in the spring or summer of the 2nd year. By completing this in year 2, you will achieve candidacy and be eligible for various fellowships in a timely manner. If you do not complete it by summer of year 3, you will be placed by TGS on academic probation and risk removal from TGS.
- 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.
- **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

- **Have an annual committee meeting.** Fall quarter is often a good time for this. Your prospectus will be used as a guide to track progress. **Upload an** annual committee review meeting form to GSP after the meeting. 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

- **Continue research and making progress toward degree**
- **Present research updates** to the PBC community in the PBC seminar series
- 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 risk exclusion from TGS and lose funding.

YEAR 4

- **Have an annual committee meeting.** Fall quarter is often a good time for this. Your prospectus will be used as a guide to track progress. **Upload an** annual committee review meeting form to GSP after the meeting. 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
- **Continue research and making progress toward degree**
- **Present research updates** to the PBC community in the PBC seminar series
- **Have Dissertation Draft Approval* Meeting (previously called permission to write or dissertation outline meeting).** Spring quarter is a good target for this. The student will submit a comprehensive dissertation outline (see handbook for more details) and timeline to the committee ahead of the meeting, and give an oral presentation of the plan. 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. **It should also 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.
- 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

- **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
- **Schedule public dissertation** presentation by the summer.
- You must have at least one paper at least in review before graduating
- You must have TA'd at least 2 quarters before graduating

*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

COMMITTEE MEMBER EXPECTATIONS

When reaching out to prospective committee members, you can provide them with this general information, along with the details of your dissertation project and why you would like them to serve on your committee:

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 generally what you can expect in this role, though timing of some meetings may vary somewhat.

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 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**