

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](#)