

## DEPARTMENTAL POLICIES ON EXPECTED PROGRESS TOWARDS DEGREE

### A. Overview

All graduate students in the Department of Physics and Astronomy are expected to complete a doctoral degree in a timely fashion (4-7 years). To meet this goal, it is important that students and faculty work together to ensure that each student is making appropriate progress and that the department's expectations are clearly communicated. To this end, the Director of Graduate Studies has established a timeline that outlines optimal, potentially problematic, and unacceptable rates of progress. In addition to providing a communicative function, this timeline will play a role in the annual evaluations of student accomplishments and the quality of faculty mentoring.

### B. Timeline indicating expected progress towards degree

Table 1 outlines the rate at which students are expected to progress through the milestones associated with the Department's graduate program. Faculty in the department recognize that the progress of each student will vary, and for this reason rates of progress are defined in terms of various "zones," rather than specific, department-wide cut-off dates for each milestone requirement. The three zones – green, yellow, and red – are defined below.

#### Expected Rate of Progress

Year	1			2			3			4			5			6			7			8			
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	
<b>Preliminary Evaluation</b>		X	X	X	X	X	X	X																	
<b>Comprehensive Exam*</b>		X	X	X	X	X	X	X																	
<b>Select Advisor</b>		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X																
<b>Form Dissertation Comm.</b>			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X															
<b>First meeting</b>			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X															
<b>Second meeting</b>					X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X											
<b>Third meeting</b>							X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X								
<b>Fourth meeting</b>										X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			
<b>Defend Dissertation</b>										X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

*\* A seven-year statute of limitations between passing your comprehensive exam and defending your PhD exists in the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences*

**Green (optimal) zone:** Completing each milestone requirement within a Year/Term that is color-coded as green will yield a doctoral thesis in the expected 4-7 years.

**Yellow (cautionary) zone:** This is considered to be a cautionary zone. For some students, spending some or most of the time in the Yellow Zone is not a problem as long as Milestone progress does not slip into the Red Zone. This is especially true if performance is otherwise high (e.g., coursework is strong, the student has multiple research projects, the work has resulted in conference presentations and

journal submissions), if research is delayed due to a sabbatical of an advisor, or if the student experienced a temporary research or personal setback that stalled progress for a short while. For other students, time in the Yellow Zone may be viewed with a high degree of concern by faculty. This is especially true when the outer range of the Yellow Zone is approaching without a successful Milestone event in sight, or when slow progress toward the degree is coupled with other signs of lackluster performance. There are multiple factors that may place a student in this less optimal position. These include unanticipated research setbacks, a nonproductive student-advisor relationship, personal setbacks caused by physical or mental health problems, a low degree of enthusiasm about the academic research track, or a sense of isolation from the departmental faculty and graduate student peers. Regardless of the cause, it is imperative that students and faculty work together to identify the causes behind a problematic level of performance and develop a plan for positive change. Students **should not** wait for faculty to determine that a problem exists – instead, if they are concerned about their progress they should confer with their advisor, Dissertation Committee members, the Director of Graduate Studies, and/or the Departmental Chair. Depending upon the factors that have slowed performance, appropriate actions could include changing research projects, adjusting the scope of a Milestone, switching advisors, seeking clinical care, asking for a leave of absence from the program, etc.

**Red (danger) zone:** Students who reach the Red Zone will be placed on Provisional Status. Entry into Provisional Status will trigger a formal letter outlining the performance criteria that need to be met (including dates for successful completion) to avoid even more formal actions, such as progression to University Probation or termination from the student's doctoral training program. Students on provisional status are unable to be assigned as a Teaching Assistant or be eligible for other departmental funding. Students may, however, be supported as a GSR, if the faculty member is so inclined.

**Note:** The School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh mandates that any graduate student who does not finish and defend their dissertation within seven years of completing the Comprehensive Examination must retake the Examination.

### **C. Productivity and experience targets**

A student's rate of progress through the various training milestones provides a valuable internal measure of a performance. But students should also be mindful that individuals who are external to the department will typically give more weight to measures of achievement that appear within an individual's curriculum vitae. The most important of these measures is the number of peer-reviewed publications, especially lead author publications. A variety of other measures, such as the number of conference presentations, history of honors and awards, and documented teaching and mentoring experience, also tend to receive close examination. With this in mind, the department has also established the following recommendations for students:

1. Students are encouraged to present their work locally at least several times during their graduate career. There are poster session opportunities each year, group meetings, and departmental seminars that provide valuable training opportunities.
2. Students should present a lead author poster or talk at a national forum a minimum of once during their graduate career.
3. Students should aim to submit their initial lead author publication by the end of their 4<sup>th</sup> year. An earlier submission is possible, and the lack of a submission by the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> year is a point of concern.
4. Students should tackle a dissertation project that is expected to produce at least one lead author publication. This work should be submitted within one year of completing the dissertation.

5. Students interested in an academic research career should strive to leave the program with at least two submitted publications and a third in preparation from the dissertation. At least two of these publications should be lead author publications.
6. All students should develop a teaching philosophy and record of teaching success. Electronic and written results of individual teaching evaluations are made available to you at the end of each term taught. Students interested in a teaching career should have experience teaching two or more different courses.
7. Students are encouraged to take advantage of undergraduate and graduate mentoring opportunities, which can help develop and document research training and mentorship skills.
8. Students are encouraged to seek out and take advantage of opportunities to compete for fellowships and other academic awards. These can provide valuable sources of funding and they serve as indicators of research quality and intellectual achievement.

#### **D. Evaluation of student progress**

The yearly Dissertation Committee meeting is an opportunity to review student's progress and to obtain feedback in a timely manner. The progress report submitted after the Committee meeting should serve to point out lack of progress on recommended milestone goals. For any student who is at risk of entering the "red zone" as identified after a Committee meeting, a formal letter will be sent by the Director of Graduate Studies to serve as a warning that the student must take one of the following actions during the upcoming year to avoid placement on Provisional Status:

- 1) provide documentation that expected milestone has already been successfully completed.
- 2) successfully complete the required milestone before the start of the fall semester.
- 3) file a petition for an extension of the "yellow zone" time line. A petition will take the form of a letter addressed to the Director of Graduate Studies. The petition must clearly state the extenuating factors that account for the delay in progress and it must provide a clear plan for how and when the delay in completing the relevant milestone will be overcome. It is expected that "yellow zone extensions" will be granted only in rare instances.
- 4) request a leave of absence or withdraw from training.

Any student who has failed to meet the milestone deadline and (a) who is not granted a yellow-zone extension, or (b) not requested a leave of absence or withdrawn from training will receive a letter indicating that they are now on Provisional Status. The letter will indicate that the student must satisfactorily complete the required milestone by a specified date, or else a final decision could be made to terminate the student.

*AL/AZ/lmh (approved 10/17/2014)*