

Biomedical Engineering PhD Student Guide

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Introduction and Purpose

Welcome to the Biomedical Engineering PhD program at Northwestern University. This guide is designed to help you navigate your doctoral studies, from your first year through degree completion. It outlines the academic milestones, degree requirements, and administrative processes that shape your progress in the program, and it serves as your primary reference for questions about coursework, qualifying exams, committee meetings, and other key steps along the way.

We encourage you to consult this guide regularly and to reach out to the Director of Graduate Studies or the student services team with any questions specific to your situation. Our goal is to support your development as a researcher and to help you succeed throughout your time in the program.

Program Contacts

This section provides a general description of who has responsibility for curricular, admission, financial, and other matters in the program. The most up-to-date list of personnel can be found on the Biomedical Engineering website.

Director of Graduate Studies (DGS): Neha Kamat, PhD (DGS_BME@northwestern.edu; nkamat@northwestern.edu). The DGS oversees the graduate program, advising students on academic matters and assisting with advisor selection and changes. The DGS also monitors academic progress and participates in decisions concerning academic probation and exclusion.

Department Chair: Mitra Hartmann, PhD (hartmann@northwestern.edu). The Department Chair is responsible for providing academic leadership, managing faculty affairs, overseeing curriculum and instruction, supporting student success along with the DGS, handling budgeting and resource allocation, coordinating departmental operations, and representing the department externally.

Graduate Program Assistant / Coordinator: Mike Okun-Perlin, Senior Student Program Coordinator (mike.op@northwestern.edu) & Skylar Droege, Student Program Assistant (skylar.droege@northwestern.edu). These staff members aid with administrative aspects of the program, including procedures, paperwork for milestones, registration issues, and other day-to-day operations.

Financial Assistant / Coordinator: Cole Lopardo (BME-Payroll@northwestern.edu). This staff member handles financial aspects such as stipends and tuition payments.

Learning Outcomes

The purpose of Northwestern University's doctoral degree program in Biomedical Engineering (BME) is to produce graduates who are qualified to fill research positions at the highest levels in private industry and in government laboratories, to teach in this field at universities, and to perform original research on the staffs of universities, hospitals, and companies. Students entering the program with a degree outside BME (e.g., traditional areas of biology, civil engineering, etc.) are expected to use their elective course work to gain expertise in the areas of BME that are new to them.

Students in the BME doctoral program study approximately equal portions of engineering, life sciences, and mathematics. Biomedical Engineering is a diverse field, and thus breadth is required. At the same time, students are expected to develop depth and understanding in one particular area of engineering and one of the life sciences. The areas of mathematical and computational development are also somewhat flexible, with some breadth expected, but should be appropriate for the student's area of study. The relative effort devoted to engineering, life sciences, and mathematics will depend on the student's previous background.

Students in the PhD program enter into one of several “tracks” representing the broad research areas in our department. The purpose of these tracks is to guide students in their course selection, providing depth in areas relevant to their selected research area. Track listings and specific course requirements for each track can be found on the BME PhD Communications Canvas site.

PhD students are admitted to The Graduate School (TGS), not the Engineering School. Thus, students must meet degree requirements as stipulated on [The Graduate School](#) website. All courses taken for graduate credit must be listed as graduate-level on CAESAR (e.g., BME 395 does not qualify for graduate credit).

Learning objective(s) Students should be able to...	Milestone or Requirement	Assessment Strategies and Criteria. How do we know this objective has been achieved? What criteria determine success?
Demonstrate a basic knowledge of responsible conduct in research	Y1: Complete responsible conduct in research training	Student must complete responsible conduct in research training
Demonstrate basic knowledge within the field of BME and within a chosen BME specialization	Y2: Complete qualifying coursework (Nine courses before qualifying exams)	Student must meet TGS minimum grade requirement each quarter, as well as minimum grade requirement for department track courses
Design a research project.	Y2: qualifying research proposal and oral exam	Student submits a research proposal and answers related questions asked by a faculty committee.
Communicate research progress in presentation form	Y2 and onwards: Annual committee meetings	Student shares plan annually with advisor and thesis committee; Student seeks appropriate resources in response to advisor and committee feedback.
Begin to communicate research progress in writing to the scientific community	Y3: complete MS degree	Student must submit a 1 st author manuscript to a peer reviewed journal, OR submit an MS thesis, OR have the MS degree waived.
Develop classroom activities for a specific discussion section.	Y3: Teaching Experience	Teaching assistant (TA) collaborates with professor and fellow TAs.
Independently conceptualize and complete a significant, cohesive, doctoral-level research project in the field of BME	Y4: Prospectus	Student must pass written and oral components of the prospectus
Communicate research progress in writing to the relevant scientific community	Prior to graduation	Student must have a 1 st author manuscript accepted to a peer-reviewed journal. Detailed requirements are provided in this handbook under the heading “publication requirement”
Defend and communicate an original, independent research project	Prior to graduation	Student will hold a successful thesis defense in front of their thesis committee.

Program-Specific Academic Requirements & Policies

Coursework Requirements

The Graduate School requires PhD students to successfully complete at least nine quality letter-graded course units (ABC, not P/NP or S/U) authorized for graduate credit. Students must maintain at least a 3.0 cumulative GPA. You can view the full policy on their [website](#).

Detailed course requirements may change slightly each academic year. To meet coursework milestones, students should carefully follow the PLoS approved coursework lists posted on the Canvas website for their year of admission. Students are expected to work with their primary BME advisor to ensure the PLoS is sufficient for meeting all requirements. Students are required to complete an initial PLoS by the end of the winter quarter of the first year. This plan must be approved by the primary research advisor or rotation advisor and the DGS. Note that this is just an initial plan and is likely to change depending on course offerings and the students' developing research interests. Appropriate changes can be made with approval of the primary advisor.

This section describes coursework required by students entering with a BS degree, with a MS degree, or are in the PhD/DPT or MSTP programs. Students must meet the following coursework requirements:

- All first-year students are required to complete BMD_ENG 512 (Seminar) in the fall, winter, and spring quarters of their first year. Upon petition to the DGS, a student may delay completion of BMD_ENG 512 until a subsequent time if the student is enrolled in a class that conflicts. *Note: this class is worth zero credits and does not count toward the minimum credit requirement.*
- The number of course requirements vary depending on the student's degree path but generally include quantitative courses, life science courses, track courses (specialized courses in student's area of research), and elective courses. The approved courses for each areas can be found on Canvas. Elective courses are chosen by the student and their advisor that will inform their research.
- All courses must be in Engineering, Science, or Mathematics on topics related to the general field of biomedical engineering. They may not be writing, communications, entrepreneurship, or business-related classes.

Degree Path Specific Requirements:

- Students entering with a BS degree in biomedical engineering or related field must complete a minimum of twelve 300-level or higher graduate-level, letter-graded credits at Northwestern University; none can be a 499 (research credit)
- Students entering with a MS degree in biomedical engineering or a related field or in the PhD/DPT program must complete a minimum of nine 300-level or higher graduate-level, letter-

graded credits at Northwestern University; one can be a 499 (research credit)

- Students entering from the MSTP program must complete a minimum of six 300-level or higher graduate-level, letter-graded credits at Northwestern University; none can be a 499 (research credit)

Minimum Grade & GPA Requirements

For all graded courses, students must obtain at least a C for the course to count towards the curriculum requirements. A 3.0 GPA is required to maintain satisfactory academic standing.

499 courses do not count toward the GPA, except with approval by the Chair of the Graduate Program Committee.

Students must earn a B+ or higher in Track Courses.

Course Waiver Policy

The program may designate certain required courses as eligible to be satisfied by a placement examination. Eligible courses are identified on the PLoS for each entering cohort. Placement examinations are offered at the discretion of the program and are not guaranteed in any given year.

Placement examinations are optional. A student who does not sit for one, or who does not pass one, remains in good standing and simply takes the course. Performance on a placement examination is not recorded on the transcript and is not used in any assessment of satisfactory academic progress.

A student who passes a placement examination is not required to take the corresponding course. The examination confers no course credit. The student must still meet the minimum credit requirement described in this section and will substitute another qualifying course in consultation with their advisor.

The course instructor recommends the placement decision. The Director of Graduate Studies records the outcome on the student's PLoS, and the substituted course is approved through the ordinary PLoS process.

Students who require testing accommodations should contact AccessibleNU. The program will arrange approved accommodations for any student who requests them.

Academic Progress & Probation

Academic progress is documented through Northwestern's Graduate Student Progress tracker (GSP). Detailed instructions for documenting progress and uploading forms to GSP can be found on the BME PhD Communications Canvas site. Throughout time in the PhD program, students are responsible for

regularly checking GSP and Canvas for the requirements for their year and for ensuring that they meet the milestones and deadlines described there.

During their time in the PhD program, students must maintain satisfactory academic standing both in TGS and within the BME program. Failure to maintain satisfactory academic standing defined by TGS or the BME PhD program, or failure to document academic progress on GSP (including the annual academic progress report), will result in the student being placed on probation.

Criteria for maintaining satisfactory academic standing within The Graduate School are listed on [their website](#).

Criteria for maintaining satisfactory academic standing within BME department includes completing milestones outlines under the “Program Specific Milestone Policies” on pages 10-16 and making satisfactory research progress, as evaluated by PhD research advisor and committee.

Evaluation Form & Remediation Plan

If an advisor has concerns that a student is not making satisfactory research progress, the advisor should first meet directly with the student to discuss those concerns. As part of this meeting, the advisor and student should complete the relevant progress evaluation form found on Canvas or provided by DGS. This form should be completed together and document the specific nature of the concerns in writing and notify DGS.

If concerns remain unresolved following that meeting, or if the situation warrants additional oversight, a meeting with the BME DGS and/or an appropriate delegate should then be arranged. This three-party meeting, involving the advisor, the student, and the DGS, will review the documented concerns and result in a written remediation plan that all parties agree to.

A student may not be placed on probation for unsatisfactory research progress without first completing these steps: an advisor-student meeting with accompanying written documentation, and a subsequent DGS meeting resulting in a mutually agreed-upon remediation plan. If the student does not successfully complete the steps in the remediation plan by the end timeframe in the remediation plan, they will be placed on department probation.

Department Probation

Students placed on department probation for any reason will typically have one quarter to address the issue that is causing them to be on probation. Under some circumstances or when petitioned, DGS and/or the graduate committee may allow a more extended probation period. When a decision to place a student on probation is made by the program, the student, The Graduate School, and the McCormick Dean’s Office must be notified in writing.

A student who fails to resume satisfactory academic standing by the end of the probationary period will be excluded from the PhD program, subject to review by the Graduate Committee. The decision to exclude is made by the program faculty or a subset of faculty which includes the Director of Graduate Studies. No individual faculty member may exclude a student.

When a student is excluded (dismissed) by the program, the student has an opportunity to appeal the exclusion decision to The Graduate School.

Teaching Requirement

All PhD students are required to complete one quarter of duties as a teaching assistant (TA) within the first three years of their tenure at Northwestern University in a BME class. Extensions beyond this time require prior approval of the Graduate Committee. Serving as a TA in a department other than BME will not fulfill the TA requirement unless prior approval by the DGS has been granted.

See Pages 14-15 of the McCormick Engineering PhD Handbook for more information.

Other Coursework and Activities

Professional Skills Development

The following professional skills classes (also zero credits) are recommended for all students, but not required:

- Public speaking: TGS offers public speaking workshops throughout the year. Students are strongly encouraged to participate prior to taking the oral Qualifying Exam.
- Grant writing: TGS offers grant writing workshops throughout the year. Students are strongly encouraged to participate prior to taking the oral Qualifying Exam. Workshops relevant to NIH funding are most relevant to this particular exam.

Typical BME PhD Timeline

- Year 1:
 - Selection of PhD Advisor – due February 28
 - Plan of Study Checkpoint 01 – due March 31
 - Selection of Dissertation Committee – due August 31
- Year 2:
 - QE1: First Committee Meeting – due March 31
 - QE2: Quals PLoS (Plan of Study) Checkpoint 02 – April 15

- QE3A: Submission of Project Proposal – due approximately May 31 (date may vary depending on Qualifying Oral Exam date(s))
- QE3B: Qualifying Exam Form – due June 30
 - PhD candidacy is achieved when passing the qualifying exam
- Year 3:
 - Teaching Assistantship – due August 31
 - Completion of MS Degree – due August 31 (*students entering with a MS Degree or are in either the DPT or MSTP programs are automatically waived from this milestone*)
 - PLoS Checkpoint 03 – Completion of Coursework – due August 31
- Year 4:
 - Proposal/Prospectus – due August 31
- Year 5 (and beyond):
 - Oral Defense -due by the end of student's 7th year
 - Publication Requirement/Degree Completion – due by the end of student's 7th year

In addition to the milestones above, every student is required to complete the following milestone each year:

- Hold at least one committee meeting each academic year after selecting your dissertation committee starting in Year 2. The Prospectus meeting may count as the yearly meeting.
- Complete an Academic Progress Report in GSP by the end of August each active year in the program.

Program Specific Milestone Policies

Selecting an Advisor

By the end of February, all first-year students are required to choose a research advisor who agrees to support them for the duration of their degree. Advisors must be tenure-track faculty. Students who choose to work with a research advisor who is not core faculty in BME must also select a BME co-advisor by this time. Advisors and co-advisors must be documented in GSP.

For those who choose an advisor who is not core BME faculty, the role of the co-advisor is to serve as Chair on the thesis committee and to provide access as faculty member who is well-versed in the requirements of the BME department. The co-advisor's role in your PhD research is no different than any other thesis committee member.

Occasionally, students who choose to work with a research advisor who is a core BME faculty member might also select a co-advisor if they anticipate that their thesis project will be joint between two laboratories. The decision to add a co-advisor should be carefully discussed with the research advisor.

In this case, the co-advisor can be added at any time during the student's PhD career. This co-advisor will act as a proper co-advisor who has a significant impact on the student's research. They also fill the role of a committee member. The faculty member listed as the primary advisor is typically responsible for the student's funding.

Students who do not meet this milestone will be placed on probation for failure to make satisfactory academic progress and removed from probation when an advisor/co-advisor is chosen and documented in GSP. First-year students are given two quarters of probation to secure an advisor and co-advisor (if required). If an advisor continues not to be chosen by the end of the probation period, the student may be excluded from the PhD program. If the student has maintained an adequate GPA and is in good standing in the program, they may petition the Graduate Committee to pursue a coursework-based master's degree.

If a student finds they are unable to continue working with their advisor after matching, they are first encouraged to discuss possible changes in research direction with their advisor. They are then advised to talk with the DGS as soon as possible to identify possible remedies, including a change of advisor or exiting the program. If the DGS is your advisor, you may reach out to the Department Chair. Students without an advisor will be placed on probation. If students are on probation by the add/drop deadline of a given quarter, their probation will end at the end of that term. If they are placed on probation after the add/drop deadline, they will have until the end of the following term.

Annual Advisor Reviews

Please review Page 17 in the McCormick PhD Handbook for Annual Progress Review requirements. Additionally, advisors are asked to enter their own comments on their student's Academic Progress Statement and an Evaluation Score in GSP.

Committee

Students are required to form a thesis committee by the end of the summer quarter of their first year. The committee must be documented in GSP. Students who do not meet this milestone will be placed on probation for failure to meet satisfactory academic progress for one quarter until the milestone is completed.

The Chair of the committee:

- Must be a core member of the BME department.
- Is typically, but not always, your advisor.
- If your advisor is not a core faculty member of the BME department, they should serve as the co-chair of your committee. Your co-advisor, who is a core faculty member, serves as the Chair.
- Must be a member of the Graduate School Faculty. GSP indicates who is a member of the Graduate School Faculty.

A thesis committee must consist of at least four faculty members. The Chair counts as one of these faculty members. Of the four:

- At least three members must be full-time members of Northwestern University faculty.
- At least two members must be members of the Graduate School Faculty.
- At least two members must be core or courtesy members of the BME department.
- One member should be your advisor (who may or may not also be the Chair).

The thesis committee **must** meet at least once per academic year, beginning in the second year, to review student progress. The first committee meeting should occur soon after the initial research project (see Research Component of the PhD Qualifying Exam) is completed. The occurrence of this initial meeting should be no later than March 31st of the second year. At least two committee meetings must be held before the final doctoral defense can be scheduled. The first committee meeting must be documented on GSP following the instructions on the BME PhD Communications Canvas site. Students who do not meet this milestone will be placed on probation for failure to meet satisfactory academic progress until the milestone is completed or excluded from the program.

Qualifying Exam / Candidacy

PhD Qualifying Exams must be completed by the end of the second year of study. Before taking the oral exam, students must complete at least nine graded courses, including the required quantitative courses, life sciences courses, and track courses, as well as BME 512 (seminar). MSTP students must take all six required courses before Qualifying Exams, as well as BME 512 (seminar). Students who do not take the oral exam as scheduled will be placed on probation for failure to meet satisfactory academic progress unless a time-extension is requested and granted by the Graduate Committee.

There are three components to the PhD Qualifying Exam: a course-based component, a research component, and an oral exam component. The requirements for each component are directly related to the student's area of research.

- 1. The course-based component of the Qualifying exam** ensures that the candidate has understood the basics of the chosen biomedical research area. General course requirements as well as track requirements and minimum grade requirements are found on the PLoS for the student's year. PLoSs are found on the BME PhD Communications Canvas site. Students are responsible for discussing their qualifying coursework with their advisor. The student must then submit the PLoS in GSP showing they have completed at least nine graded courses (6 for MSTP) prior to taking the oral exam. This milestone is captured in QE2: Quals PLoS Checkpoint 02.
- 2. The research component of the Qualifying Exam** is to be completed under the supervision of the student's primary research advisor. The scope of the project should be 6 – 12 months of full-time research effort. Project details and specific goals are to be agreed upon by the student and the advisor prior to the start of work. The project should be started in the summer of the first

year and results presented at the student's first committee meeting, no later than March 31st of the second year. Students are responsible for ensuring that their advisor signs and returns the "First Committee Meeting Form" to DGS and copies the student and rest of the committee. The student must then upload the signed form to the Documents tab in GSP. This milestone is captured in QE1: First Committee Meeting.

For students entering with a BS, this initial research project forms the basis of the MS thesis writing requirement. The committee will assess the student's expected timeline to submit a document to meet the MS writing requirements within the next 15 months as described in the next section of the handbook. For those entering with an MS, or for students in a program that does not require an MS to be completed (e.g., MSTP, PhD/DPT), this initial research project can be incorporated into the PhD dissertation. The committee will assess the student's expected timeline to submit a first-author manuscript to a peer-reviewed journal.

- 3. The oral component of the Qualifying Exam** will take as its starting point, a written research proposal that the student submits to DGS, which will be shared with the quals committee of BME faculty, different from the student's thesis committee. The student's qualifying exam committee will be made up of three faculty familiar with their research area, chosen for the student by the BME faculty. The student will defend the proposal during a one-hour oral exam before the committee. This exam emphasizes general questions related to the area of research. The goal of this exam is to evaluate the student's preparedness for independent graduate research. Details for the structure of the written proposal for the qualifying exam are provided on the BME PhD Canvas site. The written proposal is captured by QE3A: Submission of Project Proposal.

The student will receive results of the oral exam within one week of exam completion. If the student passes the exam, the student is responsible for documenting completion of this component of the qualifying exams in GSP. This is captured by QE3B: Qualifying Exam Form.

The oral component of the Qualifying Exam must be taken in June of the second academic year. After the oral exam, all three components of the Qualifying Exam will be considered together by the BME faculty. Based on the student's performance on the three components, students' qualification to continue towards completion of their PhD thesis will be determined.

Failing Qualifying Exam Components

Students who do not pass the research component of the qualifying exam will be placed on probation. This is decided during the First Committee Meeting if it is determined the student is not meeting satisfactorily research progress. The advisor must use the Evaluation Rubric found on Canvas to develop an academic/research plan for the following quarter. If the student does not successfully complete the academic/research plan within the given timeline, they will be excluded from the program. Students who do not pass their First Committee Meeting are still expected to take the oral

exam.

Students who do not pass the oral component of qualifying exam may petition the Graduate Committee for permission to retake the oral exam. Permission will be granted only in rare circumstances. If granted, the exam must be taken in June of the third year of study.

If a student is not approved to retake the oral exam or does not pass the oral exam the second time but is otherwise in good standing in the program, they will be given the option to leave the program with an MS degree upon completion of all additional requirements for the MS program. Students may only complete the MS with Thesis if their current advisor agrees to serve as the MS advisor; otherwise, students must complete the MS Course-Only track.

Master's Degree

Students entering with a BS degree and not enrolled in the MSTP or PhD/DPT programs are required to complete an MS degree no later than the end of their third year of study. Completion of the MS degree is required for admission to PhD candidacy. Students not completing the MS by the end of the third year will be placed on department probation and given one quarter to complete this milestone.

In addition to completing nine graded graduate-level courses, the MS degree has the following requirements:

- Completion of PhD Qualifying Exams.
- Completion of the MS writing requirement. This requirement can be completed in one of two ways:
 - **Submit** a manuscript of MS research to a peer-reviewed journal approved by the thesis committee. The student must be the first or co-first author on this publication. Conference proceedings cannot be used to meet this requirement.
 - Writing an advisor-approved MS thesis.

Directions how to file for the MS Degree can be found on the BME PhD Canvas page.

Prospectus (Dissertation Proposal)

Students must pass their prospectus no later than the end of Y4 in the PhD program. This can count as one of the annual thesis committee meetings. The goal of the prospectus is for the student to demonstrate that they can independently conceptualize and complete a significant, cohesive, doctoral-level research project in the field of biomedical engineering. Passing the prospectus consists of two parts: written and oral.

- **Written:** Students should provide their thesis committee with a written document that clearly describes the body of work they plan to complete for their PhD dissertation. The exact format of the written document is determined by the student/advisor pair; however, it must meet

approval of all thesis committee members and must meet the prospectus goal stated above.

- **Oral:** Students must give a "prospectus presentation." The presentation should review the written document and clearly describe the body of work that the student proposes to complete for their PhD dissertation.

Students are responsible for ensuring that their advisor completes the prospectus form found on the BME PhD Canvas site and emailing it to DGS, copying the student and committee. The student should upload the completed document in GSP, then submit the Prospectus Form on GSP.

If a student does not pass by the end of Y4 or fails their prospectus, they will be placed on probation for unsatisfactory academic progress by TGS. They will be removed from probation once the prospectus is passed within the given timeframe or asked to leave the program with an MS degree, pending completion of all MS requirements. If a student does not pass the prospectus in year 4, even after working with their advisor and committee, they should schedule a meeting with DGS and their advisor.

Dissertation/Thesis/Defense

During their time as a PhD student at Northwestern, students are required to be the first or co-first author on a peer-reviewed journal article with their advisor as senior author that has been ***accepted for publication prior to defending their PhD research***. For students entering with a BS degree, this publication can be the same used to meet the MS degree requirements. The article cannot be a review article. The article must describe research in science or engineering. The article cannot concern engineering education or pedagogy. Conference proceedings cannot be used to meet this requirement.

Upon written approval from the thesis committee and following a thesis committee meeting, a final thesis defense can be scheduled. Notification of this defense must be circulated to all faculty members of the department a minimum of three weeks before the defense and cannot be circulated prior to written approval by the thesis committee. All thesis committee members must receive a copy of the thesis after they have provided written approval of the defense date a minimum of two weeks prior to the defense. The thesis defense is open to all members of the Northwestern University community and their guests.

An acceptable dissertation resulting from original research must conform to set forth by TGS. Each student must submit a PDF of the completed thesis to the department. An electronic copy also must be submitted to TGS via ProQuest, as described on their [website](#).

The department strongly discourages placing a copy of your CV at the end of your dissertation. A CV is a "living document." A thesis is a completed, finalized body of work.

Program Resources/Support

Conflict resolution

Students should follow the steps outlined on this TGS website:

<https://www.tgs.northwestern.edu/services-support/dealing-with-student-faculty-conflicts/index.html>