

Graduate Program Manual

2024-2025

Department of Astronomy
University of Arizona

Graduate Program in Astronomy &
Astrophysics

Mission of our Graduate Program

The University of Arizona Department of Astronomy and Steward Observatory trains graduate students to become independent scientists with the knowledge and skills to conduct and communicate world-class astronomical research. Our graduates go on to a diverse array of careers both in and outside of academia. A Ph.D. in Astronomy and Astrophysics from the University of Arizona signifies a student's excellence in research, which is demonstrated through significant, original, scholarly contribution to astrophysical knowledge. We admit graduate students who have met high standards of achievement and shown potential for conducting original research, with the expectation that they will succeed in attaining a doctoral degree in astronomy. The academic program is structured in support of this goal, emphasizing research throughout the graduate career; providing mentoring from individual advisors and our interactive community of students, postdocs, scientists, and faculty. Students will gain firsthand experience with the tools and facilities that define the state of the art in our field. We are committed to training diverse cohorts of scientists and work to create an inclusive environment with a welcoming work climate.

Description of the Ph.D. Program

All members of the Department are responsible for providing a stimulating intellectual environment that supports the growth of the graduate students. The core curriculum provides the broad knowledge base that is an essential foundation for astrophysical research. Through electives and minor offerings, students obtain focused instruction in areas of interest to them. Training in spoken and written scientific communication is an emphasis of our program. Communication skills are sharpened through class work, research activities, seminar series, and teaching opportunities. Students are supported in their development through the relationship with their advisor, frequent meetings with their mentoring committee, peer-to-peer learning, and contact with the wider department through seminars, talks, and interactions in and out of the workplace. These structures provide training in the activities of a professional scientist, the ethical conduct of research, an introduction into the scientific community, and guidance on future career paths.

The pursuit of a graduate degree is an exercise in high scholarship, and students have significant responsibility for their own intellectual development and educational progress. Students have access to the facilities and research tools of the Observatory, including instrumentation laboratories, supercomputers, and direct access to telescopes for millimeter, IR, and optical wavelengths. With these tools and the support of the Department, students can follow their interests, develop new skills, and accumulate knowledge. We expect our students to approach research in the manner of a scholar, through study, writing, teaching, and listening. They are integral to the health and intellectual life of the Department and participate broadly in its activities, including seminars and discussions, education, and decision-making.

Graduates of this Department will have been trained comprehensively in the conduct of scientific research and prepared to be leaders in the community of professional astronomers. The experience and skills gained in our program will prepare students to be successful as astronomers, and in many other career paths that they may choose.

Graduate Program Guide and Requirements

Beginning the Graduate Program

Upon arrival, new students will receive a department orientation from the Graduate Program Coordinator, Director of Graduate Studies, Associate Department Head, and Department Head. Office assignments will be made in advance and office computers will be provided by the computer support group. Building access requires a student ID (CatCard) and other keys will be provided by Michelle Cournoyer in the Academic Office, room N204. Office supplies such as pens, pencils, and pads of paper, are available from the Academic Office. For general advice be sure to ask the other graduate students.

Students normally register for classes by using the UAccess Student on-line computer registration system, though Michelle Cournoyer generally handles registration for incoming students and handles all registration for ASTR 900 (research) and 920 (dissertation). All Graduate Teaching and Research Assistants must register for at least six units of graduate credit per semester. These can include Independent Research or Dissertation, when appropriate. Tuition and health insurance are covered, but students will have to pay miscellaneous fees (about \$800). All students are encouraged to apply for fellowships and scholarships.

Grading in graduate courses is different than in undergraduate courses. Graduate students must maintain a GPA of 3.0 or higher to avoid academic probation, so a grade of C or below is below the expected standard. The primary goal of graduate coursework is to master the broad range of astrophysical knowledge covered by our courses, so course grades are a secondary concern, but there is some correlation between grades and understanding. Coursework is an important part of the first years of your graduate career and should be given significant attention. For a first-year student taking eight or so credit hours of courses, the student might well be spending 50% of his/her work time on course work (both in class and out). That would leave 40% for research and 10% on miscellany such as attending colloquia, journal club, etc. Of course, this is just a rough guide.

Research advisors can be chosen from the ranks of research or teaching faculty at Steward Observatory. Members of the faculty of the Lunar and Planetary Laboratory, Planetary Sciences, Physics, Optical Science, and staff members at NOIRLab may also serve as student research advisors. New students who are not on a Fellowship must tell Michelle Cournoyer by mid-September who their advisor will be. If for some reason a student does not have an advisor at that point, he or she will be assigned one.

Sometimes a student will be unable to obtain a research assistantship with their first choice of advisor because that person does not have the time or funding resources. (Fellowship students can work with anyone as long as the advisor has the time.) As students are encouraged to pursue several different research projects during their graduate careers, a faculty member who is initially unavailable may later become a collaborator or supervisor. In addition, there are ample opportunities for research projects as independent study projects (without salary) or with faculty, staff or postdocs who are not their primary research supervisors. We also ask that all students identify a "successor advisor," with whom they could work in the event that their primary advisor can longer serve (e.g. due to relocation, medical leave, etc).

Course Requirements

Students are required to successfully complete the 7 "core" courses in astronomy: Physics of Astrophysics (Astronomy 589), Statistical and Computational Methods (513), Cosmology (541), Stars & Planets (545), ISM & Star Formation (515), Galaxies (540), and Instrumentation (518). An introductory computing course is also recommended in the first year. Core courses are to be completed in the first three semesters. In addition, students are required to take another eight graded credits of non-core courses. The student can fulfill the non-core requirement by choosing from a wide range of 3 credit elective and 1-2 credit seminars that will be offered in the fall and spring semesters. Students can also satisfy the non-core requirement by taking courses offered by other departments, including Physics, Lunar and Planetary, Biology, Chemistry, Electrical Engineering, and Optical Sciences. Courses below the 500 level are not acceptable for graduate credit.

By the end of the third semester, the student should have completed the core Ph.D. qualification requirements, which consists of five graduate astronomy core courses, with a grade of C or better in each course. The student's overall GPA must remain 3.0 or above to hold either a research or teaching assistantship. A GPA of 3.0 is also a graduation requirement for either a Masters or Ph.D. in Astronomy.

Core courses will always be taken for letter grades by Astronomy students, but may be taken for Pass/Fail credit, with instructor approval, by students from other departments. Electives and seminars may be taken for Pass/Fail credit, subject to the limitation of no more than two Pass/Fail courses per semester and the overall constraint of having taken a sufficient number of credits in letter-graded courses.

By the end of the sixth semester, students typically will have taken 18 units of graded core courses, 8-9 units of graded elective/seminars, and 19-20 units of Independent Research (Astronomy 900) and/or other elective/seminars for a total of 45 units. Electives may also be taken in later semesters, if relevant courses are offered later in a student's career. By the end of their graduate career, students should have taken an additional 18 units of dissertation credits (Astronomy 920) for a total of 63 units. Students on fellowships who have completed their coursework may be eligible to enroll for fewer credits and maintain fulltime student status. They should consult with the business office and Director of Graduate Studies.

Typical Graduate Plan

Fall Semester	Spring Semester
First Year	
ASTR 589 (3 units): Physics of Astrophysics	ASTR 541 (3): Cosmology
ASTR 501 (1): Introduction to Computing	ASTR 545 (3): Stars and Planets
ASTR 513 (3): Statistical and Computational Methods	ASTR 900 (at least 4 units): Research
ASTR 900 (at least 3 units): Research	
Second Year	
ASTR 540 (2): Structure & Dynamics of Galaxies	Elective (3) and/or Seminar (2) as needed
ASTR 515 (2): Interstellar Medium & Star Formation	ASTR 900 (at least 4 units) Research
ASTR 518 (2): Instrumentation	
ASTR 900 (at least 4 units): Research	
Third Year	
Elective (3) and/or Seminar (2) as needed	Elective (3) and/or Seminar (2) as needed
ASTR 920: Dissertation	ASTR 920: Dissertation
Fourth Year and Beyond	
ASTR 920: Dissertation	ASTR 920: Dissertation

Example Electives and Seminars

ASTR 502. Data Mining and Machine Learning in Astronomy (2 units)

ASTR 503. Physics of the Solar System (3)

ASTR 516. Modern Astronomical Optics (3)

ASTR 520. Seminar on Advanced Extragalactic Astronomy (2)

ASTR 553. Solar System Dynamics (3)

ASTR 560. Seminar with a Focus on Stellar Evolution from an Observational Perspective (2)

ASTR 569. Introduction to General Relativity (3)

ASTR 578. Writing in Astronomy (3)

ASTR 582. Seminar on High Energy Astrophysics (2)

ASTR 585. Radio Astronomy (3)

ASTR 588. Astrochemistry (3)

ASTR 589. Topics in Theoretical Astrophysics (3)

ASTR 596B. Methods in Computational Astrophysics (3)

PTYS 558. Plasma Physics with Astrophysical and Solar System Applications (3)

as well as other related courses in Planetary Sciences, Optics, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, Engineering, and Computer Sciences.

Required Teaching

All students have an obligation to teach for a total of two semesters at some point in their graduate careers. The department recommends that students get involved in research as early as possible. As a result, most students choose to postpone their teaching until their third or fourth year.

All graduate students who have teaching assistantships must complete the GTA Training Session administered by the College of Science, which concludes with an online quiz, before teaching for the first time. Failure to complete the training program and quiz will result in the loss of your teaching assistantship. These sessions usually occur during the week before the first day of classes in August and January.

In rare cases, a student may choose not to take on a formal, paid teaching assistantship due to constraints from, for example, an external fellowship. In such cases the department will work with the student on a case-by-case basis to identify an assignment that will provide teaching experience consistent with the two semester requirement.

Graduate Minors

The Astronomy Minor

Formally, all PhD students in our program select both a major and a minor subject. For most, both are astronomy. However, it is possible for the minor to be in one of the other science or engineering disciplines. The course requirement is set by the minor department, but usually at least three of the required elective courses are graduate courses in the minor department. At least one representative from the minor department should participate on the preliminary and final oral (dissertation defense) exams.

The astronomy department allows graduate students whose PhD major is in another department to minor in astronomy. We require that they pass nine units of graduate-level astronomy coursework, including five or more units from the core graduate curriculum, and that one astronomy faculty member participate in the preliminary and final oral exams.

See the [Graduate Catalogue](#) and the "Handbook for Completing the Steps to Your Degree" for more information. These publications also contain requirements involving the dissertation, as does the [Manual for Theses and Dissertations](#).

The Astrobiology Minor

The Department of Astronomy and the Department of Planetary Sciences jointly offer a graduate minor in Astrobiology. This minor is recommended for astronomy or other students with strong interests in astrobiology, exoplanets, planet formation, or planetary sciences. The minor allows students to develop a strong core of understanding in astrobiology, enhancing their specific research in astronomy, biosciences, earth sciences, etc. The minor requires nine credits from among the following courses: Astrochemistry 588A (3 credits), Planetary Astrobiology (3 credits), Key Concepts in Biology (MCB315, 3 credits), and Geoastronomy (3 credits).

Funding

Graduate students are funded via a combination of teaching assistantships (TA), research assistantship (GA), and internal or external fellowships. The department guarantees that all full-time enrolled students in good standing will be funded for a minimum of five years.

During the academic year, the graduate college stipulates that students may be appointed as a GA or TA with a maximum of 0.5 FTE. Students receiving external fellowships with compensation that meets or exceeds the current graduate student compensation for 0.5 FTE may not be appointed to and / or receive compensation from an additional full or partial GA or TA. During the summer months, students receiving external fellowships with compensation that meets or exceeds the current graduate student compensation for 1.0 FTE may not be appointed to and / or receive compensation from an additional full or partial GA or TA.

Preliminary Exams

The required preliminary exam consists of two parts: 1) a written, comprehensive examination in the middle of the fourth semester after the core courses have been completed, and 2) an oral examination on the student's research to be taken by the beginning of the fifth semester on the subject of the student's first research project. A longer description of these exams is available on the department website, but we summarize the procedures here.

The **written comprehensive exam** is authored, administered, and evaluated by a committee of several faculty members and is given simultaneously to all students in the second-year class. This exam covers a broad range of astronomical topics, is taken over two days, and is intended to require 2 hours per day. Questions are designed to help make connections between different subfields. The exam is given in closed book format, with a note sheet allowed, and students are provided example questions from previous years.

On each question, students will receive one of three grades, "pass", "major revision," or "minor revision". A pass indicates that the question is all answered correctly. A grade of minor revisions requires students to turn in revised solutions addressing a small error. Major revisions indicate a substantial misunderstanding and require a remediation plan in consultation with the committee and student advisor. Students are generally given 3 months to turn in all completed revisions to receive a pass. Students who do not complete revisions will not be able to advance in the program, but may still obtain a Master's degree by completing a short, written thesis, usually a version of their research paper, and passing the research oral exam described below.

Students also complete an **oral comprehensive exam** at the beginning of the fifth semester. Prior to scheduling their exam, students must schedule at least one meeting with their oral exam committee. Students must submit a first author paper (not necessarily submitted/ published) that describes their research project. While many students submit articles that have been submitted for peer-review, certain projects may be ill-suited to this format and committees have the discretion to accept alternate written documents. In addition to the written document, students present a 30-minute talk and answer questions from their committee on their research and adjacent topics. Students are evaluated using a rubric in four categories: 1) quality of the paper, 2) quality of the presentation, 3) knowledge of the research project, and 4) knowledge of adjacent sub-fields. Students must be marked as adequate in 3 of 4 categories to pass. The exam will be no longer than three hours. If the student fails the research exam, a second try will generally be allowed up to six months later, and may be of a different format, at the discretion of the committee. Students who do not successfully pass on the second try will not proceed in the Ph.D. program, although a Master's degree may be awarded at the discretion of the committee.

The Graduate College requires that the examining committee consist of a minimum of four people, including at least three graduate faculty members (this applies to most department faculty, but may require extra paperwork in certain cases.) The chair of the research exam committee should be an astronomy faculty member that is not the student's advisor. The committee should also include one member outside of the student's research area. The advisor is

responsible for reporting the outcome of the exam to the student and the department, including providing the summary assessment of the student's performance.

Dissertation

Dissertation Plan and Timeline

Within 2 months of passing their oral examinations, students must submit a dissertation plan. This document should contain a basic description of the planned research and a projected graduation timeline. All members of a student's thesis committee must review and sign off on the plan. Students whose thesis relies on use of Steward Telescope facilities must also include the following, for use by the TAC: 1) Estimates for expected observing time requests over the next year (telescope, instrument, number of nights), and 2) Short (1 paragraph) contingency plan in the event that the observing time is not obtained (not awarded, scheduled, weather, etc). Dissertation plans should be updated annually following the Fall semester committee meeting. Students who have completed their oral exam must have a dissertation plan on file with the department to enroll in dissertation credits.

Final Dissertation Defense

A five-person committee, which may be different from the student's dissertation committee, is appointed when the student's dissertation is completed. (The Grad College requires only four, but the faculty agreed to have five members to ensure that at least four will be present at the exam in the event of an emergency.) All five should read the dissertation at least three weeks in advance -- or some other length of time agreed to by the committee and student -- and forward questions/comments to the student in advance of the exam.

The oral exam consists of a 30-minute talk by the student, to which the "public" are invited. In the private session following, questions are asked by each committee member on the dissertation work and associated topics in the subject area.

The possible outcomes are (1) pass with no reservations, (2) pass conditional upon changes made to the dissertation recommended by members of the committee, or (3) fail. In case (2) the committee may grant discretion to the principal advisor to enforce the changes to be made to the dissertation recommended by the committee. The members would sign the paperwork certifying completion of a satisfactory dissertation, but the advisor would withhold the paperwork until satisfactory changes are made in the opinion of the advisor. All requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy must be completed within 5 years of passing the prelim exam. Should a student not finish within that time period, he or she may be allowed to re-take the prelim with permission of the program, and then proceed to complete other requirements, e.g., the dissertation.

Committees and Advising

Mentoring, Second-Year, and Dissertation Committees

The mission of the mentoring (first-year), second-year, and dissertation committees is to guide and provide advice and perspective for graduate students as they pass through the program. The committees should meet at least once a semester and at each meeting hear from students about their progress with classes and research. Members can and should meet with students individually as needed.

During the first year, students are assigned a Mentoring Committee by the department that consists of dedicated professionals who not only advise about academics and research but who also assist and advise students with the transition to graduate school. During the second year, students will form their Second-Year Committee, which will

increasingly focus on the research that students are doing for their second-year project. After passing the prelims, students will form their Dissertation Committee, similar in scope to the Second-Year Committee but which may (or may not) include different members.

These committees are a long-term resource for students but also serve to help students maintain the expected timeline for completion of the Ph.D. It should be recognized that committee members also benefit from this interactive experience, not only in research but also in learning how to become better advisors, colleagues, and educators. The committee provides an additional layer of advocacy and protection alongside the principal advisor.

Members of the committees should provide advice, feedback, and guidance on any topic relevant to reaching this goal, including the following:

- 1) developing and adjusting a plan for successful research projects that result in important publications and build up competitive skills/expertise by the time of graduation;
- 2) maintaining productive and harmonious student-advisor and student-collaborator relations;
- 3) questions related to ethical aspects of the research and collaborations;
- 4) any non-work-related problems the student seeks the committee's advice on;
- 5) development of skills, knowledge, and connections that are important for career development.

Forming Your Committee:

Mentoring committees will be assigned to first-year students and will include the research advisor and two other faculty members. Second-Year and Dissertation committees shall consist of no fewer than four faculty members, including the student's principal research advisor, chosen by the student in consultation with the student's research advisor, and approved by the department Director of Graduate Studies (DGS).

Committee meeting format:

Meetings will consist mostly of time during which students can present details of their current work and seek feedback and/or advice from committee members. Every meeting will include some time where the student leaves the room, and some time where the student's advisor leaves the room.

Committee Meeting Frequency and Reporting Requirement:

Mentoring Committees for first year students should first meet by the end of the first semester. Second-Year Committees should first meet by the end of the third semester, and again in the fourth semester if the oral prelim is not to be held during that semester. After successful completion of the prelims, Dissertation Committees should convene twice a year. The department office will send out reminders regarding committee meetings, and students should inform the office that the committee meeting has taken place. Those who are having difficulties in scheduling committee meetings by the middle of the semester are strongly encouraged to seek help from the DGS and the department office. Students will only be allowed to register for independent study or dissertation research credit hours for the subsequent semester when either the committee has met, or permission is granted by the DGS for the postponement of the committee meeting. In the Fall, students and advisors must complete the Annual Survey sent out by the Academic Program Committee. At the Spring committee meeting, the advisor and student must fill out a progress report to meet the University's "Career Conversation" Requirement. This form will be kept on the department website and can be used as a guide for fall committee meetings as well, although it is not required in the fall.

Leaves of Absence, Medical Accommodations:

In the course of the degree program, some students will unfortunately encounter health or other unforeseen circumstances that make it difficult to fulfill the obligations of being a full time, funded, PhD student. The Department is committed to helping students navigate these challenges and successfully complete the program. The Department and Graduate College provide for medical and non-medical leaves of absence for up to a year. Students may then re-enter the program with no penalty. All program deadlines will be postponed for up to a year. Students who do not wish to take a complete leave of absence may be given the option to enroll as a part time student for up to 2 semesters, with 1 credit funded by the department. There is no guaranteed compensation for part time enrollment, as such students are ineligible for appointment as a GRA. Students whose health or other circumstances interfere with their full time participation in the program should speak with their advisors and the DGS as soon as possible. The department should be notified at latest at the end of the semester of any issues which inhibit students' fulfillment of their GRA or TA obligations.

Contact Information

Buell Jannuzi (buelljannuzi@arizona.edu)	Head, Department of Astronomy, Director, Steward Observatory
Xiaohui Fan (xfan@arizona.edu)	Associate Department Head
Dan Marrone (dmarrone@arizona.edu)	Director of Graduate Studies
Michelle Cournoyer (michelle@arizona.edu)	Graduate Coordinator
Tiffany Deyoe (tdeyoe1@arizona.edu)	Administrative Associate for Graduate Studies
Meredith Stone (meredithstone@arizona.edu)	Graduate Student Council
Joe Adamo (jadamo@arizona.edu)	Graduate Student Council
Vikram Manikantan (vik@arizona.edu)	Graduate Student Council