Graduate Program in
Cell and Developmental Biology

Requirements and Guidelines
Guide for Graduate Students  
(updated September 2019)

The graduate program in Cell and Developmental Biology provides state of the art research training in cellular based biology, including impacts on organismal development, homeostasis, and disease. It is hosted by the Department of Cell Biology, Neurobiology and Anatomy, but includes faculty mentors across multiple Departments and Centers of the Medical College of Wisconsin. Successful completion of this program leads to a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree. This is accomplished through a combination of coursework, seminars, journal clubs, and "hands-on" laboratory research in the laboratory of a faculty mentor. This guide is intended to provide students with a list of requirements and a general time-line for completion of requirements for the PhD degree. To maintain full-time status, graduate students are required to take a minimum of 6 credits in the summer, 9 credits in the fall and 9 credits in the spring semesters. Accrual of at least 60 graduate course credits is needed for the PhD degree. Students are required to meet with their thesis committee starting in the third year of training. The student will write a 1-2 page summary of the meeting, detailing what was presented and discussed, and any bench-marks or time-lines that were established. This should be approved by the Thesis Mentor and then distributed to the thesis committee. As part of the training process, it is also required as a minimum that the student thesis research culminate in publication of at least 2 articles in peer-reviewed journals for which the student is first author. At minimum, one should be accepted for publication, if not already in press, while the other can at the “submitted” stage.

First Academic Year:

Most students enter the Program in Cell and Developmental Biology after matriculation through either the Interdisciplinary Program in Biomedical Sciences (IDP) or the Neuroscience Graduate Recruitment Program. These are graduate recruitment programs that involve faculty from multiple departments at MCW, and each program has a set of core course requirements and laboratory research rotations for first year graduate students. Other students enter from the Medical Student Training Program (MSTP) after completing the first 2 years of medical school and laboratory research rotations.

For students in the Interdisciplinary Program in Biomedical Sciences, the 1st year requirements are:

**Fall Semester**  
Fundamentals of Biological Sciences I (3 credits)  
Fundamentals of Biological Sciences II (3 credits)  
Fundamentals of Biological Sciences III (3 credits)  
Techniques in Molecular and Cellular Biology (2 credits)  
Professional Development (1 credit)  

**Spring Semester**  
Electives and Reading and Research (8 credits total)  
Professional Development (1 credit)  
For students in the Neuroscience Graduate Recruitment Program, the 1st year requirements are:

**Fall Semester**  
Fundamentals of Biological Sciences I (3 credits)  
Fundamentals of Biological Sciences II (3 credits)  
Fundamentals of Biological Sciences III (3 credits)  
Techniques in Molecular and Cellular Biology (2 credits)  
Professional Development (1 credit)
Spring Semester
Fundamental of Neuroscience (3.5 credits) and Reading and Research (totaling 7 credits)
Neuroscience Journal Club (1 credit)
Professional Development (1 credit)

For MSTP students, the 1st year in graduate school begins after they complete the first 2 basic-science years of medical school, identify a thesis advisor and join the program in the summer semester. Some students join in the fall semester because they are completing a clinical course in the summer. Those starting in the summer proceed on the same schedule as the IDP and Neuroscience students for completing the PhD qualifying requirements. MSTP students entering in the fall are delayed 1 or 2 months in meeting the qualifying milestones.

By June of the 1st year, IDP and Neuroscience students are expected to have chosen a faculty advisor in whose laboratory they will conduct research that will form a basis of their PhD dissertation. Choice of an advisor in the Program in Cell and Developmental Biology places the student in this program. However, the qualifying examination for IDP students is administered by IDP. The qualifying examination for Neuroscience and MSTP students is administered by the Graduate Committee of the Cell and Developmental Biology program. All students are required to take a 3 credit course during Fall term when the qualifying examination is occurring.

Students electing Cell and Developmental Biology are required to take 9 hours of additional coursework beyond that completed during the first year. Typically, this consists of three 3-credit courses.

Summer Term:
Readings and Research (5 credits)
Ethics and Integrity in Science (1 credit)

Second Academic Year:

Fall Term:
Students from the IDP are required to take
One elective course* (3 credits)
*Note Neuroscience Program students typically chose either Cellular Molecular Neurobiology OR Advanced Systems Neuroscience OR Special Topics in Neuroscience
Readings and Research (to Complete the Qualifying Examination) (to add to 9 credits total)

Winter/Spring Term:
Students take an elective course (3 credits)
Research Ethics Discussion series (1 credit)
Students register for Readings and Research (5 credits)

Summer Term:
Readings and Research (6 credits)

Qualifying Requirements and Examination Committee:
During the second year, students must pass a qualifying examination that is required for continuation of work toward the PhD.

Interdisciplinary Program in Biomedical Sciences
Students entering the Cell and Developmental Biology Graduate Program through the Interdisciplinary Program in Biomedical Sciences complete this requirement as part of the
Interdisciplinary Program. An examination committee is formed by the IDP during the Fall semester, and the student prepares a Qualifying Research Proposal or "mock grant proposal" to test an original hypothesis that the student has generated. The mock proposal becomes the focus of an oral examination by the committee. The oral examination will cover broad topics selected from the 1st year curriculum.

The coordinator of IDP mock proposal examinations will announce two informational meetings to discuss the mock proposal, format of the oral examination and what should be covered in the oral examination. One meeting will be for students and their thesis advisors, and the other will be for faculty members serving on the oral examination committees.

• Typically the Written Abstract is due Monday of the 2nd or 3rd week of September: Check with the Chair of the IDP examination committee for specifics.

• Typically the Written Qualifying Proposal is due Monday of the last week of October: Check with the Chair of the IDP examination committee for specifics.

• Oral qualifying examination is scheduled during the first two weeks of December.

**Neuroscience Program**

Students entering the Cell and Developmental Biology Graduate Program through the Neuroscience Program undertake the qualifying examination administered by the Graduate Committee. The format and scheduling for the Cell and Developmental Biology Program examination is as follows:

During the Fall Semester of 2nd Year, the student consults with their thesis mentor to identify a suitable, hypothesis-driven topic for the qualifying proposal. By the 3rd week of September a written abstract is submitted to the Graduate Program Director. The abstract is one page and should convey the general topic, the main hypothesis, and the experimental frame-work. The Departmental Graduate Committee then identifies a chairperson of the qualifying examination committee. The four-member committee will include the chair, the thesis advisor, a faculty member from the student’s department and another faculty member that may be from a different department. The two faculty members will be chosen based on their expertise related to the topic of the qualifying proposal. For Neuroscience students, the Chair of the qualifying examination will schedule a meeting with the student to go over the format and expectations of the qualifying proposal and exam. During proposal writing, the student may approach faculty outside their committee to discuss research ideas. When the proposal is completed, the student submits a PDF version to the Chair of the examination committee. However, the thesis advisor will take on the role of the primary mentor and provide overall guidance for the mock proposal. During the Oral exam, the advisor participates in the questioning phase, but does not answer for the student or vote on the student’s performance and is excused during voting deliberations.

Due dates for the topic abstract is the Friday of the 3rd in September. The proposal is due the last Friday of October. The exam will be scheduled during the last three weeks of November or in December.

**Medical Sciences Training Program**

Students entering the Cell and Developmental Biology Graduate Program through the Medical Sciences Training Program are to fulfill the following PhD qualifying requirements. Within 6 months after entering the graduate program the student should form their dissertation advisory committee (as defined below). Within 9 months after entering the graduate program, MSTP students should complete a hypothesis-driven Qualifying Research Proposal (described below). Once completed, the MSTP student defends this proposal as an Oral Examination. The thesis advisory committee serves as the examiners for the qualifying proposal and oral defense. One member, other than the thesis mentor, will serve as the Chair of the qualifying examination.

Through this process, the Chair, with input from the dissertation advisory committee, will identify any additional coursework necessary to fill potential knowledge gaps required to prepare the student for ongoing research and training.
Specific Guidelines for the Qualifying Research Proposal (written requirement for qualifying examination):

- The written qualifying proposal should follow the guidelines of the current NIH F grant style or a similar format in the case the student intends to submit the proposal to different funding agency.

  **Current NIH F grant format**
  - Specific Aims (1 page)
  - Research Strategy (6 pages, Arial 11pt font)
    - A. Significance
    - B. Innovation
    - C. Approach

- The hypothesis-driven research question is to be generated by the student with guidance from the mentor. It can be the anticipated thesis hypothesis.

- The Specific Aim(s) should directly address the hypothesis. The number of Specific Aims should be as few as possible. The project should not just yield descriptive data, but should address underlying mechanisms.

- The experiments proposed should be clearly described from both a technical and conceptual standpoint. Well-designed controls should be included and assurance of rigor and reproducibility should be incorporated.

Guidelines for the Oral Component of the Qualifying Examination (IDP and Neuroscience students):

- Each exam will begin with a 20- to 30-minute uninterrupted presentation by the student. Students may use overheads or other visual aids to facilitate their presentation. While a brief background may be given, the bulk of the presentation should be focused on describing the experimental design and how it addresses the hypothesis/specific aim.

- After the presentation, the remainder of the exam will consist of interactive discussion and questions. In addition to the specific areas of the proposal, students will also be expected to be familiar with related areas, including methods, experimental design and controls, interpretation of possible alternative outcomes, and alternative approaches to the proposed experiments. A major component will involve questions directed at topics discussed in the background sections. *The student is strongly advised to review their coursework, especially covered-topics related to the proposal.*

- There is no absolute time limit on the length of the exam. Past experience indicates that the length of the exam averages 2 hours.

- When completion of the Examination requires submission of a Revised Proposal, the examination committee shall set the completion date, taking into account the amount of work required. Minor revision can be accomplished within 1-2 weeks.

Dissertation Committee:

For IDP and Neuroscience students, the PhD dissertation committee will be assembled by the end (July 1) of the second year. For MSTP students, the PhD dissertation committee should be assembled within 6 months of starting in the graduate program. The purpose of the committee is to
provide guidance and evaluate the student’s progress to a thesis that meets committee approval and fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral research degree. The Graduate School expects the student to be trained in the 3 general qualities (Scholarship, Innovation, Professionalism) that relate to 3 core competencies (Knowledge & Skills, Communication, and Management & Leadership).

The committee will consist minimally of five members. Some committees add a sixth member. The members are the advisor serving as chairperson plus four additional faculty. The committee must include at least two Graduate Faculty members of the Cell and Developmental Biology program. One member from another graduate program at the Medical College is encouraged. Also encouraged is one member from outside the Institution. The student obtains the approval of the graduate program director for the committee composition and completes the thesis committee form of the Graduate School by getting the signatures of the advisor and the program director. The student then submits the completed form to the Graduate School Dean for approval of the thesis committee. Forms are available through the Graduate School web-site.

Following approval of the proposal, the student is expected to have full committee meetings as necessary. *A meeting of the committee to review progress is required at least once annually. Following each meeting, it is required that the student circulate to the members a summary of the meeting including accomplishments, concerns, expectations, and time-lines. The Graduate School requires completion of an annual progress form to be completed by the Thesis advisor.*

**PhD Dissertation Proposal and Advancement to Candidacy for the PhD Degree:**

The student must prepare a dissertation proposal describing the research to be conducted for the dissertation. The proposal should be in the current NIH format and not exceed 6 pages (Arial 11pt font), excluding references. The dissertation proposal can be an undated version of the qualifying proposal.

The first draft of the dissertation proposal should be completed, and the first meeting of the thesis committee should occur by January 15th of the third year (IDP and Neuroscience students) or within 17 months of starting the PhD program (MSTP students). The student is encouraged to get the individual input of members of the committee during preparation of the proposal. Approval of the proposal can occur only after a meeting of the thesis committee. The meeting format is expected to involve a presentation of a draft proposal by the student followed by continuation of questions and discussion. The student should demonstrate knowledge in the thesis research area, and the ability to formulate a testable hypothesis. Based on committee input, typically refining the hypothesis and focusing the aims, defining the methods, experimental and control groups and addressing adequacy of the statistical power and methodology, the proposal is revised to meet committee approval. If the student meets these expectations they will be advanced to candidacy for the PhD degree. If the student does not meet these expectations, the committee can make alternative recommendations.

The approved dissertation proposal accompanied by a completed proposal approval form should be submitted to the Graduate School office by February 1 of the third year (IDP and Neuroscience students) or within 18 months of starting the PhD program (MSTP students). After approval by the Graduate School, the student is advanced to candidacy for the PhD degree.

While the approved proposal is a required, critical milestone demonstrating the ability of the student to define a focus area of research that advances the field, it is not a contract list of tasks that once completed guarantees awarding of the doctoral degree. Typically, the original aims are modified by consensus as experimental findings emerge.
Third and Fourth Years:

In year 3 or 4, the graduate student presents his/her research-in-progress findings in a 40-50 minute seminar format. Examples include, but are not limited to, the following: CBNA Departmental Seminar, Cardiac Biology and Heart Failure Meeting, Developmental and Stem Cell Biology Group Meeting, or Neuroscience Group Seminar.

Fall and Winter/Spring Terms:

Ethics and Integrity in Science (1 credit, on-line course)
Relevant Elective course
Readings and Research (variable credits to total 9 credits)

Summer Term:

Readings and Research (6 credits)

Fifth Year and beyond (if necessary):

Fall and Winter/Spring Terms:

Reading and Research (9 credits)

Completion of the Doctoral Dissertation:

A completed copy of the final dissertation must be provided to each committee member at least 2 weeks in advance of anticipated defense date.

The Dissertation Defense date must be scheduled with committee approval and advertised campus-wide 30 days prior to the public defense. The Graduate School has specific requirements for the public defense announcement (cover page, abstract and curriculum vitae) described on the website and within the Graduate Handbook. Following the public dissertation defense seminar and questions from non-committee attendees, the entire committee meets in closed session for further questioning to determine if the student passed the defense. Before the examination day, the student should contact the Graduate School to determine which forms are to be completed by the committee and by the student to satisfy the dissertation requirements. The forms are available on the Graduate School website.