

Graduate Manual

NIU Department of Physics

January 10, 2025

This manual covers procedures and guidelines for graduate students in the [Department of Physics](#) at Northern Illinois University. It is a supplement to the physics section of the [Graduate Catalog](#).

I. Course Offerings

A. Core (subject to change)

PHYS 600 Classical Mechanics – every fall

PHYS 660 Quantum Mechanics I – every fall

PHYS 661 Quantum Mechanics II – every spring

PHYS 663 Statistical Physics – usually every spring

PHYS 670 Electromagnetic Theory I – every spring

PHYS 671 Electromagnetic Theory II – every fall

B. Distribution (below are likely scenarios, subject to change)

PHYS 666 Solid State Physics I – usually every year

PHYS 667 Solid State Physics II – every other year as needed

PHYS 673 Beam Physics I – at least every other year

PHYS 680 Introduction to Nanophysics – usually every year

PHYS 683 Beam Physics II – every other year as needed

PHYS 684 Introduction to High Energy Physics – at least every other year

PHYS 686 Phenomenology of Particle Physics – every third year

PHYS 790 Special Topics in Physics – many times each year, subject to faculty availability

Other courses will be offered when appropriate with the distribution courses listed above scheduled more regularly. The PHYS 790 sequence are special topics courses covering (A) condensed matter physics, (B) particle physics, (C) nanophysics, (D) beams physics, and (E) other topics such as medical physics. PHYS 790 can be taken more than once.

Course requirements for different programs are given in the Graduate Catalog. To meet the Ph.D. requirements, a student must take at least five out of the six core courses noted in the list above. A Ph.D. student is also required to take at least 12 hours of distribution courses from those listed above and others at or above the 600 level that have been approved by his or her advisor. This can include up to 9 hours in courses from engineering, biology, chemistry, mathematics, computer science or geology.

II. Assistantships

Students accepted into the program without a Master's degree and offered a full-time assistantship by the department will typically receive two academic years (9 months each) of support from the department provided they remain in good standing. This is subject to availability of funds. Summer support is typically provided through research assistantships funded through individual faculty support. A limited amount of summer support is sometimes available through departmental funds and summer TAs. Students entering with a Master's degree in physics need to establish a research program during their first year. A second year of departmental support may be offered if it is strongly recommended by the research advisor and department funds are available.

Support beyond the first two years is usually provided by research assistantships through the student's advisor. A limited amount of

departmental support will sometimes be available for the third year and beyond. A request for such support must be made by a student's advisor and is not guaranteed.

Research assistant support is primarily left to the discretion of the student's advisor and the availability of funding. However, a student must remain in good standing within the department to receive RA support.

Most students receive full-time assistantships. The graduate school lists both TAs and RAs as 20 hour/week appointments. In the case of TAs, their TA-related responsibilities will be 20 hours per week or less leaving the remainder of their time to their own course work and research. For RAs, the combination of course work and research is their full-time responsibility. In general, students with full-time assistantships should not have additional employment. Any additional NIU employment will need to be approved by both the graduate school and department. It is the student's responsibility to inform the department about employment outside NIU and work with the department on how best to accommodate this. The usual procedure will be a reduction in the TA or RA appointment.

Students must be enrolled in courses in the corresponding semester to receive funding and a tuition waiver from an assistantship.

III. Master's and Ph.D. examinations

Two graduate examinations are administered by the department. Study guides including previous exams are on the department's web page. Calculators will be provided for the Master's exam but are not allowed for the Ph.D. exam. No other electronic devices of any sort are allowed for either exam and a student possessing one will have their exam be disqualified. Such devices should be given to the exam proctor prior to taking the exam.

A Master's proficiency examination (also called the Master's comprehensive examination or the Ph.D. qualifying examination) is

required for all students in the Master's program, and for all students in the Ph.D. program who have not received a Master's degree in physics. The department will administer an examination at least once per year, and typically twice per year. The student may substitute an outstanding performance (the present standard is 50th percentile or higher, but may be adjusted in the future) on the GRE physics subject examination, taken either prior to NIU or while at NIU, for the departmental Master's proficiency exam. Students in the physics teaching emphasis may substitute course work in a related science for one area on the examination.

A Ph.D. candidacy examination (also called the preliminary examination) is required for all students in the Ph.D. program. The department will typically administer an examination twice a year. The examination consists of three sections: classical mechanics, quantum mechanics and electricity and magnetism. A collection of previous exams is listed on the department's web page, and practicing these previous questions is the best way to study and prepare for the exams. Students may elect on the last day of the three-day exam (or the last day that they are taking a section) to choose to not have their exams graded by clearly indicating as such to the proctor. Note that this option can only be applied to all sections at once.

To remain in the program, a Ph.D student is required to complete the Ph.D. candidacy exam, typically offered once in the Spring and once in the Fall, within the next four fall+spring semesters following the completion of their required core 600-level courses. To be explicit, a Ph.D. student completing their core courses in Fall (Spring) of Year X must pass their Ph.D. candidacy exam not later than the Fall (Spring) of Year X+2. Per graduate school guidelines, only two graded exam attempts are allowed; students must pass one of their two graded attempts to remain in the program.

Full-time students entering the program without a Master's degree in physics are first required to pass the Master's proficiency examination before the end of their second year in the program. Full-time students entering the program with a Master's degree in physics do not have to take the Master's proficiency examination. Students with a Master's

degree in a related field enrolled in the Ph.D. program follow the same regulations as those entering with a Bachelor's degree in physics and are required to take the Master's proficiency examination unless they receive a waiver from the department.

The typical pass rate for an individual section is 50%, but this is subject to change and evaluation by the department depending on the difficulty of the section. Students may also pass the total exam "on average" by having a combined average score on all sections above a threshold of 50%. This threshold is also subject to change and evaluation by the department.

Full-time students who have not passed the relevant examinations during the time periods described above may only take the examinations in succeeding years if they have written permission from the Chair of the department or Director of Graduate Studies (DGS). Part-time students must pass the same examinations but the requirements for how long they are given to do this are handled on an individual basis.

IV. Advising and Thesis/Dissertation Advisor

All incoming students have as their initial advisor the current DGS. Each student should try and find their own advisor as soon as possible, ideally by their second semester in the department. This advisor should be the person the student wants to primarily work with while a student in physics at NIU. The advisor can give guidance on both course selection and how a student should proceed to complete the other aspects of his/her degree. All courses have prerequisites, and it is primarily the student's responsibility to be sure they have the background to take a particular course. If a student is uncertain, they can discuss this with a professor who has recently taught the course (or look at their web pages), their advisor, the department chair or the DGS. Students who are lacking some undergraduate physics skills may need to take PHYS 383, 300 and 370 without receiving graduate credit. The DGS will discuss this with students if it is deemed necessary.

Before starting in the program, the DGS will administer a brief placement exam to all students to help determine the best course placement in the first year.

V. Program of Courses and Degree Completion

A program of courses does not need to be submitted to the graduate school and a student can see their progress to degree completion on [MyNIU](#). However, it is strongly recommended that a student confer with the DGS prior to the end of their second semester at NIU for students in the Master's program, and upon the completion of the core courses for Ph.D. students. If a student wishes to substitute for required courses, this can occasionally be allowed with permission of the DGS and the graduate school.

Students planning on completing their degrees should contact the department office a semester prior to the anticipated graduation term and obtain a list of the items needed for this. Requests for graduation must be made to the Graduate School a semester prior to graduation. Note that thesis or dissertation committee approval and requests to defend should be submitted by a student to the department or the DGS, and not directly to the graduate school.

659/699/799

Students typically take PHYS 699 (Master's) or PHYS 799 (Ph.D.) credits towards the end of their graduate program as they work towards degree completion. Per graduate school guidelines, once a student starts taking 699 or 799 credits, that students must continue to take such credits until completing their degree. Students must pass the MS exam before they can begin to take PHYS 699 credits. Students must pass the Ph.D. exam before they can begin to take PHYS 799 credits. Note that PHYS 699 and PHYS 799 are subject to continuous enrollment – students taking either of those courses must continue to do so until they successfully receive the corresponding degree. Failure to do so is grounds for dismissal from the grad school, and it is each student's responsibility to remember to enroll in courses in a timely manner.

PHYS 659 is a "Special Problems in Physics" independent study course. It can only be taken up to a maximum of 15 credit hours in total. It can be used as a way for an instructor to teach a specialized topic or skill to a student, or for the student to learn specific subject material. Registration requires permission of the instructor and also of the DGS, as well as

submission by the instructor of a detailed syllabus and grading scheme for the course. It can often be used for a student and advisor to determine mutual interest in working together in the future.

VI. Ph.D. Committees

Ph.D. degree candidates have a Dissertation Committee appointed at the time of their dissertation defense per the regulations in the Graduate Catalog. In addition, Ph.D. students will have a Ph.D. Progress Review Committee to monitor their progress leading up to the dissertation.

All full-time students entering the Ph.D. program with a Master's in physics are required to have identified a dissertation advisor by the end of their second year in the program. Those entering without a Master's degree must do the same by the end of the third year.

Within one year of the date that a student has both identified an advisor and passed the Ph.D. Candidacy Exam, the student must have the initial progress review performed by a Ph.D. Progress Review Committee chosen by the student and his advisor. The subject of the initial review should include a plan of the proposed dissertation research. The Ph.D. Progress Review Committee is responsible for monitoring the progress of the student and will conduct further reviews of the student's progress at least once within every one-year time period thereafter. This committee will consist of the advisor and at least two other faculty members. If the advisor is not a full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty member in the NIU Physics department, then at least one other member of the committee must be. The composition of the Ph.D. Progress Review Committee must be approved by the Physics department. Note that the student's Dissertation Committee for the final defense may be the same but has the stronger requirement of including at least three graduate faculty members, as required by the catalog. The mode of the progress reviews is to be decided between the Ph.D. Progress Review Committee and the student but will typically entail a presentation by the student and questions from the committee.

After each review, the committee will submit a short report to the department, with copies to the student and his/her advisor. The report will include an assessment of progress as either satisfactory or unsatisfactory, goals to be achieved before the next review, and, optionally, recommendations. If the committee review concludes that progress has been unsatisfactory, a second review will be scheduled to take place within 6 months.

The DGS will not sign off on any registration for a student who is missing these progress reviews and has no plan to hold them in the near future.

VII. Master's Committees

Master's degree candidates have a Thesis Committee appointed at the time of their thesis defense per the regulations in the Graduate Catalog.

Registration for PHYS699 for more than 2 semesters, excluding summers, requires department approval and an annual progress review by a committee to check for progress toward completion.

This committee will consist of the advisor and at least two other faculty members. If the advisor is not a full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty member in the NIU Physics department, then at least one other member of the committee must be. The composition of the MS Progress Review Committee must be approved by the Physics department. Note that the student's Thesis Committee for the final defense may be the same but has the stronger requirement of including at least three graduate faculty members, as required by the catalog. The mode of the progress reviews is to be decided between the MS Progress Review Committee and the student but will typically entail a presentation by the student and questions from the committee.

After each review, the committee will submit a short report to the department, with copies to the student and his/her advisor. The report will include an assessment of progress as either satisfactory or unsatisfactory, goals to be achieved before the next review, and,

optionally, recommendations. If the committee review concludes that progress has been unsatisfactory, a second review will be scheduled to take place within 6 months.

The DGS will not sign off on any registration for a student who is missing these progress reviews and has no plan to hold them in the near future.

VIII. Good Standing

A student's standing in the department of Physics is determined using the standards of the Graduate School supplemented by departmental requirements. A student must be in good standing within the department in order to receive teaching or research assistantship. It is not used for any other purpose. The following criteria are used to determine if a student is in good standing.

- The Graduate School will place a student on probation if their GPA falls below 3.00. A student remaining on academic probation who fails to earn a 3.00 term GPA (not cumulative GPA) in any future semester may be dismissed from the Graduate School. Prior to dismissal, the Graduate school will consult with the department.
- To maintain good standing in the department, a full-time student must satisfy all the applicable requirements on taking and passing the relevant proficiency, qualifying, and candidacy examinations, as described in Section III. above.
- For Ph.D. students only, a determination by the student's Ph.D. Progress Review Committee of two consecutive unsatisfactory progress reviews, or a failure to complete a review within any one-year time period after having identified an advisor and passed the Ph.D. candidacy exam, will result in the student losing her/his good standing status. In such an event, the student will be given a written explanation from the Ph.D. Progress Review Committee and be allowed to respond either in writing or in a meeting (or both) within a one-month period. A final determination that a

student is not in good standing status must be agreed upon by the student's Ph.D. Progress Review Committee, the Department Chair, and the DGS.

- For MS students only, a determination by the student's MS Progress Review Committee of two consecutive unsatisfactory progress reviews will result in the student losing her/his good standing status. In such an event, the student will be given a written explanation from the MS Progress Review Committee and be allowed to respond either in writing or in a meeting (or both) within a one-month period. A final determination that a student is not in good standing status must be agreed upon by the student's MS Progress Review Committee, the Department Chair, and the DGS.
- Students taking courses outside the department without approval can lose their good standing in the department if it is found to be detrimental to their progress in the degree program.

IX. Courses Outside the Department

Students may take courses outside the department but must obtain approval from their research advisor and the DGS before doing so.

X. Departmental Colloquium

Students in the MS program are required to take PHYS 798, Physics Seminar, each semester (as an audit after the first semester) unless they receive a written waiver from the department. All Ph.D. students are required to register for PHYS 798 for two semesters.

XI. Course Load

The Graduate School's policy on academic load is described in the graduate catalog. The normal full-time load for graduate students is 9-12 credit hours for the academic year and six hours for the summer. Ph.D.

students taking only 799 credits (ABD) need only 3 credit hours to be considered full-time students. Students with a TA or RA appointment must register as full-time or receive permission as described below for an underload. Students without a TA or RA may register for fewer hours with permission. Students wishing to register for more hours need the department's approval for an overload.

Students taking only research credits in the summer may reduce their load to 1-3 credits with departmental permission. After obtaining at least 18 credit hours at NIU, students may reduce their load to six credits for the Fall or Spring term with the department's permission.

Any reduction to lower than six credits for the Fall or Spring term or three credits for the summer term requires the permission of both the department and the graduate school. Students must submit requests for this to the department prior to the start of the semester. Summer underloads will be approved by the department upon condition of having a clear path towards obtaining the necessary credits. Otherwise, students graduating in a given term may request to take only one credit of PHYS 699/799 in that term provided she/he has satisfied all other requirements or has a path to doing so. For both Ph.D. and MS students, once they have 90 credits including transfer credits, they may reduce their load to one credit of PHYS 699 or PHYS 799 per term. It is always up to the graduate school to approve such requests. Note that consent of the department is a prerequisite for both PHYS 699 and PHYS 799.

International students may have special enrollment requirements by visa regulations. Such students who wish to request an underload should consult with ISSS (iss@niu.edu) before doing so. Note that it is the responsibility of individual students to ensure that enrollment requirements for visas are met.

XII. Appeal process

Students who would like to appeal grade or other decisions should consult [the grade appeal process page](#), which includes details about the process and links for more information. If that web page becomes out of

date or is incomplete, students should confer with the DGS or the chair of the department. Note that all appeals will be taken seriously, but are designed for special circumstances, not average requests for things like extra credit.

XIII. Paid Leave Benefit

Graduate Assistants who would like to use leave as part of their [State of Illinois Paid Leave Benefit Program](#) should keep in mind the following guidelines:

- If the need for leave is foreseeable, requests should be made at least 7 calendar days in advance; additional notice is highly encouraged and welcome. If the need for leave is not foreseeable, requests should be made with as much notice as possible.
- TAs: Leave will not be authorized during the first two weeks or the one last week of the semester before finals, as these are critical times to work with and meet students, introduce lab procedures, and submit final lab grades. Leave will be authorized based on operational needs of the department.
- TAs who are requesting leave that is foreseeable are asked to submit their request in a single email to the chair, the assistant chair, the DGS, the instructor(s) in the course(s) they TA for and also the department staff (physics@niu.edu) with the subject "Paid Leave Request". Please explicitly list the times that the request is for, what help room and/or lab sessions you would be missing and also state that you intend to use your Illinois Paid Leave Benefits. The office staff will respond with the authorization status in writing by replying to the email.
- RAs who are requesting leave that is foreseeable are asked to submit their request in a single email to their research mentor and also the department staff (physics@niu.edu) with the subject "Paid Leave Request." Please explicitly list the times that the request is for and also state that you intend to use your State of Illinois Paid Leave Benefits. The office staff will respond with the authorization status in writing by replying to the email. If the request is denied, the chair, assistant chair and DGS will be included in the email.

- Graduate assistants who use leave will be expected to fill out and sign the appropriate forms sent by the department to track this information, and to do so in a timely manner.