Financial Matters

1. Is there a limit to the number of semesters that I can receive financial support from the Department as a Teaching Assistant (TA) or as a Research Assistant (RA)?

A student who is in good standing academically, making appropriate progress toward completion of his or her degree as determined by the annual evaluation, and has been adequately performing duties as a TA has priority in the assignment of a TA position until they graduate. RA support is at the discretion of the major advisor. The maximum number of semesters that one can have a TA or RA depends on the time limit for a degree. M.S. or Ph.D. students who accumulate an excessive number of credit hours without graduating (more than 66 hours at the Master’s level or 99 doctoral hours, respectively) may jeopardize their financial support.

2. Is there a ranking system to determine which graduate students receive financial support?

All other factors being equal, there is some preference to support a Ph.D. student over a thesis M.S. student with a TA or RA. Non-thesis M.S. students have the lowest priority for TA appointments. Nevertheless, the Department makes every effort to provide financial support for all of our graduate students who truly need it to pursue their studies.

3. What is the possibility of receiving summer support from the Department?

A limited number of TA positions are available during the summer. In recent years, the Department has tried to provide a TA or RA to every graduate student who needs one for at least one of the two summer sessions. However, the extent to which this remains possible will depend on the size of the annual budget.

4. If I am being paid as an RA or TA and I interrupt or terminate my degree program in mid-semester, am I effectively breaking a binding contract with my major advisor or with the Department?

Your assistantship has a fixed appointment period, usually 9 or 12 months. You may request that your appointment be terminated prior to its expiration. However, the time for termination must be agreed upon by both you and your supervisor (your major advisor for a RA or the department chairperson for a TA). You may be required to complete your contract.
Leaves of Absence

1. Can I take a leave of absence from the University (or Department) while my degree program is in progress? If so, under what circumstances is a leave of absence granted?

Leaves of absence are granted only for exceptional personal or professional circumstances that would severely hamper the student’s ability to continue working toward completion of the degree. Examples would include a family crisis, extended serious illness, or financial catastrophe. Each request for a leave of absence requires a letter from the student explaining the need for a leave and supporting letters from each member of the student’s advisory committee. The case is then reviewed by the Graduate Student Affairs Committee and the department chairperson. If a decision in favor of the student’s request is made, a recommendation is sent to the Dean of the Graduate School, who makes the final decision. Should a student wish to appeal a negative decision, the issue should be discussed with the chairperson, who can advise him or her of the proper procedures to follow. When granted, leaves of absence normally do not exceed one year.

2. Should I request a leave of absence if I anticipate being away from my employment duties for a short time, such as for the birth of a child, scheduled surgical procedure, etc?

It is unnecessary to request a formal leave of absence when the duration of an anticipated absence from employment duties will be short (a few days or weeks). However, you must be proactive and make appropriate arrangements for any such absence in advance with your major advisor (RA) or with the course coordinator and department chairperson (TA).

3. If I interrupt my graduate studies for an extended period of time, how does this affect my standing in the graduate program when I return?

If a student has received a leave of absence from the Graduate School, there is no change in his or her standing upon return. If the student takes an unauthorized leave and fails to maintain continuous enrollment, he or she must apply for readmission to both the Graduate School and to the Department. In addition, once a student has started taking BIOL/MBIO/ZOOL 6000 Master’s Thesis or BIOL 8000 Doctor’s Dissertation, he or she must continue to enroll in it every fall and spring semester and at least once each summer until graduation. Graduate students can start taking the 6000 or 8000 courses as soon as they have begun their thesis or dissertation research.
Major Advisor/Advisory Committee

1. What should I do if I have a disagreement with my major advisor (major professor) concerning the composition of my advisory committee?

   The advisory committee consists of Graduate Faculty members chosen together by the major advisor and the graduate student. A serious disagreement about the composition of the committee could lead to problems during the conduct of the research. The student and major advisor should first try to resolve the situation themselves. Failing that, the department chairperson may be asked to serve as a mediator in such a dispute. However, if the dispute is irreconcilable, the student should consider asking another professor to serve as his or her major advisor.

2. Can I switch major advisors without consulting my current major advisor or my advisory committee?

   Although you may switch your major advisor, you must show courtesy by letting him or her know in advance about your plans and the reasons for your decision. It may be that a misunderstanding has occurred that can be resolved without the need for making such a change. You may convey your decision directly to your major advisor or through the department chairperson. In either case, your advisor then has an opportunity to express his or her opinion and make any attempt to work out problems that may have precipitated the need for a change. The student should also understand that switching major advisors after a substantial portion of the thesis or dissertation research has already been done may result in “loss” of that effort due to the need to start a new project and a consequent delay in graduation.

3. Can I remove or replace a member of my advisory committee other than my major advisor?

   Any change in your advisory committee must be made in consultation with your major advisor. Follow the procedures outlined above when considering replacing a committee member.
Change of Degree Program

1. Can I switch from the Ph.D. to the M.S. program without completing the doctoral degree?

Any student admitted to the Ph.D. program is expected to fulfill the original intent of the application. In **exceptional situations**, a Ph.D. student may request that he or she be allowed to switch to the M.S. program without completing all of the requirements for the doctoral degree. It is not necessary to submit a new application for admission to the M.S. program. However, such a change in your degree program must have **written approval** from the major advisor and advisory committee, and the department chairperson and graduate advisor must both be notified. The student should understand that the current major advisor may not wish to continue in that role under these circumstances, requiring the student to find a new major advisor. In addition, if the student is being paid an assistantship (TA or RA) by the department, this change in program is accompanied by a reduced, Master’s-level stipend.

2. Can I switch from the M.S. to the Ph.D. program without completing the Master’s degree?

Any student admitted to the M.S. program is expected to fulfill the original intent of the application. In **exceptional situations**, an M.S. student may request that he or she be considered for admission to the Ph.D. program without completing all of the requirements for the M.S. degree. The following policy exists. An M.S. student may only request such a change to the Ph.D. program after completing at least two regular semesters of graduate study. The Graduate Student Selection Committee will decide whether or not to approve such a request. For an applicant to be considered for the change to the Ph.D. program, he or she must have met at least two (preferably, all three) of the following criteria: (1) has academic credentials (standardized test scores, GPA for the last 60 hours of undergraduate study, letters of recommendation, and other subjective criteria) that are equivalent to those acceptable for any first-time applicant to the graduate program directly at the Ph.D. level; (2) **has demonstrated outstanding research potential as documented by a unanimous endorsement in writing from the Master’s advisory committee and based on a formal (seminar) presentation of research results;** and/or (3) **has documented acceptance or publication of a first-author manuscript in a peer-reviewed journal.**

The student must provide the Graduate Student Selection Committee with a new Goals Statement emphasizing research accomplishments, the reason for requesting the change, and the work to be performed at the Ph.D. level. Letters supporting the change and addressing evidence for outstanding research potential must be supplied by each advisory committee member. The Graduate Student Selection Committee will make a holistic evaluation using the same criteria required of any applicant seeking to enter graduate school for the first time. However, the letters from the student’s advisory committee will serve as the primary letters of reference, and the graduate GPA from formal Master’s course work will be taken into consideration.
**Progress/Conduct**

1. If I am terminated from a degree program due to insufficient progress, misconduct, or any other reason, may I apply for readmission at a later date?

   If you are terminated or suspended from the graduate program for any reason and wish to apply for readmission, you must appeal to the Dean of the Graduate School in writing.

2. If I voluntarily resign my position, may I reapply at a later date to be readmitted to the program?

   Yes, but you must reapply to both the Graduate School and to the Department. The Department’s Graduate Student Selection Committee will re-evaluate your application. You must also have a faculty member who is willing to serve as your major advisor.

3. If I am required to take a preliminary examination and fail it, will I be able to take it again?

   The preliminary examination is a diagnostic exam to identify your academic deficiencies. You will be asked to take courses as part of your degree plan to make up any such deficiencies.

4. Ph.D. students only: If I fail my qualifying examination, will I be able to take it again? If I fail the written part of the qualifying examination, can I still take the oral part?

   A Ph.D. student must pass the written part of the qualifying examination before he or she is allowed to take the oral part. Passing the written part means that the student’s performance must be approved by at least four-fifths of the advisory committee members. If a Ph.D. student fails to pass either the written part or the oral part of the qualifying examination, he or she is allowed to retake the part failed one more time, but only after an interval of at least four months and not more than 12 months. Failure to pass the qualifying examination a second time will result in dismissal from the doctoral program.

5. Ph.D. students only: If I fail my qualifying examination (once or more than once), can I still receive an M.S. degree?

   If, after failing the qualifying examination, the student wishes to earn a non-thesis M.S. degree, he or she must apply to the department for admission to the M.S. degree program and, if admitted, form a new advisory committee at that level. A new degree plan must then be submitted with the approval of the Master’s advisory committee members.
6. If I fail my final examination and defense of thesis or dissertation, will I be able to take it again?

In order to pass the final examination and defense of thesis/dissertation, a majority of the student’s advisor committee members must cast affirmative votes. If a Master’s student fails the final examination, that is, does not receive majority approval, he or she may be permitted one more opportunity to defend after an interval of at least four months. The Graduate School does not normally permit a Ph.D. student to repeat the final examination and defense.

7. Can I complete a degree program successfully without having any teaching experience?

There is no departmental requirement that a graduate student must have teaching experience (e.g., be appointed as a TA) for the completion of any graduate degree. However, it is recommended that all students have at least one year of experience in the classroom. This experience will make the student a much stronger candidate for post-graduate employment opportunities.