

# Recommended Timeline for Completing Degree Milestones

## Department of Biomedical Engineering

### Duke University

Updated: 11/07/16, by the DGS and BEPSA

#### Degree Milestones Overview

These milestones are required for incoming Class of 2016 and beyond:

Milestone	Timeline
Preliminary Exam	Year 2-3
Thesis Proposal	Year 4+
Thesis Defense	Year 5+

#### Thesis Committee Requirements

In the BME graduate program, the prelim committee requires only four persons, but the thesis committee must be composed of **at least five persons**.

Four committee members are specified:

- The research advisor (typically the chair of the committee) who must have a primary or secondary appointment in the BME department.
- Three BME faculty members, including the committee chair, one of whom must have a primary appointment in the BME department.
- At least one cognate member from outside the department - typically from a clinical or basic medical science department.

The fifth committee member is at the student's discretion. Note that this is one more committee member than the Graduate School's requirement of four committee members. The members of the committee may change between prelim and defense.

#### General Timeline

The BME Ph.D. Program offers the following timeline for planning purposes. Each BME faculty member and each BME graduate student has different interests, needs, and expectations; consequently, there is no "one size fits all" approach to successful student mentoring and advising. That said, it is obligatory that each student, and his or her research advisor and thesis committee, be intentional and responsible in progressing through the milestones at an appropriately timely pace.

**1. In the first year, and by no later than 9 months following matriculation, the student shall have identified a research advisor.**

In BME, the thesis advisor is synonymous with the research advisor, and is almost always the chair of the student's thesis supervisory committee. The research advisor is thus the primary source of information and resources regarding departmental requirements, course selection, research direction, and progress towards degree. This might not be the case if the research advisor is not a BME faculty member, in which case there is also a thesis advisor who is a primary BME faculty member.

In the vast majority of cases, the research advisor is identified prior to the student arriving on campus. In certain cases, students may be admitted to the graduate program without prior identification of the research advisor. In these instances, the Director of Graduate Studies will assign a temporary advisor to monitor student progress until the research advisor is identified by no later than the 9th month following matriculation.

**2. In the first year, and by no later than 12 months following matriculation, the student shall have identified a departmental advisor.**

The departmental advisor will serve as a member of the student's thesis committee. The departmental advisor is someone other than the research advisor and the Director of Graduate Studies who is familiar with the student's research topic and/or is a faculty member with whom the student has particularly good rapport. The role of the departmental advisor is to ensure that a second faculty member, besides the research advisor, is well aware of the student's progress and aspirations. The departmental advisor can be especially valuable when matters arise outside the research advisor's expertise or when there are conflicts between the student and the research advisor. The Departmental Advisor Form can be obtained from the BME Graduate Program Office, the BME Department website, and the BEPSA website.

**3. By April 1 of the second year, and by no later than 26 months following matriculation, the student shall have identified four of the five members of their thesis committee.**

Only four committee members are required for the student to sit for the Preliminary Examination, which also fulfills Graduate School Requirements. Graduate School requirements state that: "As early in a student's course of study as is practicable and not later than one month (***thirty days***) before the preliminary examination, the Director of Graduate Studies in the major program or department will nominate for the approval of the associate dean a supervising committee." The Committee Approval Form is available on the Graduate School website and can be printed from the following link:

[https://gradschool.duke.edu/sites/default/files/documents/form\\_committee\\_approval.pdf](https://gradschool.duke.edu/sites/default/files/documents/form_committee_approval.pdf).

The form must be submitted through the BME Graduate Program Office with at least a few

days to spare before the deadline so that it can be signed by the DGS and submitted to the Graduate School at least 30 days before the preliminary exam.

**4. Toward the end of the second or at the beginning of the third year, but no later than 36 months following matriculation, the student shall have stood for the Preliminary Examination.**

The preliminary examination in BME involves a 6 page written report and an oral presentation. See the BME Guidelines for the Preliminary Examination, posted on the BME website, for more information. This milestone is intended to review the student's course work to date, assess the ability of the student to propose a meaningful research direction, and discuss the student's plans for the progression of their thesis.

The target date for the preliminary exam in BME is between the first day of summer session near the end of the second year and Oct 31 of the third year. The Graduate School requirements state that: "Ordinarily a student registered for full-time study should pass the Preliminary Examination by the end of the third year. A student who has not passed the examination by this time must file a statement with the Dean of the Graduate School, approved by the Director of Graduate Studies in the major department, explaining the delay and setting a date for the examination. Except under unusual circumstances, extension beyond the middle of the fourth year will not be granted". The BME policy is designed to ensure that the majority of students stand for their preliminary exam before the Graduate School deadline.

Students who are not prepared to stand for their Preliminary Examination within the specified window must inform the Director of Graduate Studies by the start of their 3<sup>rd</sup> year, 24 months after matriculation. Acceptable reasons for missing this window can include leaves of absences, internships, and other approved time off from the program. In some cases, a change of research direction or research advisor may be acceptable. Students who miss this window must complete their preliminary exam by 36 months following matriculation. Students who do not stand for their preliminary exam within 36 months of matriculation will be asked to leave the program unless they obtain prior approval for an extension from the Graduate School.

Students seeking an extension of their preliminary exam beyond the 36th month following matriculation (1) must provide a written explanation to the Director of Graduate Studies by month 36, and (2) must schedule a meeting with his or her thesis committee prior to requesting the extension to discuss the student's progress towards the degree. Acceptable written explanations for postponing the Preliminary Examination may include but are not limited to: a Graduate School approved leave of absence (e.g. military, health, maternity or family leave), or an advisor-approved extended off-campus activity (e.g. a year-long internship, research, training or educational experience). A change of research direction or change of advisors is generally not acceptable for a delay beyond the 36<sup>th</sup> month.

It is the responsibility of the student, with support from the student's research advisor and thesis committee, to comply with this expectation. Failure to comply may result in removal from the BME graduate program.

**5. In the fourth or fifth year, and by no later than 60 months following matriculation, the student shall have identified a fifth committee member and completed the thesis proposal.**

The thesis proposal in BME involves a written report and oral presentation. See the BME Guidelines for the Thesis Proposal, posted on the BME website, for more information. This milestone is intended to assess the proposed thesis research and research progress, confirm that other degree requirements (classes, RCR, TA) have been met or plans are in place to meet them, and discuss plans to complete the thesis research. This milestone must be completed at least six months before the thesis defense.

**6. The Final Step: Writing the dissertation and passing the thesis defense.**

There are a number of specific procedures and filing dates that absolutely must be adhered to for completing a thesis defense. Failure to do so may result in additional costs and substantial delays. It is critical that students be completely familiar with Graduate School requirements for student registration, thesis preparation, thesis submission, and scheduling the defense date, which are outlined at the following link:

[https://gradschool.duke.edu/academics/degree\\_reqs/phd\\_reqs/index.php](https://gradschool.duke.edu/academics/degree_reqs/phd_reqs/index.php).

Graduate School requirements state that "The doctoral dissertation should be submitted and accepted within two calendar years after the preliminary examination is passed. Should the dissertation not be submitted and accepted within four years after the examination, the candidate may, with the approval of the committee and the director of graduate studies, petition the dean of The Graduate School for an extension of up to one year. If this extension is granted and the dissertation is not submitted and accepted by the new deadline, the student may be dropped from candidacy. The student must then pass a second preliminary examination to be reinstated as a candidate for the degree. In such cases, the time limit for submitting the dissertation will be determined by the dean of The Graduate School and the candidate's committee."