

Annual Academic Progress Review for Ph.D. Students

Starting in Academic Year 2024/25, the Graduate College requires Ph.D. programs to conduct at least annual academic progress reviews of all enrolled students between April 1 and June 30 (“Annual Review”).

Benefits of Annual Academic Progress Reviews (“Annual Review”)

An annual review of every Ph.D. student’s academic progress involving the student, their advisor, and Graduate Studies Committee is best practice in student-centric, faculty-led, university-supported graduate education.

The Annual Review (AR) supports student progress through the graduate program and toward their degree by clarifying expectations for academic performance, setting goals, and identifying opportunities for further support and improvement.

Most faculty advisors strive to provide regular, thoughtful feedback. However, a culture of excellence in effective advising and inclusive mentoring requires that all students can expect regular, structured feedback from their Graduate Studies Committees, in writing. This is especially important for establishing shared and agreed-upon expectations and for resolving information that may be incorrect or misunderstood. Reviewing academic progress at least annually also allows for timely identification of behaviors and areas of concern that, if left unaddressed, might lead to more serious problems developing later.

Ph.D. programs are the appropriate level for the AR. This policy, and related resources, provide a framework so all students can expect minimum standards and accountability at the levels of the academic unit and the Graduate College.

Research suggests that “formal annual evaluations tend to increase the numbers of students who complete, and are therefore preferable to sporadic and informal reviews . . . Some form of progress-tracking, annually or each semester [helps ensure] that both students and advisors be held accountable for timely progress and for constructive feedback.”¹

In addition, it is university policy that Ph.D. students must make satisfactory academic progress to hold academic appointments as a GA, GTA, GRA, or predoctoral fellow or trainee.

Moreover, Ph.D. programs benefit from the results of annual reviews in the context of program planning, recruitment, and national data reporting requirements. Regular reviews can be an indicator of program quality. National surveys, such as the National Research Council assessment of research doctorate programs, consider annual or more frequent assessment of academic progress and the timely provision of feedback to doctoral students when assessing program environments.

¹ Council of Graduate Schools, *Ph.D. Completion and Attrition: Policies and Practices to Promote Student Success* (2010).

Scope and Process

At a minimum, annual academic progress reviews must include the following:

- student self-assessment of academic progress, supported by relevant documentation, and articulation of goals for the following year;
- a written review prepared by the Graduate Studies Committee (GSC), centered on an assessment of degree progress, student strengths and areas for improvement, and goals for the coming year;
- an opportunity for the student to discuss this review in person with their GSC and to comment further on the written review during and/or after the meeting;
- documentation signed and filed with the program and the Graduate College; includes assertion that student completed (for first-year students) or updated their IDP.

Procedures

As Ph.D. programs vary in size and structure, programs are free to design their own review procedures as long as they adhere to the minimal requirements stated in this document and provided all Ph.D. students in the program are reviewed according to the same procedures. The program should make a description of its AR procedures available to all students and faculty in their unit, along with a description of what the program considers to constitute satisfactory progress toward the degree. These descriptions should be filed with the Graduate College.

The AR should include every dimension of a student's academic performance to provide a multi-faceted evaluation of their academic strengths and areas for development. At a minimum, the information that serves as the basis for the AR should include:

- university-wide requirements for student academic progress
- program-specific requirements and expectations, typically outlined in program handbooks
- CV or resume
- student transcript
- milestones completed
- research progress on dissertation
- student publications, presentations, other research products
- fellowships, grants (applied for/awarded)
- awards or other recognitions during the previous year (applied for/nominated for/awarded)
- mitigating factors, if any, provided by the student

NB: Review of graduate assistantship performance (as a GTA, GRA, GA) should be conducted separately from the review of the student's academic degree progress.

Minimal Process Requirements

Program Director initiates AR for all enrolled Ph.D. students; includes sharing documentation of university-wide requirements and program-specific requirements and expectations for student academic progress.

Student prepares AR dossier

Student prepares a self-assessment of their progress, with relevant documentation to share with their GSC. Involving students in assembling all necessary materials builds investment in the process and encourages self-reflection and awareness of progress (or lack thereof).

GSC schedules a review meeting within two weeks of receiving student's AR dossier, reviews student's file and AR dossier, and discusses student's performance in advance of meeting with them.

Student meets with GSC: enhances shared understanding of student's progress and needs.

Committee provides written feedback and assigns an overall progress rating

Feedback indicates progress to date and sets clear expectations for the coming year. Student may add comments to the feedback immediately and/or after meeting.

Overall progress rating (see details below, p.4) determines nature of follow-up.

Committee chair (advisor) and student sign the feedback and attest that IDP has been completed (for first-year students) or updated.

The student's signature indicates they have received the feedback and understand its nature, not necessarily that they agree with it. Having the student sign that the annual evaluation has been shared with them documents program-level advising and communication.

Student reflects after the meeting. As the student reflects, they can add further comments to the committee's assessment. The advisor also encourages the student to follow up informally with any committee member for further discussion.

Documentation. A copy of the self-assessment and GSC feedback, with any final comments from the student, are placed with the student's file in the Ph.D. program. It is valuable for the Ph.D. program to have regular documentation of student progress, both for general reference and if misunderstandings arise.

The Ph.D. program confirms to the Graduate College that the evaluation process for all Ph.D. students has been completed and files documentation with the Graduate College.

Annual Review Progress Ratings

AR ratings should distinguish between *satisfactory*, *marginal*, and *unsatisfactory* progress toward degree.

Satisfactory

Student reliably meets expectations for academic progress and performance; planning and goal setting is realistic and appropriate. Students who are meeting the requirements of their program, making good progress, and developing and acting on thoughtful plans and goals should be assigned this rating.

Marginal progress – needs improvement

Academic progress and performance are not consistently of the quality needed to meet expectations and need improvement. This rating signals that some changes are required for the student to get on track for successful degree completion. Issues of concern need addressing before they may have more significant consequences for progress. Sometimes a short-term disruption or setback can slow a student's progress; such challenges can usually be overcome with careful planning and targeted support. The GSC must articulate clearly why it considers the student to have made only marginal progress. It must address specific, identified challenges through appropriate planning, goal setting, and timelines. Both the GSC and the Ph.D. program must provide targeted support to help the student return to "satisfactory" progress. It is critical that the student and their GSC collaboratively develop a plan and check in with each other frequently. The Ph.D. program director endorses the plan and oversees timely follow-up. An interim academic progress review should be conducted no later than by the end of the semester following the AR that resulted in a "marginal progress" rating.

Unsatisfactory – academic progress has stalled and performance is below expectations

This rating indicates that the student has made little or no academic progress in the preceding one or two semesters to the extent that lack of progress endangers their ability to complete their degree in an appropriate timeframe. With the student not making satisfactory progress, they enter a Graduate College "academic probationary period." The program notifies the Graduate College, which will require a detailed plan to be prepared by the student and their GSC and endorsed by the Program Director, the academic unit's Associate Dean, and the Graduate College.

The GSC explains problem(s) in detail and provides constructive advice about the remedies needed to correct the situation, including milestones and specific timelines. In collaboration with the student, and in a supportive approach, the GSC designs a detailed improvement plan for the student to return to "satisfactory" progress status by the end of the semester following the "unsatisfactory progress" rating. The plan must detail clear responsibilities for the student, their advisor, GSC, and program, along with reasonable milestones, timeframes for review check-ins, the protocols to be used to determine whether the conditions have been met (e.g., a GSC meeting by date X), as well as the outcome that will result should the requirement not be met.

The improvement plan is filed with the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the Graduate College, who notifies the student of their probationary status, reiterates the GSC's and Ph.D. program's requirements, and orients the student to relevant support resources. The Graduate College will enforce the terms of this plan. If the terms are not met, the student may be dismissed on academic grounds from their UVM graduate program.

In the difficult situation where a student has not improved their performance in a reasonable period of time following an *unsatisfactory* rating and constructive guidance, the program has a documented case for dismissal from the program at the time of the second *unsatisfactory* rating.

Annual Academic Progress Review for Ph.D. Students: Resources

The Graduate College, in consultation with Ph.D. programs, will develop further resources to support the Annual Review process in accordance with this policy. These resources will help Ph.D. programs develop or refine their unit-specific procedures and assist Ph.D. students and their committees as they conduct Annual Reviews supportive of the student's progress to degree.

Graduate Degree Audit Tool

The Graduate College is building out a graduate instance of Degree Works to help students and their advisors, committees, and programs track progress and plan the next step towards their degree.