

Graduate Student Issues and Proposals
October 9, 2020 Faculty Meeting
Compiled by the Columbia Physics Graduate Council

Course offerings and requirements:

- Changes below were mentioned to the graduate committee early August.
- Currently, **students have to choose two courses** out of a narrow list. That means that students interested in certain areas such as biophysics and atomic physics, among other areas, are supposed to choose between courses in unrelated fields to fulfill their requirements, when there are graduate course offerings in other departments that can be more relevant to them.
- **Certain courses are not offered for two years in a row**, which almost happened for Particle Physics and Condensed Matter II if students had not complained in time.
- We still want students to have the **option of taking courses outside of their field** and count them towards their two field-specific courses, since they might switch labs or just not find a course in their area of interest. **Yet, we would like the department to offer more flexibility in choosing these two courses among 6000-level courses in physics or in other departments.**
- **We suggest creation of an approval form** that could be signed by the student's advisor and the Director of Graduate Students so the student can keep it as formal proof that their selection will count towards their field-specific course requirement.

Qualifying Exams:

- The **Quals Committee has yet to release information** on what will happen to the 2021 qualifying exams given the necessity for social distancing and the fact that roughly half of the first-year class this year is not physically in NYC. This is **absurd** given that we're already in the middle of the Fall semester, which is causing anxiety among students in an already difficult year. **We demand a resolution** in the next two weeks, so students have time to prepare.
- The **PGC has run a comprehensive survey about Qualls** among the grad student population in the Spring. We expect the survey results to be out in a report by the beginning of November.
- We are planning on hosting a **Qualls Town Hall** this year (since it was cancelled in the Spring due to the COVID-19 pandemic).
- In the survey we ran **two proposals** by the student body:
 - **Go from 6 to 4 sections** (Classical Mechanics, E&M, Quantum Mechanics and Statistical Mechanics), because two of the sections were deemed unnecessary and taking 6 exams is exhausting for students who are already at a high level of stress. Relativity could be incorporated into the first two sections.
 - **If you passed a section, you don't need to retake it.** Currently, if you fail more than 2 of the 6 exams, you have to retake the whole thing. The same happens if you fail 2 sections on different days. If you fail one section in a day, you have to retake the whole day of exams. This is an unnecessary stressor.
 - **Both proposals got overwhelming support from the student body.**

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Mental Health:

- The student body in the department does not have adequate support, especially students in underrepresented groups, which is leading to a **mental health crisis**.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic especially, **students have also faced a range of issues** that included but are not limited to: immigration, housing, isolation/depression, family issues, travel bans, personal and family medical problems, racial disputes in the US, political turmoil in the US and in their home countries, financial difficulties, uncertainty, etc. As a reminder, the pandemic is not over yet and this is ongoing.
- **We want the department to issue a statement** that they recognize that department members (especially students) faced different obstacles over the past few months and that it is ok for them not to be at their productivity peak. It should also be noted that faculty members should be accommodating during this time, especially with their research group members, who might not be comfortable sharing the range of difficulties they are facing during these trying times.
- **We want the department to update the statement of principles** to include a similar message and **reduce the focus the statement currently has on productivity**, which might be triggering for students facing difficulties at this moment. The message should not be solely **focused** on students' physical health but also **on their mental well-being**.

Advising:

- Students typically joke that their only advisors in their first year were the second years in their offices. **Students feel at a loss with lack of advising their first year**. It's not the older students' job to advise younger grad students.
- Many first years do not have a research advisor for a few months or a whole year.
- The 2019 incoming class did not have a DGS for their entire first semester.
- **The DGS alone is not a good source of support.**
 - The DGS is one person assigned to over 100 students.
 - First years do not have a rapport with this person coming in.
 - Some DGS's might not be approachable for advice that might include how to deal with advisor/student disputes, personal problems affecting academic progress, etc.
 - Some DGS's are not accessible.
- Harvard has a system that assigns **a faculty member to each first year**, so they know they have a professor who knows them well who's not their advisor and not necessarily in their field, but simply someone more senior in the department that they know they can approach. We want a similar system in place here and have been pushing for it for over a year.

International Students:

- Update on the **new DHS rule**
 - Rule proposal: Restrict I-94 validity from Duration of Status (D/S) to 2-4 years for all F1, J1 and I visa holders. This makes them have to reapply for Extension of Stay (EOS), costing ~\$450 and taking a long time.
 - Disproportionately impacts students from lower-income backgrounds.

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- Likely to get pushed through by the administration before election day.
- Severe legal consequences for I-94 overstay of even a day.
- More info:
<https://isso.columbia.edu/news/dhs-proposes-changing-duration-status-ds-fixed-periods>
- We encourage **submitting comments** to the federal government.
- **Revocation of Chinese visas**
 - September: more than 1,000 visas were revoked for Chinese students who are supposedly related to the Chinese military, in the name of national security.
 - From available details, it is clearly more about targeting and scapegoating international scholars than protecting sensitive intellectual property. Unclear if the situation will expand to more international students.
- **Multiple recent rules come out and were revoked this summer**
 - Insecurity -- be patient with international students, they are going through a lot.
 - ICE ruling (overturned)
 - Would have forced international students to return to campus.
 - Would have forced people to leave if classes were purely online (despite it not being safe to do so or flights not existing).
 - PGC members participated in lobbying calls.
 - Columbia wasn't sure if grad students abroad would be able to get paid legally.
 - "Figured out" after consultation with peer institutions and union intervention.
 - We would like **the department to make a statement** that the department stands with international students and will protect the rights of international scholars.
- **Travel bans** affecting mobility and student mental health.

Suggested changes to advising committees (already in progress):

- These changes were accepted by the Graduate Committee early August.
- The Graduate Committee sent another email to the student population with instructions and details about how the advising committees work and what the roles of each professor in it should be. The PGC followed up with another email offering tips to the student population.
- The Grad Committee should advise second years that they will have to form an advising committee the following year.
- A deadline in mid-September was determined for students to form committees and submit names on a form to make sure they at least form the committees. The deadline the following year should be mid-August.
- Every student was assigned a month to meet with their committee.
- The Graduate Committee will follow up with:
 - Students who do not submit committee faculty names.
 - Students who do not meet by the month after their assigned meeting month.
 - Students whose committee raises concern about their progress (to offer support).
- It is also the advisor's responsibility to make sure committees are formed and meetings are held.