Route map to PhD Candidacy

Summary

• The initial two years of the MS and PhD programs are similarly structured, with a common core curriculum and research project requirement. This facilitates transitions between programs, in either direction.
• Students in the PhD program advance to PhD candidacy by satisfying the qualifying procedure, which consists of a written exam based on the core courses and an oral exam based on a research portfolio including the research project (see below).
• Students who fail either component of the qualifying process may be granted permission to retake one or both exams.
• In the event of a second failure, the student will not be permitted to proceed in the PhD program, but may request a transfer into the MS program.
• Students admitted into the MS program may be promoted into the PhD program if they successfully complete the qualifying procedure.

Qualifying Procedure
All students in the PhD program must pass a qualifying examination after completing the core curriculum and prior to embarking on the PhD dissertation project. A student will normally take the qualifying exam during June of Year 2.
The purpose of the examination is to ensure the student has the necessary background knowledge and intellectual skills to carry out doctoral-level research in the subject areas of AST.
The examination is in two parts, both of which must be passed separately.
   I. A written examination based on the core courses.
   II. An oral examination based on the student’s research portfolio, which will include a written report on the master’s level research project.

Written Exam
The written examination is based on material covered by the AST core courses. It will normally be held in early June and will be administered in two separate 3-hour sessions on different days.

The Exam will be compiled, administered, and graded by an Exam Board, which will normally consist of the core course instructors and an independent chair nominated by the Program Director.

The Board will compile the results and make a pass-fail recommendation for each individual student.

Research Portfolio and Oral Examination
The oral examination is based on a Research Portfolio compiled by the student. It will typically include
• a record of graduate research seminar activities.
• A list of oral or poster presentations
• a written report on a masters-level research project
• published papers or manuscripts submitted for publications (if any)

One or more papers published in, or accepted by, major refereed journals may be submitted as part of the research project report. The report must nevertheless include an introduction that explains the context and significance of the work reported in the paper(s). It must also include a detailed statement, endorsed by the advisor, describing the student’s contribution to the work.

The oral examination will take the form of a 40-minute public presentation by the student, followed by a closed question session with the Qualifying Exam Committee.

The Qualifying Exam Committee will be chaired by the Program Director and will include the student’s research advisor, mentor (if different), the Chair of the Exam Board and two additional AST faculty.

The Committee will evaluate the quality of the student’s research portfolio and overall performance in the oral examination and will also consider the results of the written exam together with the Exam Board’s recommendation. Depending on the results of the written and oral examinations and the quality of the written master’s level research project, the committee may take one or more of the following actions.

• Award an unconditional pass and permit the student to proceed to the PhD dissertation.
• Require the student to retake all or part of the written examination.
• Require the student to re-submit an improved research portfolio within a reasonable time limit.
• Recommend that the student transfers to the MS program and pursue a terminal master’s degree.

The Program Director will normally communicate pass/fail decisions to students by June 30.

Retakes and resubmissions
Opportunities to retake the written or oral exams will normally be scheduled in August of year 2. In this case, there are only possible outcomes:

• Unconditional pass, with permission to proceed to the PhD
• Transfer to the MS program.