Reducing Time to Degree and Improving Efficiency: Seven Years Later

Stephen Hill and Mark W. Meisel

Department of Physics, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611

In 2000, our graduate program was modified in attempt to reduce the time to the Ph.D. degree and to improve the efficiency of graduating students who entered the program. In yesteryear, a “comprehensive” exam was given to students at the start of their second year, and this exam was only given once a year and could be attempted twice. Consequently, first year students typically spent their first summer preparing for the exam, thereby losing an opportunity for a meaningful, focused research experience. The revised program resulted in a “preliminary” exam, which is given twice a year, at the start of the Fall and Spring semesters, and students have to complete this exam before the end of their second year. Furthermore, the preliminary exam serves as a diagnostic tool to guide the placement of students in the core course sequence. Since about 85% of the students pass the preliminary exam by the start of their first Summer semester, these students can focus their energy on their full-time research activities. Along with some additional modifications to the program, including more intense mentoring and monitoring of progress, our time to degree (i.e. bachelor’s degree to Ph.D. degree) has changed from about 6.5 years to about 5.7 years and our efficiency of graduating students (i.e. ratio of number of students receiving Ph.D. degrees to the number of incoming students) has changed from about 50% to about 75%, when comparing the data before and after the change of our program.