Graduate Seminar: A Perpetual, One-Hour Course for All
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The University of Alabama Department of Physics and Astronomy requires all graduate students to complete a graduate seminar course each semester in residence. In the past, the course involved attendance at a certain number of weekly colloquia, as well as a presentation by each student. Historically, students were graded by their respective advisors on their performance in this course.

When the position of graduate director was created four years ago, the grading responsibility was shifted to that person. Now, the graduate director tracks student progress by monitoring attendance at seminars, evaluating student reports on each speaker, and grading student presentations. This change has resulted in a noticeable increase in colloquia attendance and also increased interest in and knowledge of the speakers visiting the department. Students also broaden their knowledge of physics outside their areas of specialization.

The addition of the Blackboard web application for collecting and evaluating the colloquia reports provides timely feedback to the students through the use of a grading rubric. Student presentations are also graded with a rubric that facilitates tracking of improvements in student communication skills through their graduate careers. Examples of student responses using paper-based vs. web-based collection methods will be presented, and plans for future modifications.