Doctoral Program Policies

To view additional policies for PhD students, please refer to the University PhD Policies & Requirements (http://bulletin.wustl.edu/grad/phd-policies-requirements/) section of this Bulletin.

Admissions

Eligibility

Washington University encourages and gives full consideration to all applicants for admission and financial aid, without regard to race, color, age, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, national origin, veteran status, disability or genetic information. McKelvey School of Engineering is strongly interested in recruiting, enrolling, retaining and graduating students from diverse backgrounds. Applications for admission by students from diverse backgrounds to any of our degree programs are encouraged and welcomed. To the greatest extent possible, students with disabilities are integrated into the student population as equal members.

To be considered for admission into a graduate degree program, applicants must hold a bachelor’s degree from an accredited institution prior to starting the graduate program. Most of the engineering degree programs require a previous degree in science, technology, engineering or mathematics.

Current engineering graduate students who wish to be admitted into another engineering graduate program must be admitted at least one semester prior to their anticipated graduation semester.

Students may be admitted to study for the PhD degree directly from baccalaureate study or after undertaking other graduate or professional education, whether at Washington University or at another accredited institution.

Application Process

Degree programs set their own application deadlines. Applicants should check deadlines (https://engineering.wustl.edu/prospective-students/graduate-admissions/Pages/application-process.aspx) through the McKelvey School of Engineering. It is generally advantageous to the applicant to complete the application well in advance of the deadline.

The application (https://engineering.wustl.edu/prospective-students/graduate-admissions/Pages/default.aspx) is available online through the School of Engineering website. Applications are ready for final consideration after the required items from the application checklist have been submitted.

Please review our application checklist (https://engineering.wustl.edu/academics/graduate-admissions/application-checklist.html) for details on all materials needed for a complete application.

Admission and financial aid awards are for a specific academic year; students who do not matriculate that year must normally reapply. Admitted students can request a deferral of admission for up to one year, but such special requests require approval of both the admitting program and the admissions office. Applicants to whom admission is not offered may reapply for a future semester.

Admission of International Students

International students considering application to Washington University for graduate study should have a general familiarity with academic practices and university customs in the United States. All international students are required to present evidence of their ability to support themselves financially during graduate study. International students are required to submit valid English proficiency score reports from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Tests should be taken in time for results to reach Washington University by the application deadline. Official test scores are required at the time of application.

The English proficiency requirement may be waived during the application process. Please review the waiver eligibility criteria found on our application checklist (https://engineering.wustl.edu/academics/graduate-admissions/application-checklist.html).

Attendance

Each professor in the McKelvey School of Engineering decides how many absences a student may have and still pass the course. Professors are expected to give reasonable consideration to unavoidable absences and to the feasibility of making up work that has been missed. Students are expected to explain to their professors the reasons for any absences and to discuss with them the possibility of making up missed assignments.

Units and Grades

Credit-conferring grades for graduate students are as follows: A, B, C, or D (these grades may be modified by a plus or minus); S, satisfactory; and U, unsatisfactory (S and U are used for all research units and should be noted at the end of each semester).

Other grades are F, failing; N, not submitted yet; X, final examination missed; and I, incomplete. The mark of I reverts to an F grade after the lapse of one calendar year.

McKelvey uses a 4-point scale for calculating grade-point averages, with A+/A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, and D = 1. A plus (other than with an A grade) adds 0.3 to the value of a grade, whereas a minus subtracts 0.3 from the value of the grade.

Auditing a Course

A student may register for some courses as an auditor. The criteria for a successful audit are determined by the course instructor, and the student should work with the instructor to ensure that these criteria are understood. Generally speaking, the completion of homework and the taking of exams are not required. The grade L signifies a successful
audit, and the grade Z signifies an unsuccessful audit. Neither grade affects a student’s grade-point average, and the course’s units do not contribute to the student’s total cumulative degree-seeking units. Audit courses do not count toward any degree, nor do they count toward full-time status determination. They do count toward the 21-unit cap per semester, and audit units are charged at the standard full-time or part-time per-unit rate. Class attendance is normally required to earn a grade of L; unsatisfactory attendance will result in a grade of Z.

Incomplete Grades

The grade I (incomplete) indicates that the work of a student has been generally acceptable but that extenuating circumstances led to certain requirements not having been met. The grade of X is recorded when a student is absent from a midterm or final examination because of illness or other unavoidable reason, provided the work has been otherwise satisfactory.

Grades of X and I must be removed no later than one calendar year after a student returns in residence. On failure to make up an X or I grade, the student will not receive credit for the course, and the grade will be changed to F unless the student has been explicitly excused by the associate dean.

A student should not re-enroll in a class to complete an I grade. Enrolling in the class a second time invokes the Course Retake Policy (http://bulletin.wustl.edu/undergrad/engineering/policies/#repeating).

Course Retake Policy

McKelvey graduate students may choose to retake a course with the permission of their advisor. If a course is repeated, only the second grade is included in the calculation of the GPA. Both enrollments and grades are shown on the student’s official transcript. The symbol R next to the first enrollment’s grade indicates that the course was later retaken. Credit toward the degree is allowed for the latest enrollment only. The R option may be invoked only once per course, and the original grade option must be retained.

Student Grievance

From time to time, students may feel that they have legitimate complaints regarding academic matters or an interaction with a faculty member. It is important that students and faculty have a common understanding of how such complaints may be expressed and resolved. Students with complaints regarding academic matters should initially seek resolution from their faculty advisor, then from their director of graduate studies, and finally from the chair of their degree program. Complaints that remain unresolved may be addressed to the Associate Dean of Graduate Student Services. The final court of appeal for all doctoral students in the school is the Vice Dean of Research and Graduate Education. Washington University policies state that members of the university community can expect to be free from discrimination and harassment. Students, faculty, staff and outside organizations working on campus are required to abide by specific policies prohibiting harassment. An allegation of discrimination or harassment may be appealed to the Vice Chancellor for Human Resources, who will determine whether to convene the Title IX Grievance Committee to hear the case.

Additional Course Information

To count toward a graduate degree, courses must be offered at the graduate level, taken for a grade, and approved in advance by the student’s advisor and program as eligible to count toward the student’s degree. Depending on the program, graduate-level work begins with courses numbered at the 400 or 500 level. Audited courses and courses taken on a pass/fail basis cannot be counted toward the degree. Students should consult their advisors regarding these options.

All McKelvey doctoral programs require a minimum of 72 units of a combination of course work and research units to be completed for a degree. Students should consult their program handbooks for courses specific to their program.

Master's Degrees

Doctoral students who have not previously earned a master’s degree in the same field as their PhD may earn the MS on the way to their PhD. Those who wish to obtain a master’s degree must first discuss this with their research advisor. Once they have the approval of their research advisor, they should contact the director of the master’s program in which they plan to pursue the degree and ask for formal admission to the program. The MS must be added at the end of a semester and prior to filing an intent to graduate. An MS program will not be opened midsemester. Doctoral students should note that transferring courses into a master’s program is done on a course-by-course basis and should consult the master’s handbook for that procedure.

Transfer Credit

A maximum of 24 units of graduate credit earned at institutions other than Washington University may be applied toward the PhD degree, and a maximum of 48 units may go toward the DSc degree. Transfer credit must be recommended by the advisor, department or program chair and approved by the appropriate registrar with receipt of an official transcript. No graduate courses carrying grades lower than B can be accepted for transfer toward any graduate degree.

Students who have previously earned a Master’s degree from Washington University may be eligible to count all graduate-level credit earned for the Master’s degree toward their doctoral degree. Eligible courses are at the discretion of the program director.

Students transferring to McKelvey with a faculty member may be eligible to transfer more than the 24-unit maximum at the discretion of the program director.
Registration and Enrollment Policies

Full-Time and Length of Enrollment

Students admitted to a PhD program in the McKelvey School of Engineering must maintain full-time continuous enrollment throughout the approved length of the program. McKelvey PhD programs are to be completed within six years under normal conditions. During those years, students will be considered full-time with one or a combination of the following enrollments: registered for 9 or more course units (including doctoral research units); or registered in EGS 9000 Full-Time Graduate Research/Study or EGS 9001 Full-Time Graduate Study in Absentia (see below). These courses indicate the student’s full-time engagement in research or academic writing and should be used once a student has completed the 72-unit requirement for the program. PhD students who are not registered as above may find themselves in a part-time status and could be in jeopardy of the loss of certain benefits or be in violation of their visa status. Part-time enrollments will be permitted only in extraordinary circumstances. EGS 9002 Full-Time Graduate Student Extension (see below) should be used for enrollment in circumstances requiring a seventh year.

In-Absentia Enrollment

During a student’s period of regular registration, they may have a need or opportunity to study away from Washington University. Recommendations from departments for students’ registration in absentia will be considered by the school on a case-by-case basis. If approved, the student will be registered for EGS 9001 Full-Time Graduate Study in Absentia. Students may be allowed to register for EGS 9001 for up to four consecutive or nonconsecutive fall/spring semesters. Semesters in which a student is registered in absentia are counted as part of the student’s program length.

Leaves of Absence (Medical and Personal)

A student may request and be approved for a leave of absence during their regular registration period if they are not registered in absentia. Personal leaves of absence must be approved by the degree program and may be allowed for up to one year at a time. Extensions must be reapplied. Medical leaves of absence require authorization from Habif Health and Wellness Center at the beginning of the leave and again in order to return from the leave. At the end of any leave of absence, a student is reinstated under the conditions prevailing at the time the leave was granted.

Approved leaves of absence are not counted as part of a student’s program length and will not be approved for semesters beyond the stated program length, including enrollment extension. While on a leave of absence, the student is not registered and has no student status at Washington University, including financial support. Students who begin a leave during a semester will be dropped from all course registration for that semester and will receive no course credit for work completed during that semester prior to the leave. Taking a leave may therefore adversely affect loan deferment, visa status, the right to rent university-owned housing, and so on. Most visa types would prevent international students from remaining in the United States while taking a leave of absence; such students should consult the Office for International Students and Scholars (http://ois.wustl.edu) as well as their faculty advisor.

The continuation of student health insurance and access to the Habif Health and Wellness Center depends on various factors as to the kind of leave (medical or personal), the length of time the student has already been covered during the current insurance year, and the student’s location during the leave. Students should consult the Habif Health and Wellness Center website (http://shs.wustl.edu/Pages/default.aspx) for current policies related to leaves of absence; these policies may change annually if insurance carriers change.

Enrollment Extension

Students may be permitted to register for one additional year beyond their program length when approved by their department or program. These students will be registered in EGS 9002 Full-Time Graduate Study Extension, which confers full-time enrollment status. Students registered for EGS 9002 may or may not receive financial support, but they are eligible to receive other benefits available to full-time PhD students, including health insurance and wellness fee subsidies.

Degree Candidacy Extended

Upon the recommendation of their departments or programs, students who do not complete their PhD degrees within their program length and potential one-year enrollment extension may remain doctoral candidates for up to five years. Departmental recommendations and Associate Dean of Graduate Student Services approval are required for each year of extended degree candidacy. Extended degree candidates are not registered for any courses, have no enrollment status, and receive none of the benefits available to registered Washington University students, including student loan deferment. Students who do confer their degrees within the five-year extension period do so from a closed program status and do not re-enroll.

Reinstatement

Graduate students who do not register in one of the scenarios described under the full-time enrollment policy may have to apply for reinstatement if they wish to re-enroll at a future time. For reinstatement information, students should contact Graduate Student Services at 314-935-5830 or eng-gradstudserv@wustl.edu. Students seeking reinstatement may be required to pay a reinstatement fee, take special reinstatement examinations, and repeat previous work if their previous work fails to meet contemporary standards. Doctoral candidates who apply for reinstatement may be required to repeat qualifying examinations.
Withdrawal

Students wishing to withdraw from their programs must give notice in writing to the Director of Graduate Studies for their program. The program should provide notice to the McKelvey registrars of the withdrawal and the effective dates on which to drop enrollment and financial support.

Academic Progress, Probation, and Suspension

Satisfactory Academic Progress

Satisfactory academic progress for students in PhD programs is monitored by the school as well as by the degree program. Failure to maintain satisfactory academic progress may result in a student’s immediate dismissal or in their placement on academic probation for the ensuing year. Most financial awards — and all federally funded awards — are contingent on the maintenance of satisfactory academic progress. The following are minimal standards of satisfactory academic progress for PhD students; students should consult their specific program handbooks as they may have stricter and/or additional standards but may not directly conflict with the below:

1. Students are expected to proceed at a pace appropriate to enable them to finish within the time limits and milestone markers of their program. Students are expected to have completed all PhD requirements except for the dissertation by no later than the end of the fourth year of full-time graduate study.
2. Students are expected to maintain a cumulative grade-point average of at least 3.0.
3. Students are expected not to carry at one time any more than 9 credit units for which the grades of I (incomplete), X (final examination missed), or N (not yet submitted) are recorded.
4. Students must satisfactorily pass the qualifying exam process as identified by their program by the time frame stated in their program handbook.
5. Students must identify a research mentor by the time frame identified in their program handbook.
6. After four years of full-time graduate study, doctoral students who cannot identify three faculty members who are willing to serve on their Research Advisory Committee are not considered to be making satisfactory academic progress. The Title, Scope and Procedure form must be filed before the fifth year in order to identify the membership of the student’s Research Advisory Committee.
7. Students may take up to six years to complete the PhD, depending on the program. A one-year extension is available if circumstances warrant (see “Degree Candidacy Extended” above). Extensions are obtained by application of the student to the degree program and approved by the school.

Probation for Academic Reasons

Except for circumstances justifying immediate dismissal, a student cannot be dismissed on the basis of academic performance without the opportunity to return to good standing during an identified period of probation. The purpose of probation is to do the following: (1) to explicitly warn the student of their status; (2) to provide the student with clear guidelines regarding the performance that will be necessary to return to good standing; and (3) to provide the student with reasonable time to meet these expectations. To meet these objectives, probation normally should be designated for a minimum of three months. When the probation criteria involve course work, then the probation period would normally correspond to the semester’s duration. A student on probation must receive a detailed letter from the Director of Graduate Studies stating the reasons for the probation and explicitly identifying the steps necessary for the student to return to good standing by the end of the probation period. A copy of this letter should be sent to the Associate Dean of Graduate Student Services. If a student does not meet all criteria for good academic standing but the department does not wish to place the student on probation, an appeal for this exception can be made to the Vice Dean of Research and Graduate Education.

The explanation of academic performance issues leading to probation should be specific (e.g., low GPA, failed exam) and contain a clear statement of what must be done within a specified period of time in order for the student to return to good standing. This includes probation associated with faculty judgments of research potential, timely progress toward the degree, teaching performance, or professional activities. The expectations will be consistent with those held for all students in the program. They must be communicated in writing (as stated above), accompanied by the opportunity to meet with the Director of Graduate Studies or designated departmental faculty representatives for a clarifying discussion, and copied to the Associate Dean of Graduate Student Services. If the student does satisfactorily meet the requirements of the probation, a written notice of reinstatement, including the date that the student has returned to good standing, will be provided to the student. Students may be reinstated before the end of the probation period if they have met the requirements for reinstatement. Copies of any letters or e-mails to the student as well as summary notes of discussions with the student regarding the student’s placement on probation should be placed in the student’s record, which the student has the right to review.

If the student does not meet the requirements of the probation by the specified time and the program recommends dismissal, the program will send a request for dismissal and a draft of the dismissal letter to the Associate Dean of Graduate Student Services, along with copies of all previous communications and/or warnings. The draft dismissal letter will include the grounds for dismissal, the effective date of dismissal, and advice to the student that voluntary withdrawal from the program is an option. All academic dismissals require approval by the Vice Dean of Research and Graduate Education. If the student is an international student on a visa, the program should consult with
the Office of International Students and Scholars prior to drafting the dismissal letter. It is often advisable for an international student to withdraw ahead of a dismissal to avoid an adverse impact on their future entry to the United States.

At the end of a first probation, the student may be (1) returned to good standing; (2) placed on a second consecutive probation; or (3) dismissed from the program. A second consecutive probation must be accompanied by a new letter identifying the steps required to return to good standing. While the purpose of the probationary period is to provide the student with time to improve, the decision of the program at the end of a probationary period could involve immediate notification of dismissal. At the end of a second continuous probation, the student will be either returned to good standing or dismissed.

A third probation will be allowed only if it is not continuous. A fourth probation will not be allowed. A student whose performance would result in a fourth probation will be dismissed immediately. A leave of absence cannot be used by a student to delay or nullify the consequences of a third consecutive or fourth probation.

Each program must have a standard procedure (e.g., a graduate advisory committee) to manage decisions regarding placement on probation, removal from probation, recommendations for dismissal after a probationary period, and recommendations for immediate dismissal due to extreme underperformance. The procedure for managing such decisions must be applied to all students in the program and cannot be managed solely by an individual faculty member, including the student’s research mentor, although the input provided by the research mentor may play a key role in the process.

Stipend support should continue during a probationary period unless the student is failing to meet the basic expectations of their position (e.g., repeatedly misses classes or is repeatedly absent from the lab and fails to carry out lab assignments). If a program or school decides to suspend stipend support under these circumstances, the student must be given a minimum of two weeks’ notice prior to the withholding of such support. If the student’s performance improves and they begin meeting the basic expectations of the program, stipend support should resume at that time. During all probationary semesters, tuition remission will remain as offered at initial enrollment.

The appeal of probation or dismissal by a student should follow the guidelines for Student Grievance Procedures in that it should begin at the most local level. In cases of probation or dismissal, a student may appeal within 14 calendar days to the department chair or another designated faculty representative or committee beyond the Director of Graduate Studies or the Graduate Advisory Committee, consistent with department or program procedures.

Appeals of probation end with the Chair of the department or program (i.e., placement on probation cannot be appealed to the Vice Dean of Research and Graduate Education). In cases where there is a perceived conflict of interest with the Chair or the Director of Graduate Studies, another member of the department can be designated to address the appeal process for probation or dismissal.

Dismissal for Academic Reasons

Academic dismissal is distinct from withdrawal (initiated by the student), deactivation of a student’s record by a failure to register, and dismissal or other sanctions associated with the University Academic and Professional Integrity Policy or the University Student Judicial Code. Dismissals are recommended by the degree program and are not final until approved by the Vice Dean of Research and Graduate Education. Students may be dismissed immediately for extreme academic underperformance (see “Satisfactory Academic Progress”). Students who encounter personal situations that contribute to academic underperformance during a semester should be informed of the option to request a leave of absence rather than continuing enrollment with poor performance. The ability to complete mentored teaching responsibilities is not a sufficient basis for remaining enrolled.

Most academic difficulties are not of the severity associated with immediate dismissal. The faculty are also responsible for evaluating the ability of the student to identify and undertake an original scholarly project at the level of excellence expected for a Washington University PhD and for determining whether the student is making timely progress toward completion of the degree. The program may place a high value on the quality of performance in mentored teaching and other professional activities. The judgment of the faculty on these issues can lead to academic dismissal for students who meet other criteria for good academic standing. Departments are expected to maintain written guidelines that help students understand the major categories of expectations for satisfactory progress. Such guidelines should be provided to students at the beginning of their academic program and reviewed with students on a regular basis.

For academic dismissal decisions, a graduate student may submit a final appeal of the dismissal to the Vice Dean of Research and Graduate Education. Appeal requests must be initiated at the appropriate level within 14 calendar days of formal notification of probation or dismissal, and appeals to the Vice Dean must be made within 14 calendar days of a decision by the Chair of the department to uphold a student’s dismissal. Responses to appeals generally occur within the next 14 calendar days after the appeal is requested. Stipend support is discontinued at the time the student is notified of dismissal. The student is not eligible to receive stipend support during an appeal of dismissal; however, if the appeal is upheld, the student is eligible for stipend support covering the period of the dismissal appeal process. Students who have chosen to withdraw from their program or department (as opposed to taking an authorized leave) cannot appeal or seek reconsideration of this decision.

Satisfactory Academic Progress for Title IV Financial Aid

Federal regulations require that students receiving federal Title IV financial aid maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP). The minimum GPA requirements needed to maintain eligibility for SAP are dictated by the specific program of study. In each case, per the
Dissertation Dissenting Votes

In the rare case that there are faculty concerns that cannot be resolved through subsequent revisions and which therefore result in dissenting (negative) votes, the Committee Chair will refer the case to the Vice Dean of Research and Graduate Education. In the case of a single dissenting vote, the Committee Chair and the dissenting voter will be asked to explain the reasons for the dissent in a letter to the Vice Dean of Research and Graduate Education. After consulting with these and other members of the Committee, the Vice Dean may then decide to accept the majority opinion and approve the dissertation, or they may seek the opinion of an additional reader. After considering this additional evidence, the Vice Dean may either approve or decline to approve the dissertation. In the case of two or more dissenting votes, the Committee Chair and the dissenting voters will again be asked to explain the reasons for the dissent. The Vice Dean may then decide to decline to approve the dissertation, or they may ask the department or graduate program to name a Resolution Committee — consisting of three tenured or tenure-track professors at Washington University or elsewhere who did not serve on the original committee — to reexamine the dissertation and the candidate. A unanimous positive recommendation from this committee will be required in order for the Vice Dean to approve the dissertation. Failure of a department or graduate program to identify three faculty members to serve on this Resolution Committee will be tantamount to a rejection of the dissertation.

Advisor–Advisee Relationship

The relationship between an advisor and an advisee is critical to the success of a student in a PhD program. If a situation arises in which it is determined that the existing advisor–advisee relationship should be terminated, either by the advisor or the advisee, the student will enter into a 3-month probationary period so that the student can identify a new thesis research advisor. The student will continue to receive the customary stipend and allowances until an advisor for the thesis research is identified or for 3 months, whichever comes first. After the 3-month period, the student will either have established a new advisor–advisee relationship or will, at the discretion of the department, be provided a second 3-month probationary period. At the end of either probationary period, the student may be dismissed from the program as not having made the appropriate academic progress. A third probation will not be permitted. A student is able to appeal the probation decision following the appropriate procedures as outlined elsewhere in these policies.

Academic Integrity

All students in the McKelvey School of Engineering are expected to conform to high standards of conduct. Students should refer to the Office of the Provost (https://provost.wustl.edu/vpge/) for the full text of the Academic and Professional Integrity Policy for PhD Students.
Academic Calendar

In addition to the university's academic calendar, McKeelvey maintains an Engineering Academic Calendar (https://engineering.wustl.edu/academics/academic-calendar.html) with dates and deadlines that are specific to McKeelvey students. This calendar includes course information, which is also helpful for non-McKeelvey students taking engineering courses.