Molecular Genetics & Genomics, PhD

Degree Requirements

Molecular Genetics & Genomics

The Molecular Genetics and Genomics is a graduate training program at WashU, housed under the Roy and Diana Vagelos Division of Biology and Biomedical Sciences (DBBS).

Advances in genetics and genomics over the past two decades have revolutionized our understanding of development, homeostasis, and disease and ushered in a new era of personalized medicine. Much remains, however, to be learned about fundamental genetic, genomic, and epigenetic mechanisms and how alterations to these processes perturb development and homeostasis and lead to disease. For example, how are specific genes turned on in defined cell types to drive specific outcomes and how does perturbation to regulated gene expression lead to disease, such as cancer and neurodevelopmental disorders? How do seemingly identical cells employ distinct genetic regulatory networks to create the diversity of cell types found in our body and brain? How do coding and non-coding mutations alter gene function and drive evolution and disease? How can we leverage powerful new genetic tools to cure disease? Uncovering answers to these fundamental questions places genetics and genomics at the forefront of biomedical research and the quest to clarify the genetic and genomic regulatory mechanisms that normally control organismal development and homeostasis, but when perturbed drive disease.

Laboratories in the Molecular Genetics and Genomics (MGG) program leverage forward and reverse genetics and genomic and computational approaches to address key outstanding questions in all areas of biomedical research with a focus on human disease. Integrating wet and dry bench approaches, students in the MGG program advance our understanding of the genetic, cellular, and molecular basis of how cells, tissues, and organs develop and function and how alterations in these processes lead to disease. MGG laboratories at WashU have been at the vanguard of human molecular genetics, the Human Genome Project, and in developing new genetic and genomic technologies that clarify how genetic changes alter gene function. MGG laboratories further apply these methods across many areas, including cancer biology, neuroscience, developmental biology, and more. Students interested in leveraging the power of genetic and genomic approaches to learn about fundamental biological mechanism and their application to human biology will find scores of laboratories within the program in which to pursue their doctoral research.

To earn a PhD at within the Roy and Diana Vagelos Division of Biology and Biomedical Sciences at Washington University, a student must complete all courses required by their department; maintain satisfactory academic progress; pass the qualifying examination; complete all requirements for doctoral candidacy; create a Research Advisory Committee (RAC); submit a Title, Scope, and Procedure Form; fulfill residence and Mentored Experience Requirements; write, defend, and submit a dissertation; and apply for program completion (graduation) via Workday Student.

Program Requirements

- **Total Units Required:** 36 credits
- **Degree Length:** 7 years
  - Students are expected to maintain satisfactory academic progress in accordance with academic milestones. Students entering their seventh year in the program will receive a warning letter in regards to reaching their stated degree length. Students entering their eighth year in the program will be required to obtain permission from the Associate Dean of Graduate Education. Across DBBS programs, the average time to degree is 5.6 years.
  - **Note:** Students must be enrolled in 9 graduate credits each semester to retain full-time status. As students complete their coursework, if enrolled in fewer than 9 graduate credits, they must enroll in a specific Biology & Biomedical Sciences research graduate course to maintain full-time status. Prior to completing 36 credit units, student will enroll in BBS 5900 Research for research credit; after completing 36 credit units, students will enroll in BBS 9000 Full-Time Graduate Research/ Study, which will show 0 credit units but fulfills full-time status. Students should follow advising instructions to ensure proper enrollment prior to Add/Drop.
  - Continued support is guaranteed for the duration of the student's graduate studies, provided that the student maintains satisfactory progress toward completion of the degree.
- **Grade Requirement:** Required courses generally consist of four to nine courses in areas fundamental to the student's program. Students are expected to maintain a B average in graduate courses.

Required Courses

DBBS Required Courses

- BBS 5098 Graduate Research Fundamentals
- BBS 5011 Ethics & Research Science

Program Required Courses

- BBS 5491 Advanced Genetics
- BBS 5488 Genomics

Two Semesters of Journal Clubs

MGG students are required to take two semesters of BBS 5235 Genetics Journal Club. Students may petition the Program Directors for exceptions.

Two Advanced Electives

In general, MGG students select two of the following courses:

- BBS 5480 Nucleic Acids & Protein Biosynthesis
- BBS 5075 Introduction to Coding and Statistical Thinking for Genetics and Genomics
- BBS 5068 Fundamentals of Molecular Cell Biology

Laboratory Rotations

Selecting a thesis advisor is the most important decision a student makes in graduate school. To help each student make an informed, thoughtful choice, the Division builds in flexibility to explore options. Students usually participate in three lab rotations during their first year. Additional rotations can be arranged, and rotation lengths are flexible. Students usually begin their thesis research by the end of their first year.

Scientific Scholarship

Keeping abreast of scientific developments is critical for faculty and students alike. The Division offers many ways to stay current. More than 15 weekly biology seminars provide excellent opportunities to meet outstanding scientists from outside Washington University. Several annual symposia bring internationally recognized speakers to campus. Journal clubs meet weekly for students, postdoctoral fellows and faculty to present and discuss current scientific literature. A number of Interdisciplinary Research Pathways allow students to enhance their PhD program. Program retreats allow for informal interaction among students and faculty. The Division also provides funds for each student for professional development.

Mentored Experience Implementation Plan

As part of their degree requirements, PhD students must complete a program-defined Mentored Experience Requirement (MER) as per these guidelines. The Mentored Experience Implementation Plan (MEIP) is the written articulation of a program-defined degree requirement for PhD students to engage in mentored teaching activities and/or mentored professional activities, collectively referred to as *MERs.*

Mentored Experience Requirements (MERs)

Philosophy of Teaching

Effective communication of information and concepts is a critical skill for biomedical research scientists. Although much of the teaching that scientists engage in is through one-on-one interactions with individuals in the laboratory, all scientists must have fundamental instruction in and experience with pedagogy principles, be able to deliver effective lectures to a wide audience, and be prepared to teach courses to undergraduate and graduate students. These represent the goals of the required Mentored Teaching Experience (MTE).

Preparatory Engagement

Preparatory Engagement activities are those that represent an introduction to the foundational skills associated with teaching or communication. Pedagogical preparation engagement activities are normally completed before students are permitted to engage in assisting or teaching in a classroom.

Prior to beginning their MTE and typically during their first graduate year, Division of Biology & Biomedical Sciences (DBBS) students will be required to complete the Graduate Student Teaching Orientation, including three Foundations in Teaching (FiT) workshops offered by the Center for Teaching and Learning. Students will meet with assigned course director(s) prior to the start of the semester and complete a teaching expectations form.

Mentored Teaching Experiences (MTEs)

Assistant in Instruction (AI)

An Assistant in Instruction (AI) is a PhD student who is directly engaged in the organization, instruction, and/or support of a semester-long course *primarily taught by a faculty member.* An AI receives mentorship from a faculty member related to best practices in classroom engagement, instruction in the field, interpersonal engagement, and other relevant skills. Students and mentors complete a mentorship plan prior to the start of each AI experience. To complete each AI assignment and to ensure that it applies toward their degree requirements, students must register for the appropriate course number for each semester of engagement. Refer to the "Required Pathways for Completion" section below for course numbers and details.

DBBS students will serve as mentored AIs in courses approved by the Associate Dean. Units for a given course will be determined ahead of the assignment. A unit is equivalent to approximately one hour per week, so 5 units would involve five hours of support (on average per week) for a course. The PhD student is formally listed as instructional support in the course listings and receives mentorship from the faculty member in best practices for classroom engagement, instruction in the field, interpersonal engagement, and

other relevant skills. The mentored teaching training must incorporate at least one of the following activities: delivering lectures, leading lab activities or discussion groups, or conducting review sessions for groups of students. Grading exams or papers, holding office hours, administrative tasks, one-on-one tutoring, and so on may also be components of the assistantship and should be counted in the 5 units; however, these activities are not sufficient to meet the DBBS teaching training requirement. In general, AI assignments connect to undergraduate or lower-level graduate courses that the AI has taken previously. Students must enroll in MGS 8005 MTE - Assistant in Instruction experience during the semester(s) of their assigned MTEs.

The PhD student should receive regular feedback or evaluation from the mentor throughout the semester, a formal evaluation of teaching skills by the faculty at the end of the semester, and evaluation by the students at the end of the term as part of the course evaluation. If the course director determines that the PhD student's facility with essential teaching skills is unsatisfactory, the student will be counseled by the course director and the Associate Dean of Graduate Education and then will complete another MTE to attain mastery of these skills. Mentored teaching opportunities will be reviewed annually to ensure that the experiences meets the requirements established in this policy.

Required Pathways for Completion

Students work with their faculty mentor and their Director of Graduate Studies to plan how and when they will complete their MERs. Students register during the normal registration period for courses in accordance with one of these approved pathways.

- Preparatory Engagement completed during the first year

Pathway #1

MGS 8005	Take one time

Optional Activity: Professional Intensive Pathway (PIP)

The PIP is an optional pathway for those students whose career interests lie outside of academia or who want to benefit from mentored professional experiences (MPEs). An MPE is an unpaid professional experience for PhD students that allows students to develop skills and experiences relevant to their intended career outcomes. Students and mentors complete a mentorship plan prior to the start of each MPE. Students who are interested in participating in this elective experience must formally request to participate, which is subject to program approval. Due to this experience being an elective, unpaid experience, students who participate in the PIP will not receive compensation.

Students and mentors complete a mentorship plan prior to the start of each MPE. To complete each MPE assignment and ensure that it applies toward their degree requirements, students must submit the Mentorship Registration Request form for approval and register for the appropriate course number (MGS 8120 MTE - Mentored Professional Experience) for each semester of engagement.

The DBBS MPE via the PIP is an optional activity. Students should engage in activities that enhance their professional development and record these activities at their thesis update meetings. For some students, an optional MPE is encouraged. The DBBS MPE can be fulfilled by a wide range of activities that advance the careers and professional development of DBBS PhD students. These could include, for example, opportunities in biotech or pharmaceuticals (including at a startup or established company); science communication; science outreach; diversity, equity, and inclusion work; government or policy opportunities; consulting; or higher education administration. Academic-track students may use the MPE to learn a new technique at a core facility or other lab. The duties and responsibilities of the MPE should be intellectually substantive and offer opportunities for the student to develop new skills and experiences. MPEs are distinct from internships in that they are considered part of the PhD training and are recorded on students' transcripts as courses. The scope of the MPE will be determined in conversation among the student, the site mentor, and DBBS staff, and the final plan must be approved by the principal investigator and the program director. An average of 10 hours per week of MPE for a total of 150 to 180 hours is expected for each student. The nature of some MPEs may take students away from their academic pursuits for full-time participation. In these cases, coverage of a percentage of the student's stipend may be pursued by consulting DBBS leadership.

Prior to the start of an MPE, the student and the site mentor will submit a plan to DBBS detailing the scope of the project(s) to be undertaken and including a schedule and list of anticipated outcomes, and the mentor will provide an explicit commitment to the mentorship. This plan should be directly related to the goals developed via the student's recent completion of an Individual Development Plan, and students should enroll in MGS 8120 MTE - Mentored Professional Experience. During the semester, the mentor and the mentee should meet frequently (i.e., weekly or biweekly) to track the progress of the student's work. At the end of the MPE, the mentor should provide a written assessment (approximately 500 words) of the overall learning experience for the student and the quality of the work completed, and the student will submit a self-reflection statement detailing the skills and experiences gained and how their career goals may (or may not) have changed. The mentor will register the completion of MGS 8120 MTE - Mentored Professional Experience as Pass/No Pass.

Optional Pathway

MGS 8120	Take one time