

ASTRONOMY, PHD

The goal of the graduate program is to prepare capable and creative astronomers for careers in research and education. The granting of the PhD degree indicates that the recipient has a mastery of the knowledge and techniques of modern astrophysics. A PhD candidate is expected to be both knowledgeable of problems at the frontiers of astrophysical research and able to carry out independent forefront research in a specialized area. Candidates are required to gain experience as teaching assistants and are encouraged to work with a variety of faculty and research staff members during the first two years of study.

The Department of Astronomy offers the doctor of philosophy in astronomy. Although a master's degree is offered, students generally are not admitted for a terminal master's degree.

The department has a long-standing reputation as one of the finest graduate astronomy and astrophysics programs in the United States. The program provides each student with a broad knowledge of modern observational and theoretical astrophysics, while emphasizing the development of independent research skills. Beginning with the first year in the program, graduate students play an active role in the department's research programs and have access to all research facilities. As teaching assistants, they also acquire experience as astronomy educators.

The faculty are engaged in a broad range of observational and theoretical research. Topics of study include dynamical phenomena of massive stars; binary star evolution; dynamics of star clusters and star forming regions; compact objects; extrasolar planets; the interstellar and intergalactic medium; star formation; plasma astrophysics; computational fluid mechanics; magnetic fields; turbulence; the structure, kinematics, and stellar populations of nearby galaxies; active galactic nuclei; galactic winds and chemical evolution; galaxy clusters; galaxy formation and evolution; the star formation and black hole accretion history of the universe; and the development of innovative astronomical instrumentation. More information is available on the department website.

RESEARCH FACILITIES

Astronomical observations at UW–Madison trace their origin to the 15-inch refractor of Washburn Observatory, founded on the campus in 1878, and still open for public viewing. Wisconsin subsequently pioneered a multi-wavelength approach to astronomical observation. Faculty, research staff, and students are frequent observers on X-ray, ultraviolet, optical, infrared, radio, and submillimeter telescopes around the globe and in space. The department currently participates in the operation of a number of research-class observing facilities and is actively engaged in the development of cutting-edge instrumentation.

The university is a major partner in the WIYN telescope, an advanced technology 3.5m telescope at Kitt Peak, Arizona, optimized for wide-field imaging and spectroscopy, and in the 11m Southern African Large Telescope (SALT), the largest single aperture optical telescope in the Southern Hemisphere. The university is also a partner in the Sloan Digital Sky Survey IV, a massive spectroscopic survey of the distant Universe, nearby galaxies, and stars in the Milky Way. NOEMA, our newest telescope partner, is the most powerful millimeter radio telescope of the Northern Hemisphere and one of the most advanced facilities existing today for radio astronomy. The department is also actively involved in ASKAP and MEERKAT, precursor experiments for an array of radio telescopes one square kilometer in size.

The department has a long history of developing astronomical instrumentation for both ground and space-based facilities. Current efforts center on the development of a near-infrared spectrograph on SALT. UW–Madison scientists are also continuing to develop and operate an innovative and highly successful Star Tracker for sounding rocket and balloon-borne experiments. Technical support is provided by in-house electronics and machine shops.

The theory group uses a variety of facilities to support numerical modeling. The main workhorse comprises 24 dedicated nodes of the campus High Performance Computing (HPC) cluster, each containing 20 CPU cores and 128 GB of RAM, optimized for tightly coupled problems such as magnetohydrodynamical and N-body simulations. A number of smaller clusters within the Astronomy Department are used for development, analysis and three-dimensional visualization.