

Graduate Student Handbook: Math & Stats

Graduate Student Handbook – M.Sc. and Ph.D. in Mathematics, M.Sc. and Ph.D. in Statistics

Updated: August 2023

Note that the Graduate Calendar is the primary authority on graduate policy. In the event that the advice in this handbook differs from the Graduate Calendar, the Graduate Calendar prevails.

This handbook contains practical information about graduate studies in the Mathematics and Statistics programs (M.Sc. and Ph.D.). Graduate students in [Financial Mathematics](#) and [Computational Science and Engineering](#) should consult the handbook and/or website relevant to their program. For general information for graduate students in the Faculty of Science, including a link to the current Graduate Calendar, please go to: [Helpful Links](#).

Contents

1. [Introduction](#)
2. [Contacts](#)
3. [When You Arrive](#)
4. [Program Committee](#)
5. [Annual Events](#)
6. [Degree Specific Information](#)
7. [Skills Training and Other Resources](#)
8. [Teaching Assistant Duties](#)
9. [Useful Links](#)

1. Introduction

Welcome to the Department of Mathematics and Statistics! We are one of the top research departments in Canada. Our research strengths include geometry and topology, mathematical biology, mathematical finance, mathematical logic and foundations, pure and applied partial differential equations, scientific computation and statistics. Our department also has connections to other departments in Science (particularly Physics and Astronomy, Chemistry and Biology) as well as to the faculties of Engineering and Business.

The Department of Mathematics and Statistics is housed in Hamilton Hall, which is one of the original six buildings constructed in 1929 when McMaster University moved from Toronto to Hamilton. After several decades as the Student Union Building, in 2003 Hamilton Hall was renovated specially for the James Stewart Centre for Mathematics. The architects, KPMB, won many awards for the renovation, including the Governor General's Gold Medal for Architecture, the Institute Honor Award from the American Institute of Architects, and the Architectural Record (Interiors) Award. Please visit [KPMB James Stewart Centre for Mathematics website](#) for more information.

The primary goal of our program is to provide high-quality training in mathematical research through advanced coursework and one-on-one mentorship. We also encourage breadth and networking with the broader mathematical and scientific community through weekly research group seminars, the departmental colloquium, and the annual Britton and Nelson lectures. Our Department is also closely engaged with the Field Institute in Toronto; you may take courses through [the Fields Academy](#) and take advanced courses through [thematic programs](#) relevant to your interests. *All graduate students are expected to attend the weekly Colloquium.*

The Associate Chair (Graduate) and the entire department are here to help ensure that you get the most out of your studies, and to prepare you for your future career. Don't hesitate to ask any one of us for advice or support.

2. Contacts

Associate Chair (Graduate)

Ben Bolker
bolkerb@mcmaster.ca; x23320, HH
314

First point of contact for any issues
you might have.

Associate Chair (Statistics)

Shui Feng
shuifeng@mcmaster.ca; x24723 HH
211

First point of contact for graduate
students studying Statistics.

Graduate Administrative Assistants

Emily Warnock; x24582, HH 218
Hanadi Attar-Elbard; x23062, HH
218

graduate@math.mcmaster.ca

Handle general administrative
issues, provide assistance with
forms and help with organizing
M.Sc. defences.

Department Manager

Julie Fogarty
fogarty@mcmaster.ca; x24580, HH
218

Julie handles financial issues and
can answer questions about your
funding.

Assistant Department Manager

Rabia Awan
awanr@mcmaster.ca; x23240, HH
218

Teaching Assistant Coordinator

Aaron Childs
childs@mcmaster.ca; x23426, HH
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Aaron coordinates Teaching
Assistant (TA) assignments.

School of Graduate Studies (SGS)

Gilmour Hall 212
askgrad@mcmaster.ca; x23679

General information about graduate
studies and policies at McMaster.

3. When You Arrive

Come to the front desk in the Departmental Office (HH 218) to pick up the key for your office. We require a \$20 refundable cash deposit in order to issue you a key.

Prior to your arrival, you will have received the following information via email:

- Health and safety package
- Desk assignment
- Email information

- Other orientation information

If you did not receive any of the above information, please contact graduate@math.mcmaster.ca for assistance.

All graduate students must activate their @mcmaster.ca email address and check their email on a regular basis – **the department and School of Graduate Studies will use this email address for all communication with students.**

International (visa) students must go to the School of Graduate Studies with your study permit. For information about study permits, getting your Social Insurance Number, health coverage and general information about living in Hamilton, please visit the following webpages: [Graduate Studies – International Students](#) and [International Student Services](#).

If you have *not* already submitted your official transcripts, please bring them to the graduate administrative assistants in a sealed envelope so they can be forwarded to the School of Graduate Studies.

M.Sc. (thesis) and Ph.D. students: make an appointment to meet with your supervisor.

M.Sc. (project) students: make an appointment to meet with the Associate Chair (Graduate).

Please visit SGS's [New Graduate Orientation Hub](#) for important information ahead of the upcoming term, as well as activities and events.

All graduate students must pass the School of Graduate Studies online courses SGS 101 (Academic Research Integrity and Ethics) and SGS 201 (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act). These mandatory online courses must be completed within the first month of the first term after admission. Information on enrolling and deadlines for completing SGS 101 and 201 are on the [How to Enrol – School of Graduate Studies](#) webpage.

You are expected to apply for all scholarships for which you are eligible (based on your academic record and immigration status). The main awards are the NSERC CGS-Masters and CGS-Doctoral, and the OGS awards. Please look out for emails advising you of application procedures and deadlines and visit [SGS's Scholarship information page](#) for details and information sessions.

4. Program Committee

The Associate Chair (Graduate) works with the Graduate Committee to manage and develop the program. Decisions include curriculum changes (courses to add or remove), changes in course content, and degree requirements. If you have any suggestions for improving the program, please speak to the Associate Chair (Graduate) or any member of the Committee.

Graduate Committee Members, 2023-2024:

Stanley Alama, Ben Bolker (Chair), Lia Bronsard, Shui Feng, Cameron Franc, Jean-Pierre Gabardo, Pratheepa Jeganathan, Siyuan Lu, Patrick Naylor, Traian Pirvu, Eric Sawyer, Patrick Speissegger, McKenzie Wang, Gail Wolkowicz

5. Annual Events

Graduate Day (first week of September)

This is a day-long event for new and returning graduate students. The Associate Chairs and program directors present orientation sessions and representatives from CUPE (the organization representing students in their role as teaching assistants) provide information regarding TAship roles and duties. The day is capped off with a Welcome Reception for everyone in the department. This is a fantastic opportunity to enjoy some free pizza and meet your professors and fellow students.

Britton Lectures

This is a series of four lectures over the course of one week by an internationally renowned mathematician; please visit the [Britton Lectures webpage](#) for a list of past Britton lecturers and topics. These lectures were made possible by a generous endowment from former faculty member Dr. Ron Britton.

Evelyn Nelson Lectures

An annual lecture held since 1991 on foundations of mathematics to honour the memory of former faculty member, Dr. Evelyn Nelson; please visit the [Evelyn Nelson webpage](#) for a list of past lectures.

Symposium Day (June)

M.Sc. (Project) students give oral presentations on their projects in mid-June.

6. Degree Specific Information

Applications

Applicants to admission to the M.Sc. Mathematics or M.Sc. Statistics programs will be considered if they have a B+ average in the two final years of an Honours Bachelors degree in Mathematics or Statistics, or a related area. Applicants should have taken a sufficient number (approximately ten) third and fourth year mathematics or statistics courses. Two strong academic reference letters must also be provided in support of applications.

Students with a degree in engineering, science, health sciences, or social sciences will be considered, provided they have a B+ average with a sufficient mathematics and statistics background. Students coming from other areas may be required to take additional undergraduate courses to make up any deficiencies. If you are unsure whether your background is sufficient, please contact the Associate Chair of the program you are applying for.

Applicants for research-based degrees (thesis Master's or Ph.D.) are typically accepted only after they have been chosen by a supervisor in their proposed area of research. Therefore, applicants wishing to be successful should contact one or more appropriate faculty members (ideally before submitting an application) to confirm that one of them is interested in supervising, and list them as a proposed supervisor in the application.

Applicants for admission to the math Ph.D. program should normally have an M.Sc. from a Canadian university and two strong academic letters of reference. Applicants without a Canadian M.Sc. should apply for the research-based program and indicate interest in the Ph.D. when corresponding with potential supervisors as well as in the Statement of Interest with applying. You may apply to transfer to the Ph.D. program after one year.

For full information about the application procedure please refer to the [Application Procedure webpage](#) on the Mathematics & Statistics site.

Masters Program – Mathematics

Math M.Sc. (Thesis)

Overview

The candidate must complete a minimum of six one-term graduate courses. The candidate must also submit a thesis written under the supervision of a faculty member and based on original research. The thesis is defended at an oral examination; details can be found [here](#).

The duration of the M.Sc. Math Thesis program is normally 20 months (5 academic terms).

Course Information

This selection must include no fewer than four 700-level courses in Mathematics. Students considering doctoral work should complete two of the following two-term course sequences:

- Algebra 701/702
- Analysis 721/722 (alternated with MATH 723 (Functional Analysis))
- Applied Math 741/742

Of the remaining courses, up to two relevant one-term graduate courses from outside mathematics may also be taken for credit. At most two one-term 600-level courses (cross-listed fourth year undergraduate courses) may be counted toward the course requirements.

You must have your course selection approved at the start of each term by your supervisor.

The full list of graduate courses is listed in the [Graduate Calendar](#). A list of the graduate courses actually offered each year is published on the [Graduate Courses webpage](#). Note that some courses are offered in alternate years, for example, the course sequences MATH 731/732 (Algebraic Topology I and II) and MATH 761/762 (Geometric Topology/Differential Geometry), as are MATH 745 (Topics in Numerical Analysis) and MATH 749 (Mathematical and Computational Fluid Dynamics).

Supervisor Information

You should meet regularly with your supervisor (once a week is typical) and respond promptly to emails from them. Be sure to discuss your supervisor's expectations regarding meetings and response times as soon as possible. Advice on ensuring a good relationship with your supervisor is available [here](#).

Math M.Sc. (Project)

Overview

The candidate must complete a minimum of seven one-term graduate courses, including the required course MATH 790 (Major Research Project). A course outline will be distributed for MATH 790 at the beginning of the year with complete information about the project. Students make a written report on their project and give an oral presentation at the Symposium Day in June. Examples of previous projects are available on the [MATH 790 Information webpage](#).

The duration of the M.Sc. Math Project program is normally 10-12 months (3 academic terms).

Course Information

This selection must include no fewer than four 700-level courses in Mathematics. Students considering doctoral work in the future should complete two of the following two-term course sequences:

- Algebra 701/702
- Analysis 721/722 (alternated with MATH 723 (Functional Analysis))
- Applied Math 741/742

Of the remaining courses, up to two relevant one-term graduate courses from outside mathematics may also be taken for credit. At most two one-term 600-level courses (cross-listed fourth year undergraduate courses) may be counted toward the course requirements.

You must have your course selection approved at the start of each term by your supervisor and/or the Associate Chair (Graduate).

The full list of graduate courses is listed in the [Graduate Calendar](#). A list of the graduate courses actually offered each year is published on the [Graduate Courses webpage](#). Note that some courses are offered in alternate years, for example, the course sequences MATH 731/732 (Algebraic Topology I and II) and MATH 761/762 (Geometric Topology/Differential Geometry), as are MATH 745 (Topics in Numerical Analysis) and MATH 749 (Mathematical and Computational Fluid Dynamics).

Supervisor Information

You will not normally have a supervisor when you arrive. Until you find a supervisor for your MATH 790 project, the Associate Chair (Graduate) is your supervisor. You need to find a project supervisor by the end of November; the Associate Chair (Graduate) can help you. Once you have found a supervisor, please let the Associate Chair (Graduate) and Graduate Administrative Assistants know the name of your supervisor and the title of your project.

You should meet regularly with your project supervisor (once a week is typical) and respond promptly to emails from them. Be sure to discuss your supervisor's expectations regarding meetings and response times as soon as possible. Advice on ensuring a good relationship with your supervisor is available [here](#).

Masters Program – Statistics

Students can earn the M.Sc. degree following one of the options below. In both options, students can take up to two 600-level STATS courses to fulfill their graduate course requirements. All Statistics M.Sc. students are required to take the zero-credit statistics seminar courses, STATS 770 and STATS 772. In addition, the following apply to students in different options.

Statistics M.Sc. (Thesis)

Students choosing the Thesis Option are required to complete six one-term graduate courses (consisting of either three core and three elective courses, *or* two core and four elective courses) and a thesis. Equivalent in work to two one-term courses, the thesis is written under the supervision of a faculty member in the program on a topic of mutual interest to the student and supervisor. The thesis is defended at an oral exam; details can be found [here](#).

The degree requirements are normally completed within 16 months (four academic terms).

Statistics M.Sc. (Coursework)

Students choosing the Coursework Option must complete STATS 771, which develops report-writing skills through critical written reviews of seminars. In addition, the coursework option requires completion of seven one-term graduate courses (consisting of either three core and four elective courses *or* two core and five elective courses). The seminar course is the research component for this option.

The degree requirements are normally completed 2 academic terms (i.e. Fall and Winter).

Course Information (Thesis and Coursework)

In the Statistics program, there are core, seminar and elective courses.

The core courses cover fundamental theoretical concepts in statistics and probability. The core courses are:

- STATS 710: Statistical Inference
- STATS 720: Statistical Modelling
- STATS 782: Advanced Probability Theory

Elective courses cover a sufficient variety of topics to offer students a choice based upon their individual interests. Approved courses from other graduate programs may be taken as elective courses with permission of the program.

M.Sc. Students Transferring to the Ph.D.

There are three ways to transfer from the M.Sc. to Ph.D. program. Each option requires that you identify a supervisor willing to supervise your Ph.D. research.

- Transfer directly to the Ph.D. program without completing an M.Sc.:
 - First registering for the Thesis option and then applying to transfer after 12 to 20 months.
- Transfer to the Ph.D. and complete the M.Sc. after the transfer.
- Complete the M.Sc. and then transfer.

All of the options listed above require completion of six one-term graduate courses, taking and passing the qualifying exam, submission of a research proposal, and a statement of support by your proposed supervisor.

Students who opt to complete the M.Sc. can only apply credits that have not been counted toward the master's degree (you cannot apply the same course credit toward two degrees). Successful applicants who opt out of completing the M.Sc. may apply all accumulated credits to the Ph.D. degree, but are still required to complete two one-term courses beyond the M.Sc. once registered in the Ph.D. program.

M.Sc. students wishing to transfer must submit the [Request for Change of Status form](#).

Ph.D. Programs

The Ph.D. programs focus on original research done under the supervision of a faculty member (their "supervisor"). Students are typically admitted with a supervisor, although in exceptional cases it may be possible to change supervisors.

All Ph.D. students must:

- Develop a research program.

- Complete the course requirements; please see the details for each specific program below.
- Pass the qualifying and comprehensive exams (math) or both parts of the comprehensive exams (statistics).
- Attend the weekly Departmental Colloquium; students in the Ph.D. program are expected to participate in the seminar relevant to their field of study.
- Be jointly responsible with their supervisor for the organization of the (at least) annual meetings of the supervisory committee and the timely submission of the written report to the department.
- Write an acceptable thesis based on original research and present an oral defence of the thesis.

Supervision and the Supervisory Committee

You should meet regularly with your supervisor (once a week is typical) and respond promptly to emails from your supervisor. Be sure to discuss your supervisor's expectations regarding meetings and response times as early as possible. Advice on ensuring a good relationship with your supervisor is highly recommended can be found [here](#).

All Ph.D. students must have a supervisory committee, which consists of the supervisor and two or three additional faculty members. The committee meets with the student at least annually to chart progress toward the degree. The supervisory committee members, chosen for their expertise relevant to your research, can be a valuable resource for technical help and varying points of view. The supervisory committee members also take part in the oral comprehensive exam and the thesis defence.

The Written Thesis and the Ph.D. Oral Defence

Student submitting a Ph.D. thesis must follow the procedures described in the [Graduate Calendar](#). In particular, note that authorization of the Supervisory Committee must be obtained before preparing the final version of the thesis, and that the format of the typed thesis should be exactly as specified in the "[Guide for the Preparation of Theses](#)". The Supervisory Committee must also approve the final version of the thesis for submission.

Full details for the thesis format, and the processes of planning the defence and submitting the final thesis are available from the [School of Graduate Studies](#).

Ph.D. Mathematics

Course Requirements

Students choose their courses in consultation with the Mathematics Graduate Advisor, their Supervisor, and/or other members of the supervisory committee. A student may be asked to take courses beyond the minimum requirement, and the minimum course requirement should be completed in the first year of study. A student who fails a prescribed graduate, prerequisite undergraduate, or required extra course, must withdraw from the university unless the Faculty Committee on Graduate Admissions and Study approves a suitable recommendation from the Department of Mathematics & Statistics.

Qualifying and Comprehensive Exams

Qualifying Exam

The qualifying exam is a written exam testing the breadth of knowledge and covers material that is typically taught at the undergraduate level. Qualifying exams in Mathematics are offered in pure math and applied math. Passing the qualifying exam (or a part thereof) before entering the Ph.D. program or otherwise demonstrating that one possesses the required knowledge will be recognized as equivalent to passing the qualifying exam (or part).

The qualifying exam is offered each academic year in January and May and should be completed within eight months of entering the Ph.D. program (if not already completed as a M.Sc. student). Students who do not successfully complete the comprehensive exam requirements within 16 months of entering the program may be asked to withdraw due to lack of progress. *Note that few students completely pass the qualifying exam on their first attempt; please take this into account when deciding when you will attempt the exam.*

Ph.D. students who do not completely pass the qualifying exam on their first attempt are permitted a second attempt at the components they did not pass (see below).

The qualifying exam is made up of two parts: Part A, core and Part B, specialized material. To pass, students must answer four (out of six) questions from Part A and three (out of four) questions from Part B. All questions are weighted evenly. Students must:

- Demonstrate a complete understanding (at least 8/10 points) of at least 3 problems (out of 6) in Part A,

- Demonstrate a complete understanding (at least 8/10 points) of at least 2 problems (out of 4) in Part B,
- Obtain a total score of at least 42 points out of 70 (for the seven attempted problems).

The two parts may be passed separately. Students must take both parts on their first attempt. The maximum of two attempts for students in the Ph.D. program still applied; i.e., after their initial attempt Ph.D. students still have one more chance where they can choose to re-take the full exam or take only the part that they failed previously. Students must declare which part(s) they are attempting; scores replace those from the previous attempt. Two hours will be allowed for Part A alone, 90 minutes for Part B alone. The total-point requirement (42 points overall) may be satisfied by the combination of two parts passed separately.

Information on the next offering of the Math Qualifying Exam will be updated soon; sample exams from previous years can be found [here](#).

Comprehensive Exam

All Ph.D. students must pass an oral examination testing their depth of knowledge in the general area of their proposed research. The subject matter for the oral exam is based on a body of knowledge agreed upon by the student and their supervisor. The exam typically takes one of two forms:

Advanced Topics: An oral examination by the examining committee on advanced topics in the student's general research area. The examination topics should not be limited to graduate courses the student has taken.

Research Proposal: A 15-minute oral presentation by the student, followed by questions from the examining committee. The student should explain the contribution their proposed research would make to the existing body of knowledge. The student should provide the committee with a 10-page written summary of their presentation, including a literature survey and a short research proposal, at least one week before the exam.

The examining committee consists of three faculty members, including the supervisor, who is the Chair of the examining committee. The committee will agree on a written description of the topics to be covered by the exam; the description should include suggested references (published papers and/or monographs) and should be communicated to the student at least four weeks in advance of the exam. The oral exam normally lasts one hour, and should not exceed two hours. Students who do not pass the oral exam on their first attempt are permitted a second attempt at the same exam. The comprehensive exam should be taken after the qualifying exam, normally between 12 – 20 months after the student begins doctoral-level work at McMaster University, with an upper limit of 24 months.

Ph.D. Statistics

Course Requirements

Students who are granted admission having completed an M.Sc. degree in Statistics (or a related area) are required to take two 700 level (STATS or comparable) courses (total of 6 units) that have been approved by the supervisor. Students who are granted admission having completed a B.Sc. degree in Statistics (or a related area) are required to take four 700 level (STATS or comparable) courses (total of 12 units) that have been approved by the supervisor. Students who transfer into the Ph.D. program while also taking the M.Sc. in Statistics degree are required to take two 700 level (STATS or comparable) courses (total of 6 units) that have been approved by the supervisor. Students who transfer into the Ph.D. program in Statistics without taking the M.Sc. in Statistics degree must complete the course requirements for the M.Sc. in Statistics with a GPA of at least 10 and pass a transfer examination administered by the supervisory committee prior to transferring; however, for such students, no courses are required after transferring.

Comprehensive Exam

During their course of study, students will have to pass a comprehensive examination. The comprehensive examination will be in two parts. Part I is a written examination designed to test breadth of knowledge in Statistics. Part II is a written literature review, a research proposal, and an oral examination. Part I must be passed before Part II may be attempted. Students who are unsuccessful in their first attempt at Part I may repeat the exam once. Students who are unsuccessful in their second attempt at Part I will be required to withdraw from the program. Students who are unsuccessful in their first attempt at Part II may repeat the exam once. Students who are unsuccessful in their second attempt at Part II will be required to withdraw from the program.

7. Skills Training and Other Resources

The School of Graduate Studies and the MacPherson Institute offer a wide range of skills training modules and workshops. Topics including academic writing, academic job search, teaching and many others. Please take advantage of these opportunities to build your skill set and set yourself up to succeed in your future careers.

- [Graduate Community Resources](#)
- [Career and Professional Development](#)
- [Teaching & Learning Certificates of Completion Program](#)

The MacPherson Institute also offers opportunities for community engagement through [MCYU](#) (McMaster Children and Youth University).

8. Teaching Assistant (TA) Duties

Almost all graduate students work as teaching assistants (TAs). This is a paid position that is part of your financial offer on admission. Typically graduate students work 266 hours per year, although this amount varies. Note that you *cannot* work more than 1005 hours in total, including your 266 TA hours.

Your TA work is governed by the [collective agreement](#) negotiated between the University and the TA union [CUPE 3906](#). This agreement is renegotiated regularly, and in the case that the information in this document disagrees with the collective agreement, it is the collective agreement that takes precedence.

Further details regarding TA duties will be shared during our annual Graduate Day, held in early September.

The Teaching Assistant Coordinator is responsible for assigning TA duties, which may include the following:

- invigilating tests and exams
- marking assignments and tests
- staffing the Math Help Centre
- running tutorials
- teaching courses (primarily summer courses)

Assignment of TA Duties

The TA Coordinator assigns TA duties to each TA at the beginning of each term based on the expressed preferences of the TA, the abilities and experience of the TA and the teaching needs of the Department. You may be assigned to several courses in a single term to fulfil your total TA hours. The precise nature of the work is determined by your supervisor (e.g. the Math Help Centre coordinator or the professor teaching the course).

TAs typically start with marking and/or working in the Math Help Centre. If a TA does well in the Math Help Centre they are likely to be assigned to run a tutorial, and if they do well running tutorials they could be asked to teach a course (although there are currently relatively few opportunities for TAs to teach a course).

If you are interested in running a tutorial or teaching a course, please let the TA Coordinator know in advance.

Evaluation and training

Regular feedback is an important part of becoming a good teacher. TAs running tutorials or teaching courses receive student evaluations, just as professors do.

If you are working in the Math Help Centre you can ask the Math Help Centre Coordinator for feedback; if you are TAing for a course you should ask the professor you are working for to sit in on one of your tutorials to provide feedback. The TA Coordinator can also provide feedback on your performance.

If you feel your English language skills (spoken or written) could be improved you should speak to the TA Coordinator or the Associate Chair (Graduate) about opportunities for ESL (English as a Second Language) training. Excellent English language skills are an asset not only for your TA work, but also for your thesis and your future career.

The MacPherson Institute offers many courses on [Professional Development for Teaching](#); take advantage of them.

A teaching letter is an essential part of an application for academic jobs (post-doctoral fellowships, tenure track positions) so you should ensure that there is at least one faculty member who can write knowledgeably about your teaching.

9. Useful Links

- [School of Graduate Studies](#)
- [SGS Forms and Policies](#)
- [Guidelines for Prospective Graduate Students from Outside Canada](#)
- [McMaster Math & Statistics Graduate Society](#)
- [M.Sc. & Ph.D. Degrees Awarded](#)

Mailing Address

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Contact Information

Office Hours:
8:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.
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undergrad@math.mcmaster.ca

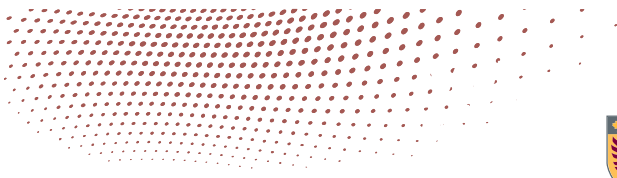
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