PHYSICS

In the Department of Physics and Astronomy

Chair, Professor Charles Conover
Professors Robert Bluhm, Charles Conover, and Duncan Tate; Associate Professor Jonathan McCoy; Assistant Professors Dale Kocevski and Elizabeth McGrath; Faculty Fellow Shreyashi Chakdar; Senior Laboratory Instructor Lisa Lessard

The Department of Physics and Astronomy offers several programs: (1) the physics major, (2) the physics major with a concentration in astrophysics, (3) the astronomy minor, and (4) the physics minor. The astronomy minor is described in the “Astronomy” section of the catalogue.

Physicists study nature and how things work on levels ranging from the smallest subatomic and atomic scales, through intermediate scales describing matter in its various forms, up to the largest astrophysical scales of galaxies and the universe as a whole. Physics and astronomy students acquire skills in qualitative descriptions and explanations of physical phenomena, mathematical analysis of physical phenomena, experimental measurement and instrumentation, theoretical and numerical modeling, scientific writing, and oral presentation. Flexible major and minor programs are designed to fit within a liberal arts education and to provide preparation for careers or advanced training in science, teaching, business, medical professions, and engineering. The department welcomes students from all majors and with diverse backgrounds.

The introductory course sequence, Physics 141 (or 143) and 145, provides a solid basis for further work in physics as well as preparation for medical school and advanced study in other sciences. These courses also provide excellent preparation for students who plan to enter professions such as law, teaching, and business. The intermediate and advanced course offerings in the department provide a strong background for graduate study in physics, astronomy, engineering, and interdisciplinary fields such as biophysics, neuroscience, environmental science, medical physics, and bioengineering.

Emphasis is placed on independent work and cooperative research with the faculty in atomic, molecular, and optical physics, condensed-matter physics, theoretical physics, and astronomy. All faculty members have active research programs that involve undergraduate contributions. Research projects make use of the department’s well-equipped laboratories, computer workstations, the Collins and Young Observatories, and supporting technical shops.

Students seeking a career in engineering may consider applying to an exchange program in which both a bachelor of arts and a bachelor of engineering can be earned upon successful completion of a joint program with Dartmouth College or Columbia University. Interested students should consult with the engineering advisor before selecting their first-semester courses.

Physics 141, 145, 241, and 242 form a comprehensive introduction to classical and modern physics. For students with a previous background in physics and calculus from high school, Physics 143 may be taken instead of Physics 141.

No requirements for the physics major, the physics major with a concentration in astrophysics, or the physics minor may be taken satisfactory/unsatisfactory. Grade point averages for the department’s majors and minors are calculated using all courses that can satisfy the requirements listed below.

Students considering graduate school in physics or astronomy are strongly encouraged to take all of the following courses: Mathematics 253, 262, 311, 352, Physics 253, 311, 321, 332, and 431.

Requirements for the Physics Major

Physics majors have a lot of flexibility in choosing the courses that are most appropriate for them. Students should work closely with their advisors in selecting courses to fulfill the requirements for the major and satisfy their academic goals. Not all upper-level elective courses are offered every year. Physics 415, taken in the fall of the senior year, involves completing an independent project, internship, or research in physics or a related field. All students are invited to attend the colloquia presented by faculty, senior students, and visiting scientists; senior physics majors are required to participate by enrolling in Physics 401, 402.

Required Physics Courses (unless exempted by advanced placement)

Physics

- 141 Foundations of Mechanics (or 143 Honors Physics)
- 145 Foundations of Electromagnetism and Optics
- 241 Modern Physics I
- 242 Modern Physics II
- 401-402 Senior Physics and Astronomy Colloquium
- 415 Physics and Astronomy Research (Physics 483-484 for students completing the honors major)

Mathematics and Computer Science Courses: Choose four (unless exempted by advanced placement); no more than one of the courses should be in computer science.

Computer Science (152 is recommended over 151)
151 Computational Thinking: Visual Media
152 Computational Thinking: Science

Mathematics
121 Single-Variable Calculus (or 161 Honors Calculus I)
122 Series and Multi-Variable Calculus (or 162 Honors Calculus II)
253 Linear Algebra
262 Vector Calculus
311 Ordinary Differential Equations

Elective Courses: Choose at least three. At least two must be 300-level or higher physics or astronomy courses, and at least one 300-level or higher physics or astronomy course must be taken at Colby.

Astronomy
231 Introduction to Astrophysics
342 Galaxies and Cosmology

Biology
274 Neurobiology

Chemistry
255 Nuclear Magnetic Resonance
341 Physical Chemistry: Thermodynamics and Kinetics

Mathematics
332 Numerical Analysis

Physics
253 Electronic Measurement in the Sciences
311 Classical Mechanics
312 Physics of Fluids
321 Electricity and Magnetism
332 Thermodynamics and Statistical Mechanics
333 Experimental Soft Matter Physics
334 Experimental Atomic Physics
335 General Relativity and Cosmology
338 Nuclear and Particle Physics
431 Quantum Mechanics

Requirements for the Physics Major with a Concentration in Astrophysics

Students should work closely with their advisors in selecting courses to fulfill the requirements for the concentration. Not all upper-level courses are offered every year. Astronomy 231 and one 300-level physics or astronomy course must be taken at Colby. All senior physics majors are required to participate in department colloquia by enrolling in Physics 401 and 402. For students electing the astrophysics concentration, Physics 415 should focus on a topic in astrophysics or a closely related field.

Required Courses (unless exempted by advanced placement)

Physics
141 Foundations of Mechanics (or 143 Honors Physics)
145 Foundations of Electromagnetism and Optics
241 Modern Physics I
242 Modern Physics II
401-402 Senior Physics and Astronomy Colloquium
415 Physics and Astronomy Research (Physics 483-484 for students completing the honors major)

Astronomy
231 Introduction to Astrophysics
342 Galaxies and Cosmology
397 Topics in Astrophysics

Computer Science – Choose one (152 is recommended)
151 Computational Thinking: Visual Media
152 Computational Thinking: Science
Mathematics – Choose three (unless exempted by advanced placement)

- 121 Single-Variable Calculus (or 161 Honors Calculus I)
- 122 Series and Multi-Variable Calculus (or 162 Honors Calculus II)
- 253 Linear Algebra
- 262 Vector Calculus
- 311 Ordinary Differential Equations

Elective Courses: Choose at least two. At least one must be a 300-level or higher physics or astronomy course.

Astronomy
- 335 General Relativity and Cosmology

Computer Science
- 231 Data Structures and Algorithms
- 251 Data Analysis and Visualization

Mathematics
- 381 Mathematical Statistics I: Probability

Physics
- 311 Classical Mechanics
- 321 Electricity and Magnetism
- 332 Thermodynamics and Statistical Mechanics
- 338 Nuclear and Particle Physics
- 431 Quantum Mechanics

Statistics
- 212 Introduction to Statistical Methods
- 321 Applied Regression Modeling

Requirements for Honors in Physics and Physics with a Concentration in Astrophysics

In the junior year, physics majors may apply for admission to the honors program. A 3.25 grade point average in courses that can count toward the major is normally required. Successful completion of the honors program will result in the degree being awarded with “Honors in Physics” or “Honors in Physics with a Concentration in Astrophysics.”

Honors majors in physics must, in addition to fulfilling the requirements for the major, take three additional 300-level or higher physics courses and one additional 200-level or higher mathematics course. In fulfilling these requirements, students must take at least one upper-level experimental course (Astronomy 231, Physics 253, 333, or 334). In their senior year, they must also take Physics 483 and 484 Independent Honors Project in the place of Physics 415. A written honors thesis is required. A thesis completed as part of the Senior Scholars Program may be substituted for the honors thesis.

Honors majors with a concentration in astrophysics must, in addition to fulfilling the requirements for the concentration, take three additional electives, two of which must be 300-level or higher physics or astronomy courses. In their senior year, they must also take Physics 483 and 484 Independent Honors Project in the place of Physics 415. A written honors thesis is required. It is expected that students electing the astrophysics concentration will focus their honors thesis on a topic in astrophysics.

Requirements for the Minor in Physics

Physics 141 (or 143), 145, 241, 242 (or 300-level or higher physics or astronomy course), Mathematics 121 (or 161), 122 (or 162).

Course Offerings

[PH120]  Space ... The Final Frontier  This writing-intensive course will use the exploration of other worlds, real and imagined, as an opportunity to investigate the shifting relationships between science, science fiction, and fantasy. Students will consider the social and political implications of human exploration, together with the science behind space travel and the historical development of the NASA space program in particular. Literature and films will be treated as texts, illustrating key elements of written craftsmanship such as word choice, style, structure, and narrative. Four credit hours. W1.

PH141f  Foundations of Mechanics  A calculus-based survey of classical Newtonian mechanics, including kinematics, forces, work and energy, momentum, gravity, oscillations, and waves. These topics are developed further in discussions, labs, and problem-solving
PH143f  Honors Physics  An accelerated, calculus-based, introductory course on Newtonian mechanics supplemented with some coverage of additional special topics. Intended for students who have had substantial courses in physics and calculus in high school. Topics in Newtonian mechanics include kinematics, dynamics, conservation laws, oscillations, and waves. Additional topics include special relativity and nuclear physics. Students acquire knowledge in these areas and skills for solving mathematical problems and doing laboratory work. May not be taken for credit if the student has earned credit for Physics 141.  Four credit hours.  N, Lb.  MCCOY

PH145s  Foundations of Electromagnetism and Optics  Explores the foundations of electrical and magnetic forces, electromagnetic waves, and optics. Students will learn how electric and magnetic fields are described mathematically, how they are interrelated, and how the interrelations lead to a wide variety of physical phenomena. Practical applications in electric circuits and optical devices are explored. These topics are developed further in discussions, laboratory exercises, and out-of-class assignments.  Prerequisite:  Physics 141 or 143, and Mathematics 102, 121, or 161.  Four credit hours.  N, Lb.  BLUHM

PH231f  Introduction to Astrophysics  Listed as Astronomy 231.  Four credit hours.  N, Lb.  MCGRATH

PH241f  Modern Physics I  An introduction to the two central paradigms of non-Newtonian physics: Einstein's special theory of relativity and the quantum behavior of light and matter. The postulates of Einstein are presented and the consequences explored theoretically along with experimental evidence for relativity. The experimental evidence for quantum mechanics is considered from a historical perspective, beginning with Planck's quantum hypothesis for blackbody radiation through to the Bohr model of the hydrogen atom and the experimental evidence for the Schrödinger equation. Students will acquire skills in solving mathematical problems, advanced laboratory work, and scientific writing. Lecture, discussion, and laboratory. Students must be available for a self-scheduled lab outside of class time for approximately three hours every second week.  Prerequisite:  Physics 145 and Mathematics 122 or 162.  Four credit hours.  CONOVER

PH242s  Modern Physics II  An intermediate-level introduction to quantum mechanics and atomic physics. Topics include the Schrödinger equation, interpretation of the wave function, one-dimensional potentials, hydrogen atom, electron spin, exclusion principle, atomic structure, and atomic spectra. Lectures, discussions, and labs. Enrolled students must be available for a self-scheduled lab outside of class time for approximately three hours every second week.  Prerequisite:  Physics 241.  Four credit hours.  CONOVER

PH253j  Electronic Measurement in the Sciences  Electronic measurements are used in all of the sciences as well as interdisciplinary research areas such as environmental science. Provides an introduction to experiment control and measurement instrumentation using modern electronics. Emphasizes laboratory work and includes design and implementation of electronic measurement and signal processing methods. Advanced analysis techniques will be introduced. Normally offered every other year.  Prerequisite:  Physics 145 and Mathematics 122 or 162.  N, Lb.  BLUHM

PH311s  Classical Mechanics  Newton's laws, oscillatory motion, noninertial reference systems, classical gravitation, motion of rigid bodies, and Lagrangian and Hamiltonian mechanics. Lecture and discussion.  Prerequisite:  Physics 145 and Mathematics 122 or 162.  Four credit hours.  CHAKDAR

PH312s  Physics of Fluids  All living things, from the smallest cells to the largest communities, are soaking in or swimming through the fluid environment of liquids and gases that covers the planet. Our understanding of fluid motion helps us build better airplanes, debate climate change, and discover new design principles in biology. We will view this subject as an exciting, interdisciplinary opportunity to see the laws of physics in action. Emphasis will be on a core set of basic concepts and mathematical tools used to describe fluids and explore a range of applications drawn from biology, chemistry, geophysics, and engineering.  Prerequisite:  Mathematics 262 and Physics 242.  Four credit hours.  MCCOY

PH321f  Electricity and Magnetism  A theoretical treatment of electrostatics and magnetostatics in vacuum and material media through Maxwell's equations. Lecture and discussion.  Prerequisite:  Physics 145 and Mathematics 262.  Four credit hours.  KOCEVSKI

PH332f  Thermodynamics and Statistical Mechanics  Examines the concepts of temperature, energy, heat, work, and entropy. Thermodynamic relations between these quantities are studied from both a microscopic and macroscopic point of view. The laws of thermodynamics are developed from an underlying statistical treatment. Topics such as heat flows, heat engines, phase transitions, chemical reactions, Bose-Einstein and Fermi-Dirac statistics, and blackbody radiation are discussed. Lecture and discussion.  Prerequisite:  Mathematics 122 (or 162) and either Physics 242 (may be taken concurrently) or Chemistry 342 (may be taken concurrently).  Four credit hours.  MCCOY
PH333  Experimental Soft Matter Physics  An introduction to scientific research, focusing on soft matter physics and nonlinear science. Uses advanced experimental topics such as Brownian motion, pattern formation, hydrodynamic instabilities, and chaos to provide basic training in modern interdisciplinary research methods. Strong emphasis will be placed on the use of computers and computer programming, image analysis, wet lab techniques, and other broadly applicable skills, including the reading and writing of scientific research articles.  
Prerequisite:  Physics 242 and Mathematics 262.  Four credit hours.

PH334  Experimental Atomic Physics  Laboratory projects in modern atomic, molecular, and optical (AMO) physics. Experiments include observing the Zeeman effect in mercury using a grating spectrometer, Doppler-free diode laser spectroscopy, and magneto-optical trapping of rubidium atoms. Through these and other projects, students will learn cutting-edge techniques of modern AMO physics. In addition they will become familiar with, and be expected to engage in, communication of results both orally and in written form. Laboratory and tutorial. Some out-of-class participation required.  
Prerequisite:  Physics 242.  Three credit hours.

PH335  General Relativity and Cosmology  An introduction to Einstein’s general theory of relativity, including a treatment of tensor analysis, Einstein’s equations, Schwarzschild metric, black holes, expansion of the universe, and cosmology.  
Prerequisite:  Physics 241.  Four credit hours.

PH338  Nuclear and Particle Physics  An overview of nuclear and particle physics. Topics in nuclear physics include radioactivity, nuclear reactions and decays, and nuclear models. In particle physics, topics include relativistic particle interactions, the strong and weak interactions, the standard model description of quarks, leptons, and gauge fields, and ideas for new physics that goes beyond the standard model.  
Prerequisite:  Physics 242.  Four credit hours.

PH342s  Galaxies and Cosmology  Listed as Astronomy 342.  Four credit hours.  KOCEVSKI

PH401f, 402s  Senior Physics and Astronomy Colloquium  A colloquium series with presentations by visiting scientists, department faculty, and senior physics majors. Visitors and faculty present their current research. Seniors present formal oral presentations on their senior projects or honors theses. Non-graded.  
One credit hour for the year.  Noncredit.  BLUHM

PH415f, 416js  Physics and Astronomy Research  A guided research project on a topic in physics, astronomy, or a related area. Students may choose from a range of approaches, including literature searches, analytical and computational analyses, experimental data collection and analysis, and theoretical investigation. Some project components can be conducted off campus or as part of a team project. Physics 415 is required for all senior physics majors.  
One or two credit hours.  FACULTY

PH431f  Quantum Mechanics  Study of the structure and interpretation of quantum mechanics at an advanced level. Quantum states and observables are described in terms of abstract state vectors and operators. Students learn about representations of state vectors and operators in terms of wave functions and differential operators in addition to the tools of linear algebra: vectors and matrices. We will approach the abstract representation of quantum objects using the concrete example of spin-1/2 particles and photons to provide insight into fundamental principles. Deep issues concerning the nature of locality and realism are explored. Weekly discussions and problem-solving assignments are used to clarify concepts. Should be taken by students intending to go to graduate school in physics or a related area.  
Prerequisite:  Physics 242 and Mathematics 253.  Four credit hours.  CHAKDAR

PH483fj  Independent Honors Project  Research conducted under the guidance of a faculty member and focused on an approved topic leading to the writing of an honors thesis.  
Two to four credit hours.  FACULTY

PH491f, 492s  Independent Study  Individual topics or research in areas where the student has demonstrated the interest and competence necessary for independent work.  
Prerequisite:  Permission of the instructor.  One to five credit hours.  FACULTY