DEPARTMENT OF CHEMICAL ENGINEERING

Graduate Study

Graduate study provides both rigorous training in the fundamental core discipline of chemical engineering and the opportunity to focus on specific subdisciplines. In addition to completing the four core subject requirements in thermodynamics, reaction engineering, numerical methods, and transport phenomena, students select a research advisor and area for specialization, some of which are discussed below.

Thermodynamics and Molecular Computation. Thermodynamics is a cornerstone of chemical engineering. Processes as diverse as chemical production, bioreaction, creation of advanced materials, protein separation, and environmental treatment are governed by thermodynamics. The classical concepts of equilibrium, reversibility, energy, and entropy are basic to the analysis and design of these processes. The extension of classical thermodynamics to molecular scales by use of statistical mechanics has made molecular simulation an increasingly valuable tool for the chemical engineer. Prediction of macroscopic behavior from molecular computations is becoming ever more feasible. This venerable field continues to yield fruitful areas of inquiry.

Opportunities in the department for graduate study in this field include predicting properties of materials and polymers from molecular structure, applying quantum mechanics to catalyst design, supercritical fluid processing, the behavior of complex fluids with environmental and biomedical applications, phase equilibrium with simple and complex molecular species, immunology, protein stabilization, nucleation and crystallization of polymer and pharmaceuticals, and many other areas of classical and statistical thermodynamics.

Transport Processes. A fluid deforming and flowing as forces are imposed on it, its temperature varying as heat is transferred through it, the interdiffusion of its distinct molecular species—these are examples of the processes of transport. These transport processes govern the rates at which velocity, temperature, and composition vary in a fluid; chemical engineers study transport to be able to describe, predict, and manage these changes. Research includes experimental testing and analytical and computational modeling; its applications range among an enormous variety of mechanical, chemical, and biological processes.

Current work includes the study of polymer molecular theory and polymer processing, transport and separations in magnetorheological fluids, membrane separations, diffusion in complex fluids, defect formation and evolution in near-crystalline materials, microfluidics, fluid instability, transport in living tissue, numerical solution of field equations, and many other areas of transport phenomena.

Catalysis and Chemical Reaction Engineering. A simple chemical reaction—the rearrangement of electrons and bonding partners—occurs between two small molecules. From understanding the kinetics of the reaction, and the equilibrium extent to which it can proceed, come applications: the network of reactions during combustion, the chain reactions that form polymers, the multiple steps in the synthesis of a complex pharmaceutical molecule, the specialized reactions of proteins and metabolism. Chemical kinetics is the chemical engineer's tool for understanding chemical change.

A catalyst influences the reaction rate. Catalysts are sought for increasing production, improving the reaction conditions, and emphasizing a desired product among several possibilities. The challenge is to design the catalyst, to increase its effectiveness and stability, and to create methods to manufacture it.

A chemical reactor should produce a desired product reliably, safely, and economically. In designing a reactor, the chemical engineer must consider how the chemical kinetics, often modified by catalysis, interacts with the transport phenomena in flowing materials. New microreactor designs are expanding the concept of what a reactor may do, how reactions may be conducted, and what is required to scale a process from laboratory to production.

Research is being conducted in the department at the forefront of catalyst design, complex chemical synthesis, bioreactor design, surface- and gas-phase chemistry, miniaturization of reactors, mathematical modeling of chemical reaction networks, and many other areas of chemical reaction engineering. Applications include the manufacturing of chemicals, refining of fuels for transportation and power, and microreactors for highly reactive or potentially hazardous materials.

Polymers. Wondrous materials found in nature and now synthesized in enormous quantity and variety, polymers find an ever-increasing use in manufactured products. Polymers are versatile because their properties are so wide-ranging, as is evident even in the conceptually simple polymers made from a single molecular species. The versatility becomes more profound in the copolymers made from multiple precursors, and the polymers compounded with filler materials. Research in polymers encompasses the chemical reactions of their formation, methods of processing them into products, means of modifying their physical properties, and the relationship between the properties and the underlying molecular- and solid-phase structure.

Graduate research opportunities in the department include studies of polymerization kinetics, non-Newtonian rheology, polymer thin films and interfaces, block copolymers, liquid crystalline polymers, nanocomposites and nanofibers, self-assembly and patterning, and many other areas of polymer science and engineering. In addition to a program in graduate study in polymers within the department, the interdisciplinary Program in Polymers and Soft Matter (PPSM) provides a community for researchers in the polymer field and offers a program of study that focuses on the interdisciplinary nature of polymer science and engineering.

Materials. The inorganic compounds found in nature are the basis for new materials made by modifying molecular composition (such as purifying silicon and doping it with selected impurities) and structure (such as control of pore and grain size). These materials have electronic, mechanical, and optical properties that support a variety of novel technologies. Other materials are applied as coatings—thin films that create a functional surface. Still other materials have biological applications, such as diagnostic sensors that are compatible with living tissue, barriers that control the release of pharmaceutical molecules, and scaffolds for tissue repair. A new generation of biomaterials is being derived from biological molecules. Research in materials is wide-ranging and highly interdisciplinary, both fundamental and applied. In the department, materials research includes studies in plasma etching, thin-film chemical vapor deposition, crystal growth, nano-crystalline structure, molecular simulation, scaffolds for bone and soft tissue regeneration, biocompatible polymers, and many other areas of materials engineering.

Surfaces and Nanostructures. In many arrangements of matter, the interfaces between phases—more than their bulk compositions —are critical to the material structure and behavior. The surfaces of solids offer a platform for functional coating; coatings may be deposited from vapor, applied as a volatile liquid, or assembled from solution onto the solid, in a pattern determined by the molecular properties. This self-assembly tendency may be exploited to arrange desired patterns that have operational properties. Interfacial effects are also responsible for stable dispersions of immiscible phases, leading to fluids with complex microstructure. Other structured fluids arise from large molecules whose orientation in the solvent is constrained by molecular size and properties. In solids, tight control of pore size, grain size, chemical composition, and crystal structure offer a striking range of catalytic, mechanical, and electromagnetic properties. The understanding of gas-solid kinetics is crucial to the study of heterogeneous catalysis and integrated circuit fabrication. Structure is the basis for function, and by manipulating tiny length scales, the resulting nanostructure makes available new capabilities, and thus new technologies and products. Graduate study in surfaces and nanostructures may include studies of colloids, emulsions, surfactants, and other structured fluids with biological, medical, or environmental applications. It also encompasses thin films, liquid crystals, sol-gel processing, control of pharmaceutical morphology, nanostructured materials, carbon nanotubes, surface chemistry, surface patterning, and many other areas of nanotechnology and surface science.

Biological Engineering. Chemical engineering thermodynamics, transport, and chemical kinetics, so useful for manufacturing processes, are fruitful tools for exploring biological systems as well. Biological engineering research may be directed at molecular-level processes, the cell, tissues, the organism, and large-scale manufacturing in biotech processes. It may be applied to producing specialized proteins, genetic modification of cells, transport of nutrients and wastes in tissue, therapeutic methods of drug delivery, tissue repair and generation, purification of product molecules, and control strategies for complex bioproduction plants. Its methods include analytical chemistry and biochemistry techniques, bioinformatic processing of data, and computational solution of chemical reaction and transport models. Biological engineering is an extraordinarily rich area for chemical engineers, and its consequences—theoretical, medical, commercial—will be far-reaching.

Opportunities in the department for graduate study in biological engineering include manipulation and purification of proteins and other biomolecules, research into metabolic processes, tissue regeneration, gene regulation, bioprocesses, bioinformatics, drug delivery, and biomaterials, to name a few. Both experimental and computational methods are used, including statistical mechanics and systems theory. Chemical engineering faculty are also involved in the Center for Biomedical Engineering, created to enhance interdisciplinary research and education at the intersection of engineering, molecular and cell biology, and medicine. The Novartis-MIT Center for Continuous Manufacturing, another center of research activity involving chemical engineers, promises to revolutionize the chemical processing of pharmaceuticals.

Energy and Environmental Engineering. Making energy available to society requires finding and producing a range of fuels, improving the efficiency of energy use under the ultimate limits imposed by thermodynamics, and reducing the effects of these processes on the environment. The widespread use of fossil fuels increases the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, leading to concerns about global warming. Other sustainability indicators also suggest that we now need to transform our energy system to a more efficient, lower-carbon future. This transformation provides many opportunities for chemical engineers to evaluate and explore other energy supply options such as renewable energy from solar, biomass, and geothermal resources, nonconventional fuels from heavy oils, tar sands, natural gas hydrates, and oil shales. Developing technologies for transporting and storing thermal and electrical energy over a range of scales are also of interest.

Further environmental distress can result from manufacturing processes and society's use of the manufactured products. The traditional response of treating process wastes is still useful, but there is growing emphasis on designing new processes to produce less waste. This might be done by improving catalysts to decrease unwanted by-products, finding alternatives to volatile solvents, and developing more effective separation processes. Chemical engineers are at work in these areas, and in developing alternative energy sources and assessing the effects of pollutants on human health.

In the department, students will find expertise in combustion, chemical reaction networks, renewable energy and upgrading of nonconventional fuels, carbon dioxide capture and sequestration, water purification and catalytic treatment of pollutants, global air pollution modeling, design of novel energy conversion processes, energy supply chains, and many other areas of energy and environmental engineering. Faculty in the department are actively involved in the MIT Energy Initiative.

Systems Design and Simulation. From early in the development of chemical engineering, processes were represented as combinations of unit operations. This concept was useful in analyzing processes, as well as providing a library of building blocks for creating new processes. Process and product design are imaginative activities, an artful blend of intuition and analysis. Design is aided by mathematical tools that simulate the behavior of the process or product and seek optimum performance. Effective use of simulation and optimization tools allows unexpected pathways to be explored, dangerous operating regions to be identified, and transient and accident conditions to be tested. Process and product systems engineering brings it all together, placing the technical features of a process or product in the context of operations, economics, and business. The end result is improved economy, reliability, and safety. Methodologies for process and product modeling and simulation, computer-aided engineering, operations research, optimization theory and algorithms, process and product design strategy, treatment of uncertainty, multiscale systems engineering, and many other areas of systems engineering are being developed in the Department of Chemical Engineering. Such research leads to new prototypes for process systems, design of new molecules with desired properties, and processes with better operability, control, safety, and environmental performance.

School of Chemical Engineering Practice

Since 1916, the David H. Koch School of Chemical Engineering Practice has been a major feature of the graduate education in the department. In this unique program, students receive intensive instruction to broaden their education in the technical aspects of the profession, and also in communication skills and human relations, which are frequently decisive factors in the success of an engineering enterprise. The Practice School program stresses problem solving in an engineering internship format, where students undertake projects at industrial sites under the direct supervision of resident MIT faculty. Credit is granted for participation in the Practice School in lieu of preparing a master's thesis.

The operation of the Practice School is similar to that of a small consulting company. The resident staff work closely with the technical personnel of the host companies in identifying project assignments with significant educational merit, and with solutions that make important contributions to the operation of the company.

During Practice School, students work on three or four different projects. Groups and designated group leaders change from one project to another, giving every individual an opportunity to be a group leader at least once.

Students in the Practice School program are required to demonstrate proficiency, or take one graduate subject, in each of the following areas: thermodynamics, heat and mass transfer, applied process chemistry, kinetics and reactor design, systems engineering, and applied mathematics.

Master of Science in Chemical Engineering

Programs for the Master of Science in Chemical Engineering usually are arranged as a continuation of undergraduate professional training, but at a greater level of depth and maturity. The general requirements for a master's program are given in the section on Graduate Education (*https://catalog.mit.edu/mit/graduate-education*). To complete the requirement of at least 66 graduate subject units, together with an acceptable thesis, generally takes four terms.

Master of Science in Chemical Engineering Practice

The unit requirements for the Master of Science in Chemical Engineering Practice (Course 10-A) are the same as those for the Master of Science in Chemical Engineering, except that 48 units of Practice School experience replace the master's thesis.

In some cases, Bachelor of Science graduates of this department can meet the requirements for the Master of Science in Chemical Engineering Practice (Course 10-A) in two terms. Beginning in September following graduation, students complete the required coursework at the Institute. The spring semester is spent at the Practice School field stations. Careful planning of the senior year schedule is important.

For students who have graduated in chemical engineering from other institutions, the usual program of study for the Master of Science in Chemical Engineering Practice involves two terms at the Institute followed by field station work in the Practice School. Graduates in chemistry from other institutions normally require an additional term.

Doctor of Science or Doctor of Philosophy

Doctoral candidates are required to pass a qualifying exam which contains two parts - a written and oral examination. The written qualifying exam consists of a thesis proposal document. The oral qualifying exam consists of the presentation of the thesis proposal to a faculty committee, including discussion and questions. The qualifying exam is usually completed within 16 months of starting residence as a graduate student. Completing a master's degree is not a prerequisite for entering the doctoral program or obtaining a doctoral degree.

The requirements for the doctoral degree include a program of advanced study, a minor program, a biology requirement, and a thesis. The program of advanced study and research is normally carried out in one of the fields of chemical engineering under the supervision of one or more faculty members in the Department of Chemical Engineering. A thesis committee of selected faculty monitors the doctoral program of each candidate.

Doctor of Philosophy in Chemical Engineering Practice

This degree program provides educational experience that combines advanced work in manufacturing, independent research, and management. The program is built on the outstanding research programs within the department, the unique resources of the David H. Koch School of Chemical Engineering Practice, and the world-class resources of the Sloan School of Management. Students are prepared for a rapid launch into positions of leadership in industry and provided with a foundation for completion of an MBA degree.

The program consists of three major parts: the first year is devoted to coursework and the Practice School, the two middle years are devoted to research, and the final year is completed in the Sloan School of Management. In addition, an integrative project combines the research and management portions of the program.

Students in the PhD in Chemical Engineering Practice (PhDCEP) program must pass the department's written and oral examinations. The progress of their research is monitored by a faculty committee, and the final thesis document is defended in a public forum. The normal completion time should be four calendar years for the PhDCEP program.

Interdisciplinary Programs

Computational Science and Engineering Doctoral Program

The Doctoral Program in Computational Science and Engineering (CSE PhD) (*https://cse.mit.edu/programs/phd*) allows students to specialize in a computation-related field of their choice through focused coursework and a doctoral thesis through a number of participating host departments. The CSE PhD program is administered jointly by the Center for Computational Science and Engineering (CCSE) and the host departments, with the emphasis of thesis research activities being the development of new computational methods and/or the innovative application of computational techniques to important problems in engineering and science. For more information, see the full program description (*https://catalog.mit.edu/interdisciplinary/graduate-programs/computational-science-engineering*) under Interdisciplinary Graduate Programs.

Leaders for Global Operations

The 24-month Leaders for Global Operations (LGO) (*https://catalog.mit.edu/interdisciplinary/graduate-programs/leaders-global-operations*) program combines graduate degrees in engineering and management for those with previous postgraduate work experience and strong undergraduate degrees in a technical field. During the two-year program, students complete a six-month internship at one of LGO's partner companies, where they conduct research that forms the basis of a dual-degree thesis. Students finish the program with two MIT degrees: an MBA (or SM in management) and an SM from one of eight engineering programs, some of which have optional or required LGO tracks. After graduation, alumni lead strategic initiatives in high-tech, operations, and manufacturing companies.

Microbiology

The MIT Microbiology Graduate PhD Program (*https://catalog.mit.edu/interdisciplinary/graduate-programs/microbiology*) is an interdepartmental, interdisciplinary program that provides students broad exposure to underlying elements of modern microbiological research and engineering, and depth in specific areas of microbiology during the student's thesis work. MIT has a long-standing tradition of excellence in microbiological research; currently, more than 50 faculty from different departments study or use microbes in significant ways in their research. The program integrates educational resources across the participating departments to build connections among faculty with shared interests from different units and to build an educational community for training students in the study of microbial systems. Students apply to the Microbiology program and conduct research in the labs of faculty in one of the participating departments: Biology; Biological Engineering; Chemical Engineering; Chemistry; Civil and Environmental Engineering; Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences; Electrical Engineering and Computer Science; Materials Sciences and Engineering; Media Arts and Sciences; and Physics. Graduates of this program will be prepared to enter a range of fields in microbial science and engineering and will have excellent career options in academic, industrial, and government settings.

Polymers and Soft Matter

The Program in Polymers and Soft Matter (PPSM) (*http://polymerscience.mit.edu*) offers students from participating departments an interdisciplinary core curriculum in polymer science and engineering, exposure to the broader polymer community through seminars, contact with visitors from industry and academia, and interdepartmental collaboration while working towards a PhD or ScD degree.

Research opportunities include functional polymers, controlled drug delivery, nanostructured polymers, polymers at interfaces, biomaterials, molecular modeling, polymer synthesis, biomimetic materials, polymer mechanics and rheology, self-assembly, and polymers in energy. The program is described in more detail (*https://catalog.mit.edu/interdisciplinary/graduate-programs/polymers-soft-matter*) under Interdisciplinary Graduate Programs.

Financial Support

The department has a wide variety of financial support options for graduate students, including teaching and research assistantships, fellowships, and loans. Information about financial assistance may be obtained by writing to the Graduate Student Office, but consideration for awards cannot be given before admissions decisions have been made.

Inquiries

For additional information concerning graduate programs, admissions, financial aid, and assistantships, contact the Graduate Student Office (*chemegrad@mit.edu*), Department of Chemical Engineering, Room 66-366, 617-253-4579.