The Pizza Seminar is held irregularly from week to week, to introduce both graduate and advanced undergraduate physics students to themes of basic research going on here in the Physics Department of the University of Texas at Austin. Usually the seminars do not begin until several weeks after the beginning of each semester.

On a typical Tuesday, especially in the Fall semester, you might find about 50 people in the audience for the week’s seminar, of which 10 or 15 are undergraduate senior physics majors, and 20 or 30 are first-year graduate students, while about 5 are graduate students or postdocs in the speaker’s research group, and typically there are 5 graduate students who are nearing the end of their Ph. D. research. There are usually also one or two “civilians,” people from the greater Austin community who want to know about the speaker’s research and its applications, and also several physics faculty members directly interested in the speaker’s research. Beginning in Fall 2009, the number of students taking the course for credit, CR/NC, remained at about 5, but in addition close to a dozen or more students took the course to earn a letter grade.

Students registered CR/NC obviously must attend the seminars in order to receive credit. Those students who are registered for a letter grade, in addition to required attendance, have to do seminar-specific class work. For each faculty lecture, students registered for a letter grade must submit to Coker within one week of the lecture a 4-page or more double-spaced report on, and synopsis of, the content of the lecture. These reports must be submitted on 8-1/2 by 11 white paper. No e-mail submissions will be accepted under any circumstances. BE CAREFUL! Nearly every semester at least one student thinks he or she is registered CR/NC when he or she is actually registered for a letter grade, and thus flunks the class!!!

Each semester, faculty from many different research groups will talk about current research and what is involved in doing it, as well as immediate or near-future opportunities for students. Note well: It is current departmental policy that graduate students should have chosen a research area by the end of their first year. That is, if you entered graduate school back in August of 2017, you must have chosen a research area before September 2018.

The atmosphere is informal, and you get free pizza, not to mention the occasional lab tour. Graduate students relatively new to the department are especially encouraged to attend, but junior and senior physics majors will also find the presentations of great interest. In the past, advanced undergraduates have sometimes made up about 50% of the audience at the Pizza Seminars.

The Pizza Seminar tries to do several things simultaneously.

(1) It provides a chance to hang around with cohorts and faculty outside of formal classes.

(2) It alerts you to the existence of many active fields of ongoing research, one of which you may decide to choose to pursue in your own future career.

(3) Even if you are already involved in graduate research, it informs you as to what else is going on within this department today — and you may be surprised to find that current
research done by some other group links up directly with, or has important relevance to, your own research.

For those of you who have yet to find a faculty research advisor for your thesis or dissertation, reflect that by far the most important decision facing you in graduate school is the choice of a specific research area. You’re about to stop doing homework problems where the answer was obtained so long ago no one knows who to credit, and plunge into the bottomless depths of open-ended questions. Your entire future career as a physicist will be determined by a single decision... it’s wise to seek information widely before making that decision.

Even if you already think you know what area you want to do your graduate research in, you may find while listening to the Pizza Seminar lectures that

(1) there is something going on that interests you as much as, or even more than the topic you are currently leaning toward, or

(2) you would like to know more about a particular faculty member or group, or that

(3) someone else’s research interests and experience are potentially of great relevance and benefit to your own area of research focus, so that collaboration or frequent consultation would benefit you both.

Web page: http://tinyurl.com/pizzaseminarf17