

GUIDELINES FOR PH.D. ORAL COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATIONS

An oral comprehensive exam requires a student to present and defend their proposed dissertation research project to their graduate advisory committee (GAC). A student must be making satisfactory academic progress to take an exam. Once initiated, an exam may not be continued at a later date. The student will either pass or fail the exam on the scheduled date.

An oral exam must be scheduled such that all GAC members are available to participate. If a single GAC member cannot participate in a previously scheduled exam, the student and advisor may choose to reschedule. Alternatively, the student may proceed with the exam if approved by the advisor and the graduate program director with the understanding that the absent GAC member will be counted as a vote to fail the student. If two or more GAC members cannot participate in a previously scheduled exam, it must be rescheduled. A student may take the exam via video conference with prior approval by their GAC and program director.

A student must provide their GAC with their proposed dissertation project at least 10 working days (or more as required by the GAC) prior to the exam. The exam focuses on the student's:

- mastery of the general area of training in their graduate program
- mastery of the background information for their proposed project and their completed studies including all major analyses and interpretations
- appropriate technical and other care for all major experiments required in their project
- ability to contextualize their findings relative to the field and suggest appropriate future studies
- ability to craft a document that describes a project suitable in scale, scope and depth for a dissertation

The advisor typically chairs the GAC during the exam; alternatively, the associate dean for graduate education (ADGE) may appoint a dean's representative (DR) to chair the GAC for the exam upon request by: the student, any GAC member (including the advisor), the graduate program director, or at the discretion of the ADGE. The appointment of a specific individual as DR may be challenged with cause by any of the above. The ADGE will consider the challenge and proceed with either the original or an alternate as DR. The DR will be from outside the original GAC, but will participate as a voting member of the GAC for purposes of the exam.

The chair will lead the exam and ensure the process is equitable to the student and maintains the standards of excellence in our programs. The GAC will establish the protocol for the questioning period (e.g. 10-15 minutes per GAC member). If the exam is lengthy (e.g. longer than 2 hours) or if the student is exhibiting signs of distress, the chair may call for a brief recess. At the conclusion of questioning, the chair will excuse the student and request a motion and a second of PASS or FAIL for the exam from the other GAC members. The chair calls for and participates in discussion from all GAC members. At the conclusion of the discussion, the chair calls for a vote on the motion by show of hands. All GAC members including the chair must vote either PASS or FAIL on the student's performance. The GAC members including the chair are the only persons allowed to vote. More than one negative vote constitutes failure of the exam.

If the student passes the exam, the GAC may provide suggestions to the student on how to improve their project. If the student does not pass the exam, the chair should ask the other GAC members if they support a re-examination. If the GAC recommends a re-examination, an approximate date for re-examination will be determined by the GAC members along with a remediation plan. The Advisor or Program Director is responsible for petitioning for the re-examination to the ADGE for review by the School of Medicine Graduate Programs Committee. The chair recalls the student and provides them with the exam outcome.

The chair reports the exam outcome to the Graduate Programs Coordinator via email with cc to all other GAC members.

Approved by the SOM Graduate Programs Committee: 2024.07