THE QUALIFYING EXAMINATION COMMITTEE CHAIR GUIDELINES

The Mission of the Qualifying Examination
Advancement to candidacy by passage of the Qualifying Examination reflects the judgment of the Graduate Division faculty that a student is adequately prepared to embark upon focused thesis research. That is, the student has demonstrated that s/he has the fundamental knowledge in a chosen discipline and the creativity, discipline, and dedication to complete the PhD degree in a timely manner. Conversely, failure of the examination indicates faculty concern regarding the student’s likelihood of success at conducting PhD-level independent research.

The Responsibilities of the Qualifying Examination Committee
It is the responsibility of each specific Qualifying Examination Committee to decide whether it is in the best interests of the student, the laboratory, and the PhD program for the student to embark upon a course of thesis study. The successful completion of a PhD dissertation requires substantial commitment, time and resources on the part of the student as well as the mentor, faculty and institution. The examining faculty must balance the following criteria in rendering judgment on whether the examinee will be admitted to candidacy:

i) A student is expected to be conversant in their chosen area of scholarship including, but not limited to, their thesis project. The student may be examined on their understanding of topics covered in the graduate coursework, aspects of their specific field of study, as well as the principles and practice of techniques included in the Qualifying Examination proposal.

ii) The examiners must judge the extent to which the written document is the student’s work and weigh their evaluation of it accordingly.

iii) The key responsibility of the examination committee is to judge whether the student’s written Qualifying Examination proposal and the oral defense of it demonstrate critical thinking and creative approaches to the proposed studies.

In summary, the examination committee must decide whether to welcome the student through the gateway to the PhD, hold the student for reconsideration by failing them on the first examination or close the door and direct them to another professional endeavor by failing them on the second examination.

Receipt of Written Proposal
Upon receipt of the written proposal, the chairperson will check that it is an acceptable document; two or three Specific Aims must be included in the proposal. Aims may be interdependent, but not entirely dependent upon each other. Only the specific departments listed below require the inclusion of the third, independent aim in the proposal:

- Anatomy & Structural Biology,
- Cell Biology, and
- Developmental & Molecular Biology.

The proposal is limited to 18 pages, excluding a title page and the Literature Cited:

- 6-page, double-spaced section on Scientific Background and Significance
- 2-page, double-spaced Specific Aims section
- 10-page, double-spaced section on Research Design and Methods (and Preliminary Data, if available)

Day of the Examination
Four Qualifying Exam Committee members must be present at the examination. If a member is absent, the committee chairperson is responsible for identifying and contacting an alternate. However, if more than one member is absent, the examination must be rescheduled for the earliest possible date.

This is a closed exam. Only the student and the four members of the Qualifying Examination Committee are permitted in the exam room.
Conduct of the Examination

At the start of the exam, the student will be asked to leave the room and the Exam Committee members will discuss:

- The background of the student, including courses taken
- The written proposal—any issues that Committee members have found that should be addressed during the oral exam
- The process of the exam—i.e. the student presents the proposal without interruption for a maximum of 15 minutes, followed by oral questions.

The student then returns to the room to give the presentation and begin the oral exam.

Following the oral presentation, the committee can begin with questions based on the proposal, and then expand into more general knowledge questions. The student should be able to demonstrate sufficient basic knowledge outside his/her particular microdomain to ensure that the student can develop new ideas and design experiments with appropriate controls to test a hypothesis.

During the exam, the Qualifying Exam Committee chairperson should make notes.

Note: Audio and/or video recording of the oral examination are prohibited. Any recording will be viewed as a breach of responsible conduct of research and the matter referred to the Academic Affairs Committee.

At the end of the oral exam, the student leaves the room.

- A preliminary, nonbinding secret vote is taken
  - Honors (indicating an outstanding performance, i.e. in the top 10%)
  - Pass
  - Postponed Decision (requiring revision of the written document within one month)
  - Fail
- The vote is followed by open discussion to ensure that the various perspectives of the committee members are heard and understood.
- A final vote is taken

The chairperson should summarize the key points of the discussion/exam on the Chair’s Summary Evaluation.

A copy of this evaluation and the Examiner Scoring Sheets will be provided to the student, the mentor, and the Academic Affairs Committee.

Committee Decision:

- A majority vote of 3-1 is required for Honors, Pass, Postponed Decision and Fail;
- A 2-2 vote with two examiners voting Honors and two voting Pass is a grade of Pass;
- A 2-2 vote with two examiners voting Fail and two voting Honors, Pass or Postponed Decision is a grade of Fail;
- A 2-2 vote with 2 examiners voting Postponed Decision is a Postponed Decision

The student is then brought back into the room and informed of the committee’s final decision.

**Please note: The grade Postponed Decision is to be used to obtain revision of the written proposal. The revised proposal must be distributed to all the members of the examination committee within one month of the oral exam date. After submission of a revised proposal, the committee has seven calendar days to submit a final grade (Pass or Fail) to the Graduate Division office via submission of Form 4a. If the oral examination is unsatisfactory, even if the written document is acceptable, the grade will be Fail. Qualifying Exam Form 4a will have been forwarded to the chairperson of the student’s Exam Committee once the Graduate Division office has received Form 4 and Examiner Scoring Sheets indicating a grade of Postponed Decision.**
Appeal of Qualifying Committee’s Decision

Students may appeal a decision by the Qualifying Examination Committee to the parent Steering Committee, by making this request in writing to the Associate Dean for Graduate Programs. The Associate Dean will review the request and may deny it or may refer to the Steering Committee for review. The Steering Committee may deny the appeal, in which case the original grade will stand, or may recommend that the student be allowed to repeat the examination with a new Exam Committee.

Outcome of the Qualifying Examination

A student who passes or receives honors following their oral examination will be awarded the Master of Science degree and will advance to candidacy for the PhD degree.

A student who fails the oral examination will be placed on academic probation by the Academic Affairs Committee. The Academic Affairs Committee will review the Qualifying Examination Committee reports, all grades received for graduate courses, and laboratory productivity as indicated by the mentor. (Eligibility to retake the exam is based upon review of the student’s entire academic record.) The AAC will either recommend a “retake” of the examination in the next Qualifying Exam period or in some circumstances, recommend dismissal from the program. The examination “retake” is not a “rebuttal” of the failed examination but rather is a fresh independent opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge and insight required for advancement to candidacy. A student is allowed only one retake of the Qualifying Exam. A student who fails the retake will be dismissed from the program.

Qualifying Exam webpage: http://www.einstein.yu.edu/education/phd/current-students/qualifying-exam.aspx