OIGS Policy Proposal 2019.1 – updated procedures for Doctoral Candidacy Exams

I. Background

Currently, doctoral candidacy exams are a required element for each doctoral student’s program, typically occurring after at least one year after matriculation. The policies and procedures for the written portions of this exam are prescribed in detail on the Graduate School’s website. The policies and procedures defining the nature of the oral exam and its conduct, however, are less clearly defined on the Graduate School website. Oral exam procedures and policies have instead been informally prescribed as a part of the e-mail directions provided to doctoral students and faculty participating in the exam. In both cases, there have been concerns in the past over various procedures which regularly require clarification or direction from the dean, particularly regarding latitude for addressing deficiencies in the written component of the exam.

The Dean of the Graduate School would like to propose the following amendments to current Candidacy exam policies to incorporate more detailed procedural directions for the conduct of the written and oral components of the examination, providing both greater detail and clarity. The existing doctoral candidacy exam policies can be found at: https://www.esf.edu/graduate/docexam.htm

II. Proposed policy guiding conduct of the Oral Candidacy Exam

Proposed is the new language prescribe candidacy exam policy and procedures:

Candidacy Examination

The objectives of this examination are to confirm the student’s breadth and depth of knowledge in their chosen field of study as well as the student’s understanding of the scientific process. The doctoral candidacy examination should be administered upon completion of the majority of coursework, and successful completion of the exam signifies readiness to undertake the research and dissertation component of the doctoral program. This examination must be taken within than three years from the first date of matriculation, and at least one year prior to the dissertation defense.
Upon the recommendation of the appropriate Department Chairperson, the Associate Provost for Instruction and Dean of the Graduate School appoints the doctoral candidacy examination committee consisting of the student’s major professor, the student’s steering committee and an additional faculty member from an appropriate area. Additionally, the Associate Provost for Instruction and Dean of the Graduate School appoints a committee chair who is not from the department of the student’s degree program. The role of the examination committee chair is to manage the examination, ensure its integrity and represent the interests of the faculty and student.

The examination must have both written and oral components, described below.

**Written Examination:** The purpose of the written exam is to assess the readiness of the student to move beyond the coursework stage of the doctoral program, into the development of a substantial research project and dissertation. Traditionally, questioning should verify sufficient breadth and depth of knowledge to successfully undertake such research, and then communicate the results in a scholarly manner appropriate to the discipline.

To initiate the examination process, the examining committee shall convene at a planning meeting with the student. During the first part of the planning meeting, the committee determines the form and schedule for the process and establishes the date for the oral component. The student is then excused from the meeting and the committee develops and discusses the exam content. There are three alternative forms for the written component, as follows:

**Form 1:** Each member of the committee (excluding the chair) submits one distinct question, set of questions, or problem related to the objectives of the exam. The questions are discussed and agreed upon at the planning meeting. The major professor administers the written examination. Typically, each question or set of questions must be completed within a prescribed period of time, not to exceed approximately 8 hours each, with additional time permitted for reasonable breaks, meals, etc. No more than one question or set of questions should be administered per 24 hours. Upon completion by the student, the examination questions are reviewed and graded by the committee members who prepared them. The committee then collectively reviews the entire examination.
**Form 2:** The student prepares a written report on a topic or problem assigned collectively by the examining committee as a whole. The topic or problem must meet the objectives of the examination and its content cannot be directly related to the student’s dissertation research topic. The student has approximately one month to develop a thorough understanding of the assigned topic and prepare a written report. The report is reviewed by the committee members and committee chair.

**Form 3:** The student prepares and defends a written proposal of future research likely to be carried out during their Ph.D. project. This research prospectus must be presented to the examining committee two weeks prior to the oral candidacy exam and should include preliminary studies supporting the feasibility of the proposed research. The exam will test the candidate’s understanding of concepts directly related to his or her immediate area of research, knowledge of prior related research that has been conducted by others, their ability to design and interpret experiments in this area, and capacity to think and write independently and to present work plans orally in a clear and rational manner. The report is reviewed by the committee members and committee chair. **Form 3 is available only to doctoral students in the Department of Chemistry and Environmental Resources Engineering.**

At least 3 business days prior to the oral exam, the major professor shall confirm with the chair of the examining committee that the oral examination should proceed as scheduled. The written exam is thus considered to be “provisionally successful.” If the written examination component does not meet the standards established for the candidacy exam, the committee has two options.

1. If the deficiencies are relatively minor, or in the case of Form 1, limited to a minority of the written questions, the oral exam may be postponed by the Dean of the Graduate School at the recommendation of the chair of the exam committee. The student may then be provided with an additional time period, the length of which should be determined by the full examination committee in consultation with the chair, to address deficiencies identified in the written examination. This time period should be no less than 8 hours (typically for Form 1), and may extend up to 5 business days for Forms 2 and 3. This action is treated as a suspension and extension of the written exam “in progress,” and, if ultimately successful,
does not constitute a failure of the entire exam, nor count toward the limited number of attempts prescribed by Graduate School policy below.

2. If the deficiencies are severe, the major professor, in consultation with the examination committee may decide to fail the candidate without performing the oral component. This latter action does constitute a failure of the candidacy exam in its entirety, and does count toward the limited number of attempts prescribed by Graduate School policy below.

**Oral Examination:** The purpose of the oral examination is to further confirm the fitness of the student to apply the skills and knowledge acquired to date toward a successful and significant research project. The oral examination provides the opportunity for the student to demonstrate their ability to think synthetically and critically in a manner conveying their readiness to commence the dissertation project.

The oral component of the candidacy examination is typically scheduled for a period of approximately two hours, and is broken in to two distinct rounds of questioning. The first round, lasting approximately 60 minutes, consists of questions from each of the members of the examination committee, including the chair should they choose to contribute questions. Time should be shared equitably among the questioners, with interjections or interruptions by other questioners prohibited during the first round. The second round of questions may be more flexibly structured, with broader discussion and interchange among questioners is encouraged.

Any member of the faculty may be a silent observer for the oral component. The candidate may also invite a silent student observer to attend the oral examination. At the completion of the oral examination, the candidate and observers are excused from the room and the examination committee determines whether the student has successfully completed the oral component of the exam and achieved the status of “doctoral candidate.” The committee chair has the option to vote. Unanimous agreement is required to pass the student on the first attempt. If less than unanimous agreement is reached, the student is considered to have failed the first candidacy examination. A student who fails the first candidacy exam may request a second exam, which must take place no more than one year from the date of the first examination. The second candidacy examination may, or may not include a new written component, at the discretion of the student's major professor and examination committee, in consultation with the examination chair. At the second exam, the student has passed if there is not
more than one negative vote. A student who is determined to have failed the second candidacy examination is terminated from the doctoral program.

**Scheduling the Candidacy Exam:** To schedule a doctoral candidacy examination, the student should complete the following steps:

1. In consultation with your major professor, complete Form 6B (Word) for your Department Chairperson to review, sign, and forward to the Office of Instruction and Graduate Studies. Form 6B should be submitted according to the academic year deadlines for defense exams.

2. The Associate Provost for Instruction and Dean of the Graduate School will assign a faculty member outside of your degree program to serve as chair of your examination committee. When you receive a copy of Form 6C which officially appoints your examination committee, you must consult with all members of your committee (major professor, steering committee, additional examiner, and defense chair to arrange a mutually convenient date, time, and location for a planning meeting.

3. You must inform the Office of Instruction and Graduate Studies of the agreed upon date, time, and location for your planning meeting at least two weeks in advance of the date. This Office will confirm in Form 6D these arrangements with all concerned individuals.

4. At the planning meeting, your exam chair and the committee complete Form 6E, the committee chair will sign it and return it to the Office of Instruction and Graduate Studies, which will distribute copies to you and the committee.

5. If you are using Form 1 of the examination, you and your major professor should arrange for a time and location to administer the questions.

6. The last step is to meet with your committee and complete the oral examination at the designated date. At the end of the oral examination, your committee will ask you and any observers to leave the room while it determines if you have satisfactorily completed the doctoral candidacy examination. You will be invited back to receive the decision of the committee which will also be reported on Form 6F and returned by the exam chair to the Office of Instruction and Graduate Studies.