Graduate Program PhD Qualifying Exam Procedure for MCEB Students

General philosophy: The exam will be completed in a timely manner, and requirements will be enforced uniformly among candidates. Further, the exam will be independent, in the sense of both evaluation and topic, of the thesis advisor.

Qualifying Exam Committee & Evaluation Criteria

The Qualifying Exam Committee will consist of the Supervisory Committee with the exception of the thesis supervisor (the thesis supervisor cannot be physically present during any part of the exam). One member of the Qualifying Exam Committee will serve as chairperson to ensure that the rules for qualifying exams are followed. A pass or fail decision will be by majority vote of the Exam Committee (at least 3 votes in favor are needed to pass).

Written and Oral Exam Components for the Qualifying Exam (PhD)

The exam will consist of a written document that will be defended in a single oral defense. If failed, a student can retake the exam once as per university statutes.

The written component will consist of a 15-page (1.5 space; Arial 11 or Times 12 fonts with one inch margins as per NSF/NIH formats) grant proposal, citations excluded, in an area not closely related to the student’s anticipated thesis research project. The topic will be chosen by the Qualifying Exam Committee from a list of 3 mini-proposals (1- to 2-page abstracts) to be provided by the student. A student must complete the written component within 7 weeks from the time an abstract is chosen by the committee. The student cannot solicit feedback or other help from their committee during the writing of the proposal. The committee will have two weeks to evaluate the written document. If revisions are requested by the committee, the student will have two weeks to complete them and resubmit the written component of the exam. The committee will then have one week to reevaluate the written component of the exam.

The oral component of the Qualifying Exam cannot be scheduled until the student has passed the written component and must take place within 30 days from the time the student passed the written component of the exam. In the oral defense of the proposal to the Qualifying Exam Committee, the student may give a formal presentation, but it may not exceed 10 slides.

Exam Schedule

A student must attempt the exam before the end of the fourth semester of graduate study. If the exam is failed, it may be retaken once (on a different topic) by the end of the following semester. Students who have not passed their qualifying exam by the end of their fifth semester of graduate school will judged as not making satisfactory progress toward their degree and will be ineligible for departmental and university support.

First Thesis Committee Meeting*

Following successful completion of the exam, a student must have a thesis committee meeting within 6 months. For this meeting, the student must furnish a 5-page document with background and specific aims pertaining to the anticipated thesis research project. The student is encouraged to seek input from their committee, other faculty members or graduate students during preparation of the document, but the student must write it alone.

* Note: The first formal thesis committee meeting will be a PROGRAM requirement. It will not be part of the qualifying exam per se, as it will be in an area on which the thesis advisor and student are expected (and encouraged) to work together closely [and is thus inappropriate for inclusion as part of the formal (intellectually independent) qualifying exam].