Curriculum in Genetics and Molecular Biology

Doctoral Written Exam Policy

PURPOSE

The Graduate School requires a doctoral written exam of all students. The purpose of this exam, as described in the Graduate School Handbook, is to:

- assess the extent and currency of the candidate's knowledge in a manner that is as comprehensive and searching as the best practices of that field require;
- discover any weaknesses in the candidate's knowledge that need to be remedied by additional courses or other instruction; and
- determine the candidate's fitness to continue work toward the doctorate.

In GMB, the written exam focuses on the ability to read and understand published articles. The exam is designed to test comprehension, ability to evaluate and interpret data, synthesize results, formulate hypotheses, and devise tests of hypotheses.

TIMING

The written exam is held in June each year. Students may take the exam at the end of the first year or at the end of the second year. The timing is determined in consultation with the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) based on completion of the core courses (GNET 621 and 631 or 632).

FORMAT OF THE WRITTEN EXAM

The exam is designed by the Written Exam Committee. This committee consists of six GMB faculty, three of whom are in their second year as a committee member, and three of whom are in their first year. Committee members are selected by the DGS to span different areas of genetics and molecular biology. Two members are appointed Co-Chairs of the committee.

Each committee member assembles a reading list, typically 3-4 articles. These lists are distributed to students two weeks before the exam. Students should spend this two-week period reading the articles and any background and ancillary material that is necessary. Students may discuss the articles with one another and with colleagues, but they should not approach exam committee members.

A copy of a previous exam, including the reading assignments, questions, and examples of answers that scored highly, will be provided to students. To ensure fairness, students taking the exam may not consult any other previous copies of the exam, whether obtained from more senior students or by other means.

Questions are distributed by email at 9:00 am on two consecutive days, usually a Thursday and Friday in late June, three sets of questions each day. Answers must be returned by email by 5:00 pm the same day. Whether students are allowed to consult the articles and/or internet sources is determined by each committee member and will be clearly communicated to the students. Students may not consult one another or any other individuals during the exam period. If any student is found to have corresponded with any other individual about the exam, that student will receive a failing grade and be expelled from the program.
GRADING OF THE WRITTEN EXAM

The Student Services Specialist will remove student names from answers and replace them with numbers, then distribute the answers to Written Exam Committee members. Each section is graded on a 20-point scale. A score of 13 or higher is considered a passing score. To pass the exam, a student must pass at least five of the sections and have an overall score of at least 84 (70% average).

Scores are gathered by the Student Services Specialist and sent to the Co-Chairs, who review scores and make pass/fail decisions. For students that do not meet the passing criteria described above, the Co-Chairs may consult with other members of the committee and with the Director or Graduate Studies (DGS) to determine whether there are circumstances that may overturn this finding.

FAILURE AND RE-EXAM

Students who fail the written exam may take it a second time, the following year. Students who fail the exam twice become ineligible for further graduate work. Upon request of the Director of Graduate Studies, the Graduate School may permit a student a third and final opportunity to take the exam. Such requests are made at the discretion of the DGS and the GMB Executive Committee after consultation with the advisor(s) and dissertation committee.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF STUDENT

- Adhere to the UNC Honor Code. This includes not consulting past exams other than those provided by GMB and not consulting sources during the exam other than those expressly permitted.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF ADVISOR(S)

- Be aware that students will need time to prepare for the exam and this may result in a temporary but severe reduction in research hours.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF WRITTEN EXAM COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- Serve on the committee for two consecutive years. It is expected that a different set of questions (and possibly a different reading list) will be used each year.
- Assemble a reading list made up of articles that can be understood by a student that has taken the core courses (GNET 621 – Genetic Analysis and either GNET 631 or GNET 632 – Advanced Molecular Biology). This may require additional reading of papers not on the list, but should not depend on the student having taken additional coursework.
- Submit the reading list and questions by specified deadlines to allow the Co-Chair time to proofread the questions and the Student Services Specialist time to assemble and distribute the reading lists and questions. This date will be specified with ample advance notification.
- Grade exams within three weeks and provide written feedback to the students.
RESPONSIBILITIES OF WRITTEN EXAM COMMITTEE CO-CHAIRS

- Review reading lists and questions to ensure that both are appropriate in scope and level.
- Review scores, consult with other committee members if necessary, and report final decisions about pass/fail to the Student Services Specialist and DGS.