

Preliminary Meeting and Qualifying/Advancement to Candidacy Policies

All of the forms that you need to complete can be found in the BISI office. Please email bisi@umd.edu for more information.

Preliminary Meeting

The goal of the preliminary meeting, which is not a test and is not assessed, is to give the student an opportunity to present their research proposal and meet with her/his committee in a relaxed setting to receive constructive feedback on the proposal and project, and to discuss clear expectations for topics and lines of questioning for the qualifying exam. The tone of this meeting is to be supportive, although with high standards communicated openly and honestly. The student should leave the preliminary meeting with the scope of the qualifying exam clarified, and empowered with advice, guidance, and strategies to strengthen the dissertation proposal and prepare for the exam.

Timing

The preliminary meeting takes place no later than the end of the student's 5th semester (or earlier as stipulated by the Concentration Area), and is generally 2-3 months in advance of the qualifying exam. A relatively short interval between the two meetings is strongly encouraged to maximize the value and retention of the information exchange facilitated at the preliminary meeting.

Preliminary meetings will generally be about 1.5 hrs long (flexible of course).

Extensions for the preliminary meeting (beyond semester 5) are rare. Students who must delay their preliminary meeting past the end of their 5th semester must submit a written request for an extension, as do their mentors. Those forms, due 60 days before the end of the student's 5th semester, require a justification for the extension, acknowledgment from the advisor that the student is on track and making good progress, and a proposed revised date for the preliminary meeting. Both the student's and advisor's Request for Extension forms must be approved by the Concentration Area Director as well as the BISI Director.

Note: Students do not need to have substantial amounts of preliminary data prior to their preliminary meeting; lack of sufficient data is not considered a valid excuse for delaying this meeting. By semester 5, students should have their thesis direction in reasonable focus. Those research questions and initiatives should enable students to proceed with this meeting on schedule even if work on all aspects of the project have not yet been designed or commenced.

Committee

The preliminary meeting will be chaired by the student's advisor. All other thesis committee members will attend (telecommute attendance permitted). At least 2 of the attending members of the thesis committee must be full members of the BISI faculty.

Written Proposal & Oral Presentation

Students will prepare a dissertation proposal according to their major advisor's instructions, often following either NIH or NSF guidelines. This proposal must be distributed to the student's preliminary meeting committee two weeks before the meeting.

Students should prepare 15-20 minute overview (around 15 slides) of the proposed thesis research, including questions and hypotheses, methods and experimental design, preliminary data, and broader context / significance of the project. Students should expect to be interrupted with questions during their presentation, so the actual duration of the presentation may be substantially longer than 20 minutes.

Committee Recommendations

Following the oral presentation, the committee will provide the student with feedback (strengths and weaknesses; constructive suggestions for improvements) on the research project, the written proposal, the oral presentation, and the student's overall knowledge of the subject matter. The meeting will conclude with the committee providing the student with a list of up to 3 areas of specialization (level of breadth at the discretion of

the committee) that will be focal topics for questioning at the Qualifying Exam. Topics directly pertaining to the student's research proposal will also be appropriate lines of questioning during the Qualifying Exam, as will general knowledge areas drawn from the student's graduate course work.

Qualifying Exam

Before the preliminary meeting adjourns, the student and committee will discuss when the qualifying exam will take place (strongly recommended to be 2-3 months after the preliminary meeting), scheduling the date and time on the spot if possible, and at least agreeing on the time frame and committing to lock in a time block as soon as possible.

Timing

The qualifying exam takes place by the end of the student's 6th semester (or earlier as stipulated by the Concentration Area), and generally within 2-3 months of the preliminary meeting.

Extensions beyond semester 6 are rare, and require approved written requests for extension from both the student and faculty advisor, as described above for the preliminary meeting.

Committee

The exam committee will be chaired by the student's advisor, and should include all members of the student's doctoral committee (telecommute attendance is permitted). At least 2 of the committee members must be full members of the BISI faculty.

Objectives & Scope

To advance to candidacy, students must pass the qualifying exam.

The qualifying exam is a defense of the student's doctoral research proposal, including its context and significance, as well as an assessment of the student's understanding of broader biological concepts.

The developing thesis project provides the framework for the qualifying exam, but questioning will also focus on determining whether the student has sufficient background knowledge, along with the abilities to think, synthesize, integrate, and communicate information, required for successfully completing the Ph.D. degree.

The Exam

Revised Written Proposal

(format as described for preliminary meeting; document revised following first draft edits / suggestions discussed at the preliminary meeting). The revised proposal is due to the committee two weeks prior to the qualifying exam.

Oral Presentation (may be waived by the examining committee)

Students normally present at least a brief review of their research proposal at the qualifying exam to help initiate and guide discussion. Depending upon the student's performance at the preliminary meeting and following the advisor's and committee's recommendation, the student may be asked to provide a full presentation of their proposal. A full research presentation is particularly important if:

- There were significant deficiencies in the student's presentation at the preliminary meeting, or
- Enough time has passed since the preliminary meeting that the committee will need to be refreshed on the student's plans, or
- The substance of the proposal has changed.

Questions from Committee

The student is expected to answer questions that cover the dissertation proposal, its broader context and significance, and general knowledge within the areas of specialization identified at the preliminary meeting. The role of the chair is to facilitate discussion and ensure that all members of the committee have an opportunity to participate fully. The chair is expected to maintain an impartial tone, but may participate in questioning as appropriate.

Evaluation

The committee will conclude that the student has passed or failed the exam on the basis of the student's performance during the qualifying examination and on the basis of the written research proposal. The exam should cover both defense of the research proposal and a test of general knowledge. The following outcomes are possible:

Pass

- Pass with recommendations (not requirements)
- Does not pass, with requirements, but no need to retake the formal exam
- Does not pass, with the option to retake the formal exam
- Does not pass, without option to retake the formal exam (results in dismissal from the program)

The student passes if all, or all but one, of the committee members cast positive votes. A vote to pass a student for admission to candidacy reflects an assessment that the student is now ready to move on to uninterrupted dissertation research. If the committee feels that the student is required to do something to achieve readiness, then this must be accompanied by a "no" vote (option 3). Any number of recommendations can accompany a "yes" vote, but these must not be mandatory. In the event that a student does not pass, the committee can detail whatever remedies it deems appropriate. Whether or not it is necessary to meet a second time is at the discretion of the committee.

The second (retake) exam will be scheduled when the major advisor considers appropriate, but no later than 9 months following the first exam. Failure to pass the second qualifying exam results in dismissal from the program.

If the committee chooses option 5 above, the student will be dismissed from the program.

In no case may a student repeat the exam a third time.

Outcome

A written report of the qualifying exam results must be given to the BISI Office for inclusion in the student's file.

After passing the qualifying exam, the student must complete the Advance to Candidacy form; this completed form must be submitted to the BISI Office within one week of passing the Qualifying Exam. The BISI Office will submit that form to the Graduate School. Please note that, for forms submitted prior to the 25th of the month, advancement to candidacy becomes effective on the first day of the following month. A copy of this form must be included in the student's file.

Students must be officially admitted to candidacy at least six months prior to the conferring of their Ph.D. degree.