REGULATIONS FOR THE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

All candidates for the PhD degree are required to pass a comprehensive examination designed to reveal a broad knowledge and understanding of the student’s field. At least eight (8) weeks before the date of the examination, the supervisory committee will identify 4-6 specific fields (topics) on which detailed questions will be asked; these fields will reflect the student’s chosen area of research. The committee may elect to make some of the topics more general and some of the topics highly specific to the actual research area. The student will be notified, in writing, of these topics; it is recommended that appropriate textbook chapters and/or review papers be specified. Normally, members of the supervisory committee will comprise the examination committee but, at the discretion of the committee, other faculty members from this or other departments may be invited to participate. The graduate officer may attend a comprehensive examination as non-voting (unless, of course, the graduate officer is also a member of the supervisory committee) participants.

The primary objective of the examination is to evaluate the candidate’s understanding and knowledge of areas related to his/her research field; therefore, the student will be expected to show detailed and comprehensive knowledge of the selected topics. A secondary objective of the examination is to identify areas of weakness that may be filled by appropriate course work or additional reading. The competence with which the student answers questions on the selected topics will be the main basis for evaluating the performance in the examination. The committee may ask general questions in fields that were not previously identified to the student; the candidate’s responses to these questions will contribute to the overall evaluation but will not necessarily determine the ultimate pass/fail decision.

The examination must be held within 15 months of the student’s initial registration in the PhD program; it should not take place in the first six (6) months. A delay of an examination beyond the initial 15 month period requires permission of the graduate officer.

A special meeting for the sole purpose of holding the examination must be arranged; it must not be held as a part of a regular committee meeting. The graduate officer will appoint a disinterested faculty member to chair the examination. The format of the exam is variable but, usually the chairperson will invite each member of the examining committee to question the candidate for 15-20 minutes; a second or third round of such questions is common but usually for shorter duration.

Immediately after the examination, the candidate will leave the room. The decision regarding the success or failure of the candidate should be taken only after discussion of the candidate’s performance by all examiners. The purpose of the discussion is to evaluate the overall performance, and to identify weak areas in which re-examination
and/or remedial work is required. The decision regarding the category into which the exam falls shall normally reflect the majority opinion of the committee.

In the case of a conditional pass, the supplementary program of study should be discussed and decided upon. Options include written assignments, coursework, presentation of a seminar, or whatever the committee feels would be useful and appropriate. A date for completion of these requirements should be provided.

In the case of a deferred decision, an approximate date for a second examination should be scheduled, and the form and scope of that examination should be decided upon. The second exam may be written rather than oral. Justification for the second examination will vary, but might include unacceptable performance on one or more topics with excellent performance on others, or enervating nervousness. A general unsatisfactory performance should not be grounds for re-examination. The decision cannot be deferred a second time.

In the case of Failure, the student will be asked to withdraw from the program.

The chair of the examination shall record the decision, including the nature of remedial work, or the form and time of another examination if appropriate, on the examination report and transmit that report to the graduate officer through the graduate coordinator. They should also inform the student as to the outcome of the examination.

Issued October 2011