

### Guidelines for Setting a Phd Appraisal Examination

PhD students in the EEB Department will be subject to an Appraisal Examination to be held **14 to 20 months** after registration (between 14 and 26 months for students who entered directly from an undergraduate degree). The appraisal is designed to:

- 1) determine whether the student can think, conduct research, and communicate at a level sufficient to produce a quality thesis;
- 2) ensure that the proposed research is sound, and can be completed within the remaining years of the PhD program;
- 3) ensure that the student has sufficiently broad knowledge in ecology and evolutionary biology to recognize and effectively pursue opportunities for research and collaboration in these fields.

The examination consists of a public seminar by the student on the thesis work (approximately 20 minutes plus 10 minutes of questions from the audience), and a private session during which committee members ask questions about the research proposal and evaluate the student's breadth of knowledge. The private portion of the examination should normally last 2-2.5 hours.

The Appraisal Committee consists of five members chosen by the student and supervisor: the supervisor (and any co-supervisor), the two members of the supervisory committee, and two other EEB faculty members. One of those latter two should be chosen to broaden the ability of the committee to evaluate the breadth of ecological/evolutionary knowledge of the candidate. The committee as a whole remains responsible for evaluating the candidate's breadth of knowledge. The student and supervisor should send a list of proposed appraisal committee members (who are available for both the seminar and examination) for approval to the Graduate Office **at least three weeks in advance** of the examination. The Graduate Office will choose the exam chair from those committee members not on the supervisory committee.

The student should send their electronic research proposal, seminar title, an abstract, a list of committee members and a personal data form (see Documents, Forms, and Links on the EEB Graduate website) to the Graduate Office **at least two weeks** before the seminar and appraisal. **Two weeks** prior to the exam the student should provide committee members with a written research proposal that is approximately 15 pages (20 pages maximum) of double-spaced text in 12-point-font, not including tables, figures and references. Both the written proposal and the public seminar should present the conceptual framework of the study, hypotheses or objectives, methods, a timeframe for completion of the research, and analyses of preliminary data, if available.

The Graduate Office will circulate a formal announcement to the appraisal committee and the department in general. Students are responsible for booking audiovisual equipment needs with the appropriate personnel on the campus hosting the exam.

In cases where the examination is taking place immediately following the public seminar, it may be most appropriate to begin the private portion of the appraisal with the proposal phase, which should involve questions designed to explore the candidate's grasp of principles and concepts underlying the study, and the adequacy of the proposed methods. The emphasis should be on the theory and proposed approach, rather than on progress to date. In this phase the student should demonstrate advanced expertise in their research specialization. At the end of that phase of the appraisal, roughly 20-30 minutes should be allocated to assessing the breadth of knowledge of the candidate using the departmental Question Bank. The questioning should also cover any substantial additional breadth requirements that the advisory committee as a whole communicated in detail to the student, well in advance of the examination date.

The breadth portion of the examination will involve an over-dispersed selection of questions from the entire subject range of the departmental Question Bank (and any extensions specified in advance by the appraisal committee). The standard Question Bank will be continuously available to help students evaluate their level of knowledge and direct their studying. It is not expected that a student should be able to provide excellent answers to all questions. Rather, a student should be able to provide strong answers to almost all questions from his/her main discipline (as perceived by the appraisal committee) and provide reasonable answers for most of the questions farther from his/her center of expertise. If a student cannot answer a question, the committee should simply move on to another question, providing the student with an opportunity to demonstrate understanding of another topic. In order to better evaluate the student's level of expertise in the area, examiners may also pose questions inspired by satisfactory answers to questions from the bank, especially when they relate directly to the student's proposed research.

At the end of the examination the candidate will be asked to leave the room and the appraisal committee will use the entire examination (including both the public seminar and the private portions) to judge whether the candidate has met the appropriate standard under the three criteria of the appraisal. Breadth deficiencies are not to be the sole reason for failure of the initial appraisal exam. If the student passes the overall appraisal but serious breadth deficiencies are perceived in the first exam, then the appraisal committee should choose a way for the student to satisfy the deficiencies (see below). A positive vote on the student's performance in overall examination from at least four members of the committee confirms that the student has passed. A negative outcome requires that the student retake the exam within **four months** by considering suggestions offered by the committee for improving the thesis research proposal and remedying any breadth deficiencies. The outcome of the second exam will be either pass or withdraw from the program.

The committee should choose among the three prescriptions below to remedy a serious breadth deficiency observed during the first appraisal:

- a. Assignment of reading, followed by an oral reassessment of knowledge in the formerly weak areas by one or more appropriate members of the appraisal committee.
- b. Assignment of 2 or more essays on topics selected by the appraisal committee. The appraisal committee members would be responsible for evaluating the essays.

c. Assignment of additional coursework. (Auditing courses will not be considered to be adequate remediation unless the weak area(s) is/are reassessed by oral or written examination by relevant member(s) of the appraisal committee after the audit is completed.)

Any breadth remediation requirements should be specified in writing by the appraisal committee in its report. The chair of the appraisal committee is responsible for returning appropriate documents and a copy of the research proposal to the graduate office after the exam. The student's supervisory committee will be responsible for enforcing the prescription and reporting the progress of remediation in the records of their meetings.

---Last modified 17 September 2010