

**MICROBIOLOGY THEME  
QUALIFYING EXAM, ADMISSION TO CANDIDACY, and COMMITTEE MEETING  
DETAILED GUIDELINES**

The guidelines are adapted from the GBS guidelines described in the GBS Student Handbook and are specific to the Microbiology Theme. The timelines are for Ph.D. students. MSTP students will follow the same procedures one year later in their programs.

Links to these guidelines, the Summary of Guidelines, the Proposal and Progress Report Guidelines, and Forms are on the Microbiology Theme website.

*Send the Summary of Guidelines to committee members as they are added to the committee (and probably again at time of Qualifying Exam). You should also direct them to the links for the other documents noted above.*

**Failure to meet deadlines may result in (in no particular order) –**

- **an Incomplete (I) grade for Non-dissertation or Dissertation credits**
- **delays in stipend increases**
- **ineligibility for special recognition rewards**
- **suspension or termination of stipend**
- **dismissal from program**

**For all meetings** – once dates, times, and locations are set, notify the Theme Director (Janet Yother [jyother@uab.edu](mailto:jyother@uab.edu)) and Process Manager ([Nan Travis ntravis@uab.edu](mailto:Nan Travis ntravis@uab.edu)). Also notify regarding committee composition and any other information as indicated. After the meeting, submit approval or evaluation forms and final versions of other documents. Forms are on GBS Microbiology Theme website.

**IN THIS DOCUMENT**

Summary Tables –

Timelines . . . . .	Page 1
Documents Required . . . . .	Page 2
Basic points . . . . .	Page 2
Requirements before proceeding to the Qualifying Exam . . . . .	Page 2
Selection of Committee members . . . . .	Page 2
Preliminary Meeting . . . . .	Page 3
Qualifying Exam Requirements . . . . .	Page 3
Admission to Candidacy . . . . .	Page 5
Requirements for Subsequent Years . . . . .	Page 5
Dissertation Defense . . . . .	Page 5

**TABLE 1. TIMELINES**

<b>Second Year Preliminary Mtg</b>	<b>Qualifying Exam</b>	<b>Admission to Candidacy</b>	<b>Subsequent Meetings</b>
Fall of 2 <sup>nd</sup> year (by October 15)	Spring of 2 <sup>nd</sup> year (submit proposal by April 30)	Fall of 3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Twice yearly after Admission to Candidacy

TABLE 2. DOCUMENTS REQUIRED

	Preliminary Meeting	Qualifying Exam	Admission to Candidacy	Subsequent Meetings
Biographical Sketch*	X	X	X	X
Career and Training Goals*	X	X	X	X
Specific Aims / Abstract**	X	X	X	X
Research Plan**		X	X	
Progress Report***			X	X

\* To be updated for each meeting

\*\* To be updated if plans change from previous meeting

\*\*\* Provide new report for each meeting; results, plans for next 6 months to one year

### A. BASIC POINTS

- It will be possible for a single Dissertation Committee formed during the student's second/third years to oversee the student's progress throughout graduate training.
- The student will have a brief meeting with the committee (or portion of) at the beginning of the second year.
- The Qualifying Exam will take place in the spring of the second year. The exam will consist of a written proposal and oral exam. The proposal will be on the student's research topic and the format will be that of an NIH predoctoral fellowship (F31). Students are encouraged to submit their final, approved proposal as part of a fellowship application to an appropriate funding agency.
- The Admission to Candidacy meeting will take place at the beginning of the third year.
- The Theme Directors are ex officio members of all committees and may attend any of the meetings.

### B. REQUIREMENTS BEFORE PROCEEDING TO THE QUALIFYING EXAM

All first year courses must be successfully completed (i.e., A, B, or Pass in all Core courses, Modules, Biostatistics, and Bioethics). The timing of the Qualifying Exam will be delayed for students who have not fulfilled this requirement. In these cases, the exam should be held in the summer of the second year and the Admission to Candidacy meeting should occur as early as possible in the third year.

### C. SELECTION OF COMMITTEE MEMBERS

The committee will be assembled as described in subsequent sections. The criteria for their selection and the processes involved will be as follows.

**C1.** The committee members should be chosen for their expertise in areas relevant to the student's research project and for their mentoring capabilities. At least one or two of the committee members should have significant research interests outside the student's primary area of interest (e.g., if you work on *Bacterium amaziae*, you need some people on your committee who work on something else. Diversity in background and expertise are key to providing perspective on your project and developing new directions).

**C2.** The student and mentor should identify the appropriate committee members. The student is responsible for contacting the prospective committee members and requesting their service on the committee. The contact may be via email, in person, or both and should include some information regarding the research project so that the faculty member can confirm their suitability for the committee (sending a copy of the abstract or summary of your planned project is helpful).

**C3.** The full Dissertation committee will consist of five faculty members. The recruitment of the full committee may be delayed until the Admission to Candidacy stage (as described below).

#### D. PRELIMINARY MEETING

At the beginning of the second year (**and no later than October 15**), the student will have a brief meeting with at least three faculty members (mentor + two) expected to be on the final Dissertation Committee. The exact format of the meeting is left to the discretion of the committee.

**D1.** The goal of this meeting is to review the student's progress to date, identify academic and career development goals, and present a brief overview of the proposed research topic to the committee. As described below, the format of the student's full proposal will be based on NIH guidelines for individual predoctoral fellowships (F31). For this meeting, the student should provide the committee with the following components of the proposal *prior* to the meeting:

- Biosketch (see Proposal and Progress Report Guidelines)
- Career and Training Goals (see Proposal and Progress Report Guidelines)
- Abstract / Specific Aims – not to exceed one page. It is recognized that the project will still be under development and may change significantly before the Qualifying Exam meeting. This document may therefore provide a general description of the area under study and why it is a significant research topic. Specific Aims are not necessary but may be included if they have been developed.

**D2.** At the meeting, the student should present a brief overview of the research topic (10 – 12 minutes), emphasizing its significance, why it is an important problem to study, and how the goals of the project will be further developed. At this point, the student should have begun to read the relevant literature and be able to have a scholarly discussion with the committee. Preliminary data may be incorporated into the presentation but it is not essential. The lack of data should not preclude the scheduling of this meeting, as its main purpose is to assess the student's progress and plans for developing their proposal. The committee may ask questions, but this meeting does not constitute an exam. Questions may be helpful, however, in directing the student's attention to areas they need to focus on prior to the Qualifying Exam. The committee should also review with the student the academic progress, plans for additional coursework, career goals, and plans for academic and career development. These areas should be addressed in the documents provided to the committee before the meeting.

**D3.** The committee should provide feedback and recommendations to the student and mentor, and should request changes as necessary to improve the written documents.

**D4.** After the meeting, the student should submit the evaluation form (link on Microbiology Theme website) and final (pdf) versions of the Biosketch, Career and Training Goals, and Abstract/Specific Aims to the Program Administrator/Theme Director.

#### E. QUALIFYING EXAM REQUIREMENTS

In the spring of the second year, the student will submit the proposal and hold the oral defense for the Qualifying Exam. The examination committee will consist of three faculty members. The mentor will not participate in the Qualifying Examination. It is expected that the committee will include the two faculty members who participated in the Preliminary meeting, plus one additional member who will also ultimately be part of the student's Dissertation Committee. However, if the research topic is now more defined and different committee members are deemed more appropriate, they should be selected.

**E1. Timelines – Proposals should be submitted in March-April (no later than April 30), oral defenses should occur in April-May, and all components of the Qualifying Exam should be completed by the end of June.** *If the student has difficulty meeting any of these deadlines, the Theme Director must be notified well in advance.* Significant departures from the latter timelines should occur only if extensive revisions or a re-defense of the proposal are required. The student and the chair of the committee should discuss expected deadlines and ensure that the committee members will be available during the necessary timeframe. Anticipated dates for proposal submission and return of reviews can

be established. A tentative date for the expected oral defense can be planned but if all deadlines are not met, the date of the defense will be rescheduled.

**E2.** One of the faculty members will serve as **chair** of the Qualifying Exam. The student and mentor will decide on the appropriate faculty member and confirm the willingness to serve in this role. The chair will be responsible for confirming the committee's preliminary approval of the proposal prior to proceeding to the oral defense (see below), guiding the oral defense meeting, providing the evaluation of the meeting outcome, and ensuring completion of all requirements of the Exam (see below). The chair is also responsible for informing the Theme Director of the student's progress and providing copies of the committee's reviews, evaluations, and recommendations.

**E3.** Once the committee members have agreed to serve, the mentor or student should provide (via email) their names to the Theme Director for approval. Indicate the chair of the committee.

**E4.** The student will provide the committee with the full proposal (see Proposal and Progress Report Guidelines). The components of the proposal provided for the preliminary meeting should be updated in the final proposal. The proposal may be sent to the committee members as a pdf or Word file via email. Copies of the proposal and any revisions should also be submitted to the Theme Director.

**E5.** Within approximately two weeks of proposal submission, the chair will provide the student with the committee's review of the proposal. Each committee member will provide a written assessment and score for the proposal. **Scores** will range from 1 – 10, with 1 being the best. Proposals with an average score between 1 and 4 will be considered acceptable, but the committee may still request revision prior to the oral defense. Proposals with an average score above 4 **require** revision. If the reviewers' scores are disparate, the chair may decide whether revision is needed (e.g., if the average score does not require revision but one reviewer's score and comments reflect a serious concern that was not noted by the other reviewers, the chair may require revision of the proposal). It is expected that most proposals will require some revision.

Approval at this stage implies that the proposal is adequate to proceed to the oral defense but does not indicate that changes will not be requested later. Written reviews for acceptable proposals should include comments that will be helpful to the student at the oral defense.

**If the proposal requires revision, the chair will notify the student, mentor, and other committee members.** The student will have one to two weeks (or other time specified by the committee) to revise the proposal and the review process will be repeated. **If the revised version is deemed unacceptable, the student will fail the Qualifying Exam. In the event of failure, the student will be allowed a second attempt to produce an acceptable proposal,** which would be expected to require extensive reworking of the original proposal. It is advisable for the chair of the committee to meet with the student and mentor to discuss the problems with the first proposal and the remedies that might help the student prepare a successful submission. **A second failure will result in dismissal from the GBS program.**

**E6.** Following approval of the proposal (and within approximately one week), the student will proceed with the Qualifying Exam meeting. The student should prepare a presentation (~30 minutes) that describes the project, its significance, specific aims, and planned approaches. Anticipated outcomes and potential problems should be incorporated. It is not necessary to incorporate data, as **the purpose of this meeting is to assess the student's knowledge rather than evaluate results.** The committee should question the student with regard to the specific research plan, approaches, rationale, and significance of the project, as well as fundamental topics that any student at this level should be expected to know. **The format of the questioning is at the discretion of the committee but it should be rigorous, thorough, and fair so that all students achieve the maximum benefit from the Exam and are treated equally with respect to outcome regardless of committee composition.**

**E7.** At the completion of the Qualifying Exam meeting, the committee will decide the outcome and immediately inform the student. An evaluation form completed by the committee will be provided to the student, mentor, and Theme Director (link on the Microbiology Theme website). The possible overall outcomes are -

- Pass without qualification – no revisions or specific remediation are required.
- Pass with qualification – the committee will provide specific requirements that the student must complete. Examples of such requirements include revisions of the written proposal, preparation of a written or oral review on a topic in which the student demonstrated weakness, or other similar requirements the committee deems appropriate. The requirement(s) must be completed by the student within one month (unless the committee states otherwise, such as a requirement to complete a specific course), and then approved by the full committee. *Failure to successfully complete the requirements will result in failure of the Qualifying Exam.*
- Fail – if the committee feels that the student did not adequately defend the proposal or demonstrate a sufficient depth of knowledge, and the deficiencies cannot be remedied through the “Pass with qualification” category, the student will be deemed to fail the Qualifying Exam. A re-defense of the proposal must occur within two months. A second failure will result in dismissal from the GBS program.

**E8.** When all components of the Qualifying Exam have been completed and approved by the committee, the chair of the committee will notify the student, mentor, committee, and Theme Director/Program Administrator.

**E9.** The student and committee should recognize that the goals of the Qualifying Exam process include developing the student’s thinking, writing, and presentation skills, while helping the student develop a plan that will serve as the basis for the dissertation. It also expected that students will be encouraged by their committees to use the proposal as the basis for submission of a fellowship proposal. Thus it is expected that most students will be required to make (and will benefit from) revisions to their proposal.

## **F. ADMISSION TO CANDIDACY**

After successful completion of the Qualifying Exam, the student will be eligible to proceed to the Admission to Candidacy meeting. This meeting should take place in the beginning of the third year (and cannot occur before the student has passed 48 credit hours, or 27 for those entering with a masters degree). *See the Graduate School website for more details on requirements for completing the degree (<http://catalog.uab.edu/graduate/completionofadegree/-doctoraldegree requirementstext>).*

**F1.** For this meeting, the full Dissertation Committee will be assembled and will consist of five faculty members (mentor + four). It is expected that the committee will include the three faculty members who participated in the Qualifying Exam, plus one additional member. However, if different committee members are deemed more appropriate at this time, they should be selected. The mentor will serve as chair of the committee.

**F2.** Once all members are confirmed, the names should be provided to the Theme Director for approval (use this form <https://www.uab.edu/graduate/images/acrobat/forms/commit.pdf>). The Director will submit the names to the Dean of the Graduate School for final approval. After this stage, any changes in committee composition will require the approval of the Theme Director and the Dean of the Graduate School (use this form - <https://www.uab.edu/graduate/images/acrobat/forms/changecom.pdf>).

**F3.** At least one week prior to the meeting, the student should provide the committee members with an updated proposal and a progress report (see Proposal and Progress Report Guidelines). The research proposal does not have to be changed from that approved at the Qualifying Exam stage, unless there are changes to the plans. The progress report should present results primarily in the form of figures and tables.

**F4.** At the meeting, the student should present the results and the plans for the upcoming six months to one year. The purpose of this meeting is to evaluate the science and help ensure the student is on track with the research project.

**F5.** At the conclusion of this meeting, the student will obtain the necessary signatures (mentor, committee, theme director) and submit the application for Admission to Candidacy to the Graduate School (use the Doctor of Philosophy form at <http://www.uab.edu/graduate/images/acrobat/forms/admitphd1.pdf> ).

**F6.** Submit the evaluation forms to the Theme Director and Process Manager (<https://www.uab.edu/gbs/home/images/FORMS/GBS-MSTP-Committee-Meeting-Eval-Form---Student-Portion-11.26.12.pdf-2.pdf> AND <https://www.uab.edu/gbs/home/images/FORMS/GBS-MSTP-Committee-Meeting-Eval-Form---Mentor-Portion-11.26.12.pdf-2.pdf>)

## **G. REQUIREMENTS FOR SUBSEQUENT YEARS**

**G1.** Subsequent to the Admission to Candidacy meeting, committee meetings are required twice yearly, approximately every six months. The student should begin scheduling these meetings as early as possible to ensure availability of the committee members.

**G2.** For each committee meeting, the student will provide a written progress report (see Proposal and Progress Report Guidelines) to the committee at least one week prior to the meeting. The progress report should include updates on the research project, plans for the next six months to one year, progress on timeline to graduation, manuscripts (completed or in preparation), an updated biosketch, an updated Career and Training Goals statement, and an updated Specific Aims. Each progress report is a step closer to graduation, and the writing and presentation should continue to improve. The committee should insist on well-written progress reports and should require the student to revise reports that are deemed inadequate.

**G3.** At each committee meeting, an evaluation form will be completed and discussed with the student (use these forms <https://www.uab.edu/gbs/home/images/FORMS/GBS-MSTP-Committee-Meeting-Eval-Form---Student-Portion-11.26.12.pdf-2.pdf> AND <https://www.uab.edu/gbs/home/images/FORMS/GBS-MSTP-Committee-Meeting-Eval-Form---Mentor-Portion-11.26.12.pdf-2.pdf>)

**G4.** Following each committee meeting, the evaluation form and final progress report should be submitted to the Theme Director/Process Manager. Evaluations and progress reports will be reviewed to ensure that all students are making adequate progress towards completion of their degrees.

## **H. DISSERTATION DEFENSE – note that the deadlines below require that you submit the dissertation to your committee one month before the final public defense**

- See Graduate School deadlines for submitting Application for Degree and last dates for final (public) defense in each semester (<http://www.uab.edu/graduate/graduate-school-quicklinks/deadline-dates>)
- Notify Theme Director and Process Manager of dates for private and public defenses as soon as they are set

### **H1. Private defense:**

**Two weeks before** private defense, send to committee –

- dissertation (email or printed, as desired by committee members)
- updated Biosketch, Career and Training Plan

**After meeting**, email to Theme Director and Administrator:

- outcome of private defense and evaluation (use these forms <https://www.uab.edu/gbs/home/images/FORMS/GBS-MSTP-Committee-Meeting-Eval-Form---Student-Portion-11.26.12.pdf-2.pdf> AND <https://www.uab.edu/gbs/home/images/FORMS/GBS-MSTP-Committee-Meeting-Eval-Form---Mentor-Portion-11.26.12.pdf-2.pdf>)
- pdf of final dissertation (revised as recommended by committee)

**H2. Public Defense** – there should be approximately **two weeks** between the private and public defenses. This allows time for you to address any comments and dissertation revisions required by the committee and to advertise the defense date

**H3. Announcements:**

You may set the anticipated date of your final public defense prior to completing the private defense. *However*, the announcement of your public defense will not be made until you have passed your private defense, and *you must follow these guidelines*.

- You must notify the office of the Dean of the Graduate School two weeks prior to the final public defense - <http://www.uab.edu/graduate/request-thesis-or-dissertation-approval-forms-theses-and-dissertations>. If for any reason the public defense will not occur on the originally planned date, notify the Graduate School immediately.
- Provide the title, date, time, and location of the public defense to the Process Manager as soon as known so that an announcement can be generated. The public defense must be advertised for AT LEAST ONE WEEK prior to its occurrence. HOWEVER, it will NOT be advertised until after you have completed your private defense and notified the Theme Director and Process Manager of such. Thus, as noted above, there should be approximately two weeks between the private and public defenses.