



Weill Cornell Graduate School of Medical Sciences

Admission to Doctoral Candidacy Examination (ACE) – Regulations

The Admission to Doctoral Candidacy Examination follows the rules outlined in Article X, Paragraph 61, of the *Code of Legislation of the Weill Cornell Graduate School of Medical Sciences of Cornell University*. Those rules are summarized here:

1. Purpose of the ACE

The ACE examination should be a rigorous and meaningful determination of the student's ability to employ and interpret information not only in the area of specialization, but also in more general contexts. The ACE objectives for students in the Weill Cornell Graduate School (WCGS) are to:

1. Ensure that the student's formal education is largely completed.
2. Determine that the student has attained and can effectively employ the breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding commensurate with the high standards of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.
3. Satisfy the Examining Committee that the student is thoroughly prepared to undertake full-time thesis research.

2. Content and Format of the Admission-to-Doctoral Candidacy Examination

The Admission-to-Doctoral Candidacy Examination consists of written and oral parts, both carefully designed to show that the student has established:

1. A thorough understanding of the development, present status, and direction of the specific area of knowledge in which the student's interests lie.
2. An adequate knowledge of areas related to the methodologies being employed in his/her field and can understand and interpret emerging research data.
3. A sufficiently broad education to enable him/her to function adequately in scientific activities other than just the narrow and often transient limits of the immediate thesis research.

The written exam is to be completed in accord with the rules of the student's WCGS Program. Graduate Programs may opt to require preliminary approval by ACE committee members of the written exam ahead of scheduling the oral part of the examination. The oral examination should continue the process of determining the student's general scientific knowledge and understanding, and may draw on what was learned by the examiners about the student in the written examination. However, the oral examination should not be viewed exclusively as an instrument to explore the written examination. The oral examination should probe the student's ability to process, organize, and evaluate scientific data in a comprehensive fashion.

The written and oral examinations are separate and are to be graded independently.

3. Examination Timing and Scheduling

Only students who are in "good standing" can take the ACE. The oral component of the Admission-to-Doctoral Candidacy Examination must be taken by June 30 of a student's second year. Students who do not take the oral exam by June 30 are placed on probation for 3 months, except in extenuating circumstances as approved by the Dean, upon request from Program leadership. Probation is lifted, and "good standing" is restored, by taking the oral examination. If a student does not take the oral examination during the 3-month probationary period, he/she will be dismissed from the graduate school unless the Dean chooses to extend the probationary period. Timetables for tabled examinations during the probationary period will be established on a case-by-case basis by the Dean.

Students must submit an Application for Examination form to the Weill Cornell Graduate School office at least two weeks prior to the scheduled oral examination date.

4. Examining Committee

The Examining Committee shall consist of one Chairperson and at least three Examiners. Additional Examiners are permitted, subject to approval by the Program and the Dean's office. Every member of the committee, including the additional examiners, must be a member of the Weill Cornell Graduate School faculty, unless otherwise allowed by the Dean's office. The following are automatically approved by the Dean's office:

- The Tri-Institutional Training Program in Computational Biology & Medicine may substitute one Cornell Ithaca faculty Examiner for one Weill Cornell Graduate School faculty Examiner.
- The Tri-Institutional Training Program in Chemical Biology may substitute one Rockefeller University faculty Examiner for one Weill Cornell Graduate School faculty Examiner.
- The Tri-Institutional MD-PhD Program may substitute an Examiner from the Rockefeller University or the Gerstner-Sloan Kettering faculty (who is not a member of the Weill Cornell Graduate School faculty) for one Weill Cornell Graduate School faculty Examiner. The Committee Chairperson and at least two other Examiners must be members of the Weill Cornell Graduate School.

The Chairperson of the Examining Committee should be familiar with the rules and regulations of WCGS and the ACE. The student's mentor (or co-mentors, if applicable) cannot serve as Chairperson.

If a member of the Committee is unable to attend the examination, the Examining Committee Chair, in consultation with the student's Program, must designate another individual to participate in the examination as the absent member's representative. All examiners should be suitably knowledgeable in the student's ACE topic area. The oral examination is open to all members of the WCGS faculty, although only the Examining Committee votes on the outcome. No other persons (e.g., students, post-doctoral fellows) are permitted to attend the oral examination or its discussion.

5. Student Preparation

Students are encouraged to consult the Program Director, Program Chairperson, or members of the Examining Committee, on appropriate areas and methods of preparation and study. Program Directors or Program Chairpersons shall, in consultation with the faculty of the Program, promulgate guidelines designed to aid the student in this endeavor.

6. Examination Evaluation

The written and oral examinations are to be graded separately. The grades for each examination shall be "Pass", "Table", "Fail", or "Pass for Master's Only". A student must achieve a grade of "Pass" on both the written and oral examinations to proceed on to Doctoral Candidacy. A "Pass" in the examination should be neither routine nor easy. If there is any doubt with regard to the student's suitability, the Examining Committee should table the examination until the student and the student's advisors feel that he/she is better prepared. Such tablings should be neither rare nor meant to disparage the student's ability. An unequivocal "Pass" should be a major accomplishment and not a mere formality.

"Pass for Master's Only" typically occurs in one of two situations. The first is that a student states before the examination that he/she chooses to discontinue pursuit of the PhD degree and instead elects to attempt to earn a Master's degree by passing the ACE (and completing all other pre-ACE requirements). The second is that the committee decides, before or during the examination, that the student is not a suitable candidate for the PhD (and is not anticipated to become a suitable candidate even after further studies in the event of a Tabled examination), but can earn a Master's degree by passing the ACE. If one examination result is Pass for Master's, but the other is Pass, then the result is Pass for Master's, unless the student requests, and the committee grants, that the examination be Tabled.

The grading of the examination rests exclusively with the members of the Examining Committee.

6a. Evaluation of the Written Examination

When the Examining Committee has assembled, the Chairperson will ask the candidate to leave the room. WCGS Faculty members who are not part of the Examining Committee are welcome to remain in the room for all parts of the ACE and its discussion.

The Chairperson will open a discussion of the candidate's written examination. At an appropriate point in the discussion, the Chairperson will ask each member to voice their individual vote. Members are permitted to change their vote during additional discussion. Each individual's final vote will be entered in the Examining Committee Report by the Chairperson. For a student to pass the written examination, pass only for a master's degree, or fail, a majority of the vote is required (e.g., a majority of the votes must be "pass" for the student to pass the exam). The written examination is tabled if the requirements of a vote to pass, pass only for a master's degree, or fail are not met (e.g., 2 pass, 2 fail, and 1 table vote would result in a tabled exam).

The candidate must pass (or pass for Master's only) the written examination before proceeding to the oral examination.

6b. Evaluation of the Oral Examination

If the written examination has been passed, the oral examination will proceed.

The Chairperson will initiate the oral examination and invite questioning. Non-committee faculty members present will be invited by the chair to ask questions, but will have no vote on the outcome of the examination. It is the duty of the Chairperson to govern the sequence and duration of questioning by the examining committee and other interested faculty.

When all questioning has been completed, the Chairperson will excuse the candidate from the room. The Chairperson will open a discussion of the candidate's oral examination. At an appropriate point in the discussion, the Chairperson will ask each member to voice their individual vote. Members are permitted to change their vote during additional discussion. Each individual's final vote will be entered in the Examining Committee Report by the Chairperson. For a student to pass the examination, pass only for a master's degree, or fail, a majority of the vote is required (e.g., a majority of the votes must be "pass" for the student to pass the exam). The oral examination is tabled if the requirements of a vote to pass, pass only for a master's degree, or fail are not met (e.g., 2 pass, 2 fail, and 1 table vote would result in a tabled exam).

The candidate will be informed of the results of the examination upon the conclusion of the oral examination. Implications of a tabled or failed examination will be explained to the candidate. For tabled examinations, the Examining Committee will specify what deficiencies the student must correct and will propose a timetable for retaking the examination, in accordance with WCGS rules.

Final disposition of the grades received by the student for the Admission-to-Doctoral Candidacy Examination shall be no later than one year from the original date of the written examination.

7. Reexamination of Students After Tabled ACE

For students whose written and/or oral examination was tabled:

1. Two weeks prior to reexamination, the student should submit a new Application for Examination form to the Weill Cornell Graduate School office.
2. For the reexamination, the Chairperson will follow the same procedures as for the original examination, including completion and submission of the Examining Committee Report form.
3. As stipulated by the WCGS Code of Legislation, students must retake the examination within one year. The Examining Committee may set an earlier deadline for retaking the examination.