



PhD Program in

Biomedical Informatics

Guidelines for Preliminary Qualifying Examination

Biomedical Informatics PhD Program

THE GOAL

The primary goal of the Preliminary Qualifying Examination (PQE) is to ensure that you have mastered several topics and skills that are critical for successful completion of your Ph.D. thesis. The PQE will assess your competence in genome sciences, bioinformatics methods, statistical analysis, and molecular biology/genetics, including material that is covered in your core BIG classes.

EXAM FORMAT

The PQE is anchored on a series of questions related to one or more recent papers. The papers and the questions are selected by the committee chair and typically require extensive reading and computation (examples available from the program office). The student has one week to work on the exam: exactly one week (24x7 hours) prior to the exam, the program administrator will email the exam to the student; on the day of the exam, the student will meet with the committee to present a response to the questions (no written report is required). The examiners will then ask questions related to the student's presentation as well as on any material that the student is expected to have mastered in their coursework. The exam will last approximately two hours. Students are not allowed to consult with anyone other than the program director and the exam chair about the exam.

EXAM COMMITTEE SELECTION

The exam is administered by three faculty members. Given that the exam chair selects the paper(s) and creates the written questions, it is advantageous for the student to have as the exam chair a professor whose research area overlaps with the student's intended area of study. The PQE chair is also responsible for keeping the exam on course and ensuring that examiners pursue an appropriate line of questions. The student should contact the potential exam chair and committee members directly to inquire about their willingness to serve on the committee.

Starting with the G1 cohort in fall 2023, the program directors will choose the PQE chair and other committee members. Current G2s will have the choice to have the program choose your chair and committee. Otherwise, current G2s will be expected to choose your own committee as usual this year. If the program chooses your committee, this will be done with your research field in mind. We will need your research field at least 3 months before you take your PQE. Once the examiners are chosen by the program, you will contact them to schedule your exam.

For G2s in 2023-2024, once a committee is formed, the student must let Cathy know at least 6 weeks before the desired exam date. The program office will review the committee membership; final selection of examiners will be at the discretion of the program office. Before the committee is formed, inform the program office if there are faculty members that you know or believe should be excluded because of a conflict of interest.

Any BIG faculty members may serve on the committee, except for your thesis advisor (if known) or collaborators; the chair must be a BIG faculty member who has already served on a committee at least twice (please contact Cathy for current eligible faculty list). In selecting the chair and the committee members, please note that some professors (e.g., those who teach the BIG core courses) are asked to serve very often and may not be willing. If you are having difficulty finding examiners, please contact the program office for recommendations.

SCHEDULING THE EXAM

You are required to take the PQE before June of your G2 year. Most students take the exam in the fall of G2; a minority of students take it in the spring or summer of their G1. It is your responsibility to schedule your oral exam. The program leadership is available to help you with scheduling. If you need help please reach out to Cathy Haskell. You may take the exam either before or after selecting your thesis advisor; if you have already selected your thesis advisor, that professor may not serve on your committee. Please note that selecting your committee members and scheduling the exam may take much longer than expected, and so you should plan well in advance (2-3 months). On rare occasions, an exam had to be rescheduled at the last minute because of a change in a committee member's schedule.

THE OUTCOMES

You will be informed of the outcome (pass, conditional pass, or fail) at the end of the exam, along with any comments that the committee may have. The committee chair will submit a written evaluation signed by the committee to the program office, which will send a copy to the student.

Pass. No further work on the PQE will be required.

Conditional Pass. A student will receive a conditional pass if the committee feels that he/she would benefit from additional preparation before starting the thesis work. The conditions for changing the grade to "pass" will be determined by the exam committee. If possible, these recommendations will be given to the student at the end of the exam. The plan will be noted in the evaluation form, along with the expected time frame for satisfying the condition. It may be helpful for the student and the chair to communicate by email shortly after the exam to ensure that the expectations for the student are clear. In the past, the required work typically involved additional coursework or writing of a review manuscript.

Fail. A student will receive a fail if there are serious concerns based on the oral exam. In this case, a follow-up meeting with the exam chair, PQE committee chair, program head, program advisor, and thesis advisor will be scheduled. After this meeting, a set of recommendations will be made to address the identified issues. The student will be given the opportunity to retake the oral exam following completion of the recommended work. If a student fails a second time, the student will be required to withdraw from the program.

THE NEXT STEP

After passing the PQE, you will assemble a Dissertation Advisory Committee (DAC). This meeting should happen within 3-4 months after passing the PQE.

The program director is available to answer questions, clarify expectations, and provide guidance at any point during the exam preparation process.