

SMS Guidelines for Student Exams and Defenses

Effective: Fall 2022

Qualifying Exam Guidelines from SMS Graduate Catalog (for reference):

MS: https://catalog.wm.edu/preview_program.php?catoid=27&poid=5370#milestones

PhD: https://catalog.wm.edu/preview_program.php?catoid=27&poid=5302#milestones

Qualifying Examination and Prospectus Defense: The qualifying examination and prospectus defense gauge a student's progress early in his/her research program. The qualifying examination milestone is 18 months for a M.S. student and 30 months for a Ph.D. student. The exam must be completed within 6 or 12 months of the milestone date for M.S. and Ph.D. students, respectively. A student who fails to meet the milestone in the timeframe specified will be placed on academic probation. A student on academic probation will have one calendar year to satisfy any outstanding deficiencies. Failure to do so will result in automatic termination of the student's degree program.

The qualifying examination is an oral exam designed to test a student's scientific competence and ability to pursue the research project. The exam consists of two components: (1) questions that address knowledge specific to the proposed research project and (2) questions concerning the general knowledge in the student's field of study. The qualifying examination will be administered by the student's advisory committee and chaired by a [moderator](#), who is not a member of the student's advisory committee. The moderator must be identified at least three weeks prior to the examination. Students, advisor(s), members of the committee, and the moderator are expected to attend the exam in-person, however flexibility will be provided for committee members who need to participate remotely via Zoom web conferencing due to extenuating circumstances. Students must electronically file appropriate paperwork via DocuSign for the scheduling and announcement of the qualifying examination with the Office of Academic Studies. The moderator is responsible for hosting and distributing Zoom meeting details when remote participation is necessary. ADAS approval is also required if more than one committee member requires remote participation.

Consistent with SMS procedures, the examination will be advertised and open to all faculty members. Faculty members who are not on the student's committee are not allowed to ask questions during the exam. The examination allows a student's advisory committee to identify any deficiencies in a student's preparation to successfully conduct and complete the degree program. The minimum elapsed time between successful completion of the qualifying examination and the final defense must be no less than six months for M.S. students and no less than one year for Ph.D. students. SMS policy prohibits audio or video recording of exams, although exceptions may be made for students with documented disabilities.

The prospectus is a formal written presentation of the proposed research. Its purpose is to present the rationale for selection of the hypotheses and methodology to be used in testing the hypotheses. It must include a problem statement, review of current literature in the area of study, and a detailed plan of study, as well as a summary of preliminary research conducted by the student. The prospectus must also provide a detailed rationale for the proposed work, clearly stated objectives, and testable hypothesis(es) when appropriate, consistent with the problem statement, and a description of research design, field and laboratory studies, methods and data analysis intended to test the hypothesis. The prospectus must be formally approved by the committee via signing the "Prospectus Acceptance Form". The student will initiate this milestone form in DocuSign for circulation of e-signatures.

Related Forms:

Students are responsible for initiating these forms in DocuSign due to required W&M CAS authentication (requires W&M login credentials).

- [Qualifying Exam Scheduling Form & Prospectus Pre-Approval](#)
- [Qualifying Exam Grade Form](#)
- [Prospectus Acceptance Form](#)
- [Admission to Candidacy Form](#)

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Thesis or Dissertation Defense Guidelines from SMS Graduate Catalog (for reference):

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PhD: https://catalog.wm.edu/preview_program.php?catoid=27&poid=5302#milestones

Seminar Presentation and Defense of Thesis or Dissertation: The defense of a thesis or dissertation will consist of two parts. First, all students are required to present a seminar to the marine science faculty, staff and students on their thesis or dissertation research. The seminar will be advertised and open to any interested individuals. Bob Polley (VIMS ITNS) manages the Zoom webinar platform for online delivery of public seminars. The link will be distributed to the VIMS community by Academic Studies via the Academic Digest and via VIMS-Business. See guidance on next page for connection and other information from Bob Polley regarding preparation for the public seminar.

Second, immediately following the seminar, the student will undergo an oral examination, the defense of his or her thesis or dissertation, by the student's advisory committee. The defense will be chaired and administered by a [moderator](#), who is not a member of the student's committee. The moderator must be identified at least 30 days prior to the defense. Students, advisor(s), members of the committee, and the moderator are expected to attend the defense in-person, however flexibility will be provided for committee members who need to participate remotely via Zoom web conferencing due to extenuating circumstances. Students must electronically file appropriate paperwork via DocuSign for the scheduling and announcement of the defense with the Office of Academic Studies. The moderator is responsible for hosting and distributing Zoom meeting details for the private defense meeting when remote participation is necessary. ADAS approval is also required if more than one committee member requires remote participation. SMS policy prohibits audio or video recording of defenses, although exceptions may be made for students with documented disabilities.

At the conclusion of the defense, the student's advisory committee will vote on a pass/fail decision, and indicate this on the "Thesis/Dissertation Defense Acceptance Form." The student will initiate this milestone form in DocuSign for circulation of e-signatures.

Unanimous committee approval is necessary for satisfactory completion of both a student's thesis or dissertation defense and the final version of the thesis or dissertation. Following a successful defense, the student will initiate the "Thesis or Dissertation Final Acceptance Form" in DocuSign using the routing order established by the moderator at the student's defense. Typical routing is as follows: #1-3) individual committee members, #4) co-advisor, if applicable, #5) major advisor, and #6) student. After each person signs the form, DocuSign will send the form automatically to the next person in the routing order. If you have questions about the form or routing, please contact the SMS Registrar.

Related Forms:

Students are responsible for initiating these forms in DocuSign due to required W&M CAS authentication (requires W&M login credentials).

- [Defense Scheduling Form & Final Draft Distribution](#)
- [Defense Acceptance Form](#)
- Thesis or Dissertation Final Acceptance Form (link coming soon!) – For ETD Submission in *ProQuest*
- [W&M Institutional Repository License](#) – For ETD Submission in *ProQuest*

Important Note for Remote Participation: *There will be 2 different zoom links to share with the committee – one for the public seminar (webinar, managed by ITNS) and one for the private defense (meeting, hosted by the moderator).*

See next page for guidance on connecting to public defense seminar, including Zoom webinar instructions.

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Guidance for Public Seminars for Thesis and Dissertation Defenses

VIMS ITNS will manage the Zoom webinar platform to run the public seminar presentation. When the student's defense scheduling form is routed for approvals, ITNS will confirm the day and time of the event. If you need auxiliary equipment, students should contact Bob Polley directly with such requests. He has a camera/microphone combo or a headset with a microphone available if you need them.

All seminars will be conducted using the same Zoom link/invitation given below. Academic Studies will include the link in the seminar and defense announcement and the seminar will be open to all who have the link, including family and friends. The seminar will be recorded at the student's request.

You are invited to a Zoom webinar.

When: This is a recurring webinar

Topic: VIMS Defense Seminar

Please click the link below to join the webinar:

<https://cwm.zoom.us/j/219220498>

Password: 5990

—Interim guidelines adopted by Academic Council and approved by Associate Dean of Academic Studies, March 2020; updated April 2020; revised September 2022.