

Institute Graduate Curriculum Committee Minutes
Start-up and Academic Matters
Thursday August 24, 2017

Present: Breedveld (ChBE – IGCC Chair), Pikowsky (Registrar/Secretary), Balch (CoC-IC), Ballantyne (Physics), Chow (CoC-CSE), Davenport (ECE), Erera (ISYE), Ferri (Vice Provost, Grad Edu.), Hays (CoC-IC), Jagoda (AE), Mackaris (HTS), Ranjan (ME), Schmidt-Krey (BIOS), Sluss (CoB/GCC Vice Chair), Smith (AE) Vigoda (CoC-CS)

Visitors: Hodges (Registrar), Hogarth-Smith (Registrar), Black (Graduate Studies), Phillips (Academic Effectiveness), Sharp (GEFA), Woolard (Academic Effectiveness)

Note: All action items in these minutes require approval by the Academic Senate. In some instances, items may require further approval by the Board of Regents or the University System of Georgia. If the Regents' approval is required, the change is not official until notification is received from the Board to that effect. Academic units should take no action on these items until USG and/or BOR approval is secured. In some cases, approval by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools-CoC may also be required; in others, notification by the Institute will suffice. In addition, units should take no action on any of the items below until these minutes have been approved by the Academic Senate or the Executive Board.

Note: All votes are unanimous unless noted otherwise.

Start-up Matters

1. The Registrar distributed information via email prior to the start-up which included all meeting dates, times, and location (information can also be located on the Institute Curriculum Committee website). The meeting day and time will continue to be Thursdays at 3 p.m. in the Registrar's Office Conference room.

A motion was made to approve the meeting time and dates. This motion was seconded and approved.

2. Reta Pikowsky, Registrar serves as IGCC Secretary by statute.
3. Dr. David Sluss, CoB, was nominated and elected Chair.
4. Dr. Victor Breedveld, ChBE, was nominated and elected Vice Chair.

5. Dr. Marilyn Smith (AE) was nominated and elected to serve on the Study Abroad Committee.
6. Dr. Ingeborg Schmidt-Krey (BIOS) and Dr. Tucker Balch (CoC-IC) were nominated and elected to serve on the RCR (Responsible Conduct of Research) Committee.
7. The Petition Subcommittee will be handled at a later date once we have a sense of any scheduling conflicts that might inform who is available.
8. In a follow-up discussion, it was noted that the delegation of authority to the Registrar in regard to certain kinds of petitions will need to be voted on at the September 7, 2017 IGCC meeting. This action was inadvertently overlooked at this meeting.

Delegated authority, where the request is reasonable, is applicable to the following areas. Should there be any question or concern, the Registrar will bring the petition forward for broader consideration by the Petition Subcommittee first, then on to the Graduate Curriculum Committee if necessary):

- 7-year rule
- 6-year rule
- Readmit after the 1st drop if the major school supports
- Reasonable changes in registration for the current term
- Full graduate standing
- Use of hours earned in special status
- Graduate without GPA
- Reasonable requests for credit hour adjustments, grade mode changes, etc.
- Withdrawals, when clear and well-documented that also include the support of the School or College

Discussion Items:

1. James Black, Office of Graduate Studies, addressed the Committee with forthcoming proposals for the approval of updates to catalog language for Comprehensive Exams. Additional proposals include endorsing a document outlining basic principles and best practices for programs, faculty, and students in regards to Ph.D. Qualifying Exams/Comprehensive Exams.

Catalog language

The current language is posted below with the proposed language (edits in ~~red~~ and ~~green~~). Suggestions from the Committee are included under each item.

Comprehensive Exams

The comprehensive examination assesses both general knowledge of the degree area and specialized knowledge of the student's chosen research field. Each ~~school~~ program¹ is responsible for scheduling at least two opportunities each year for students to complete comprehensive examinations ~~at least once a year~~², in the fall or spring, and for providing students detailed and easily accessible information regarding exam formats, rules, and scope ~~informing students of their scope~~.³ ~~A guidance committee appointed by the chair of the school will advise each student in planning a program of study and preparing for the examination, partly through an initial evaluation of the student's background and interests, partly through periodic consultation to evaluate and aid the student's progress.~~⁴

The following changes are proposed:

1. Replace “school” with “program.”

Rationale: The word “program” better reflects the current structure of graduate education at Tech including the emergence of interdisciplinary programs which administer their own comprehensive exams.

The Committee agreed with this update since “programs” is a better fit in the case that a program is interdisciplinary between Schools.

2. Add “at least two opportunities each year for students to complete” and remove “at least once a year.”

Rationale: Students should never have to wait a full calendar year to re-take comprehensive exams. If a program only schedules exams once per year, they can still offer an additional “opportunity” for a student to re-take an exam (or part of an exam) after their failed attempt on a case-by-case basis without an additional program-wide scheduling of comprehensive exams. The word “opportunity” can be interpreted broadly.

The Committee suggested to define the intent of opportunities. It was suggested that the language gives a false impression that students have a choice of when they would be able to complete the comprehensive exam. The Committee concluded that the intent appears to address retakes of the Comprehensive Exam, but the language did not reflect as such.

3. Add “providing students detailed and easily accessible information regarding exam formats, rules, and scope” and remove “informing students of their scope.”

Rationale: The existing definition sets the bar too low by requiring programs to simply inform students of the scope of exams. Significant stress can come from ambiguity in exam formats and rules as well as scope. This additional language promotes the basic principle of transparency and fairness.

The Committee suggested that the line be updated to remove adjectives, since interpretation of ‘detailed’ and ‘easily accessible’ may vary.

4. Remove “A guidance committee appointed by the chair of the school will advise each student in planning a program of study and preparing for the examination, partly through an initial evaluation of the student's background and interests, partly through periodic consultation to evaluate and aid the student's progress.”

Rationale: This is no longer current practice in programs at Georgia Tech.

The Committee agreed with this change.

The Committee agreed that ‘fall or spring’ should be removed from any new language since summer is also a term.

Basic Principles and Best Practices

The intention of the Ph.D. Comprehensive Exams study conducted by the Office of Graduate Studies in partnership with the Vice Provost of Graduate Education and Faculty Development, the Graduate Student Government Association, and the Institute Graduate Curriculum Committee is to develop a set of common or “basic principles” that can drive conversations and recommendations to reduce stress during the exams process. Comprehensive exams are inherently stressful, but *unnecessary* stress should be minimized where possible.

These “Basic Principles for Ph.D. Comprehensive Exams” are proposed to the IGCC for approval.

Comprehensive exams should:

- assess a student’s depth of knowledge in their discipline;
- evaluate a student’s ability to perform independent research such that a student who passes is well-equipped to undertake and complete their dissertation research;
- be transparent, challenging, and fair; and

- be successfully completed in a timely manner, which is in the best interests of the student, the advisor, and the academic program.

The Committee determined that the basic principles should introduce the best practices for programs, faculty, and students.

Best Practices for programs, faculty, and students

While the format and content of exams, for the purposes of determining depth of knowledge and prediction of success in a program, are under the purview of program faculty, the following recommendations are provided to help minimize *unnecessary* stress students taking exams experience. These recommendations, organized by the audience to which they should be communicated, are based on an exploration of existing practices within programs.

For programs:

1. Make detailed information regarding exam formats, rules, and scope (e.g. course syllabi on which exams are based) available and easily accessible to promote timely preparation.
2. Archive written and oral exam questions (where possible) with solutions and distribute to all students sitting for exams.
3. Schedule exams for students, and offer at least two opportunities each year for students to complete comprehensive exams. “Opportunities” can be interpreted broadly and could include re-takes to demonstrate proficiency scheduled on a case-by-case basis shortly after a failed attempt for flexibility and to avoid unnecessary delays in exam completion.
4. Maintain historical records of student performance.
5. Seek feedback from students who take exams for review by program faculty as well as feedback from all students regarding exam reforms.
6. Develop and promote exam preparation support programs in partnership with students (see Recommendation 1 for students below).
7. Include information regarding stress management and mental health resources available for students in exam announcement and preparation materials.

For faculty:

1. Advisors/supervisors should provide appropriate latitude in work schedules to allow for exam preparation. (See the Policy Library on [schedule flexibility](#) under assistantships.)
2. Faculty giving an exam should participate in a collaborative, collective exam formulation and evaluation process that

- reinforces shared understanding of core knowledge requirements for the exam area.
3. Exams should be graded by multiple graders and reflect a common understanding among faculty of core material. No one faculty member should have sole control of a student's exam result.
 4. Faculty should give constructive feedback on exam performance. For written exams, feedback might be notes on a student's responses or an explanation of point deductions on problem sets. For oral exams, a rubric with scores and comments can promote standardized evaluation and feedback across sub-groups of the faculty.
 5. Faculty should acknowledge the stress exams create for students, watch for warning signs, and be prepared to provide information on where students can go for help in dealing with it.

For students:

1. Develop and promote peer-led exam preparation support programs (e.g. mock oral exams, one-on-one exam mentoring, study groups).
2. Provide constructive feedback to programs regarding the comprehensive exam experience when solicited.
3. Keep an eye out for fellow students having difficulty managing stress and encourage them to seek stress-management resources (academic advisors, counseling center, etc.).

The Committee suggested removing “should” from all language and use “for example” to illustrate how certain practices or procedures might play out so that faculty have better guidance on certain issues. Use of “for example” prevents a prescriptive approach to how the schools or programs should operate, but provides enough information to faculty and students that they know what might work well in some instances. The Committee also suggested that the term “best practices” be used in the place of “recommendations.”

James was asked to bring back the edited versions of the proposed Catalog language and the best practices documents. The Committee will review the revised versions of the documents before taking a vote.

2. The Registrar introduced a topic of discussion involving potential creation of a policy for sharing of credits between Ph.D. programs, Masters programs, and Ph.D. and Masters programs.

Academic units and students are seeking guidance from the Registrar's Office about credit sharing between internal programs at Georgia Tech. Currently, there is no policy which prohibits credits being used to satisfy requirements for multiple programs.

Committee members asked that more information be provided to get a sense of what units on campus are doing and to what extent there is a concern about it. Any discussion of a policy would be better informed with more detailed information. The Registrar indicated that some research would be done to determine how the academic units on campus are viewing this question and how they have operated in the past.

The Committee plans to discuss the topic further at a future meeting.

Adjourned,

Reta Pikowsky,
Secretary