



Advancement-to-Candidacy (AtC) Exam Information Sheet

EEB Advancement-to-Candidacy exam in brief

Advancement to candidacy for the Ph.D. involves a passing an oral examination of ~2-3 hours administered by a student's AtC committee. The committee is composed of faculty members that are experts in the student's research area. Although the majority of the committee members should be from the EEB department, some members can be from other departments at UCI, other universities, or non-academic institutions.

Composition of the Advancement to Candidacy Committee

The advancement committee includes the members that will be on the student's Doctoral Dissertation Committee (usually 3 faculty) plus one additional member that is not on the student's dissertation committee. The role of this "external" AtC committee member is to ensure fairness and integrity of the advancement exam, as well as bring an outside perspective to the student's research. The external member can be a member of the EEB department, but should bring a new perspective to the committee. It is highly recommended that the external member is not a close collaborator of the student's advisor.

Goals of the AtC Exam

The oral examination covers the student's major field of specialization and the proposed research to be developed. Students should consult with members of their AtC committee about the member's expectations well before the exam. The specific goals of the exam are:

1. For the student to demonstrate that they have the background knowledge and skills to carry out the proposed work. One part of background knowledge is familiarity with the relevant scientific literature, such as that needed to write the Introduction of each chapter/publication that might arise from the student's thesis work. Another part of background knowledge might include baseline data and results about the system being studied to demonstrate the feasibility of the projects proposed. The skills needed to complete the research might include field, laboratory, computational, and statistical skills.
2. For the student to clearly present their scientific ideas for a dissertation. Different advisors and committees may have specific requirements for this delivery. Most require a written proposal to be delivered beforehand and then discussed at the

exam. The proposal should be less than 10 pages and delivered 1-2 weeks before the exam, but the exact format is determined by your committee.

3. For the committee to confirm that the student is making satisfactory progress towards a PhD and specifically, that if the student carried out the work proposed (or something similar), the body of work would be sufficient to obtain the PhD.

Exam Procedure

The exact procedure of the exam is up to the committee, but it is recommended that the committee set aside 3 hours so that they are not rushed. A recommended procedure is:

- The meeting begins with the student leaving the room for 5-10 minutes, during which the student's advisor and doctoral committee updates the external committee member about the student's progress to date.
- The external committee member runs the meeting, keeping track of the timing and jumping in if a line of questioning seems unfair, off topic, or has gone on too long.
- The student presents a summary of their dissertation proposal in 20 minutes.
- The committee goes around the room, taking turns asking questions. A typical exam might take two rounds of the committee, between 1-1.5 hours. For instance, the first round might focus on background questions and the second round might focus on the details of the student's research projects.
- The student's main advisor can ask questions like any other member when it is their turn, but they should not jump in to answer questions for the student, unless the committee or student asks the advisor directly.
- The student is then asked to leave the room (10-15 minutes) while the committee deliberates about the outcome of the exam and their recommendations to the student.
- The student returns and the external committee member delivers a summary of the committee. It is suggested that student's advisor takes notes throughout the exam to discuss with their student at a later time.

Meeting documentation

Before the AtC exam, the AtC Nomination Form must be submitted to the graduate student affairs coordinator and signed by the graduate advisor. This form ensures that the composition of the committee meets the Department and Grad Division's rules and avoids the situation that might require retaking the AtC exam.

After the exam, paperwork and a filing fee must be submitted. Please consult with the graduate affairs coordinator to complete this paperwork.

Doctoral students who advance to candidacy, can also receive a master's degree by submitting two forms: a master's degree advancement form and, in the subsequent quarter, a master's degree completion form.