Supervisory Committees and Final Examinations for Master Level Degree Programs Policy

Background

The history of graduate education for master-level degrees (especially the Master of Arts and the Master of Science degrees) contains two related traditions in the area of final examinations. The first derives from a fundamental belief that a master's degree represents, literally, mastery of a body of knowledge in a manner that exceeds simply passing a series of graduate level courses. In this context, mastery is taken to include a demonstrated understanding of connections and integration across, between and beyond the didactic course work. Mastery is traditionally measured by examinations, both written and oral, that assess a student's comprehensive understanding of the chosen field, and his/her ability to articulate that understanding. These examinations are in addition to the assessments, grades, or other outcome measures for the specific courses required for completion of the degree. A closely related second tradition is the preparation, presentation and defense of an academic thesis. Near the conclusion of a master's degree program, the candidate would formally present his/her thesis before a faculty group. This final presentation and defense would occur in person. It would normally require the physical presence of the student's major advisor or Committee Chair, other members of the student's supervisory committee and such other members of the faculty who might choose to attend. Over the course of time, some elements of these two traditions merged. The written document (the thesis) and the oral presentation thereof, including responses to questions from the faculty examiners, would together come to be seen as representing the required written and oral components of the final examination for the degree.

Over the past 50 years or so, master-level degree education has undergone many dramatic changes. Literally dozens of new degree titles that extend far beyond the traditional Master of Science and Master of Arts degrees have emerged. For numerous programs, there has been a demonstrable shift away from traditional scholarship leading to an academic thesis, and a parallel movement toward pedagogy that emphasizes professional skills of value in a future occupation. Examples abound and include an ever-expanding list of degree programs. The University of Florida offers nearly thirty such programs, including M.B.A., M.H.A., M.U.R.P., M.Acc., M.P.H., and many others.

It can be difficult to align the older academic traditions of major advisors, supervisory committees, theses and comprehensive final examinations with the emphasis on course work, technical skills, and professional/occupational development manifested in the more recent and wide-ranging forms of master's degrees. Like other large universities with diverse programs, the University of Florida has attempted to combine both sets of laudable objectives…encouraging innovation that assures the relevance of the coursework and degree programs for professional placement of graduates, but retaining at least some form of the examinations, faculty committees and other attributes that characterize education at the graduate level, and demonstrate mastery of the field. Alternatives to the traditional academic thesis have emerged, as have new ways to assess the comprehensive knowledge of degree candidates, but some of these alternatives reflect *ad hoc* compromises and may not fully achieve intended goals.

Furthermore, the challenges of establishing faculty committees, identifying culminating projects/experiences, and conducting comprehensive examinations in many specialized master's degree

programs have been dramatically compounded in the past couple of decades by the emergence of online programs. Students may literally be anywhere in the world, have no plans to ever set foot on a university's campus, and may "meet" their faculty exclusively by electronic means. Precisely how theses or analogous projects might be presented and defended, and how committee members (and other faculty) can attend and participate in such defenses are both substantive and technical challenges. How examinations can or should occur, what form of physical presence should be required of whom, how to arrange for proctoring or other appropriate security and similar issues do not have obvious answers that work well in widely diverse programs.

The Graduate School establishes the policy described below regarding these issues.

Policy

The Graduate Council and the Graduate School affirm the basic principle that all graduate master-level degree programs at the University of Florida should include degree requirements that reflect mastery of a field of study. In this context "mastery of a field of study" is taken to mean:

(a) Successful completion of required courses, achievement of appropriate grades, grade point average, and similar specific degree requirements, as set forth by the academic unit offering the degree program within the general requirements of the Graduate School, and

(b) Knowledge and skills that combine and integrate degree program elements in a manner that extends beyond the course work itself.

In general, this policy is to be implemented by means of curriculum design at the academic unit level. Master-level degree programs are expected to have clearly articulated degree requirements at or beyond the minima established at the Graduate School level and monitored as part of the Graduate School's degree certification process. These Graduate School minima generally include 30 credit hours of graduate level course work, a GPA of 3.0 (truncated) in overall, major, and where appropriate, minor credits, a properly constituted supervisory committee, and a final comprehensive examination, with all work being accomplished within a 7 year time period.

The academic unit offering the degree program must clearly identify the manner in which the requirement for a final comprehensive examination is manifested within the degree program, including the program's requirements for the physical presence of the student and/or committee members. In turn, the Graduate School will specify the mechanism and timing whereby final examination information is recorded with the Graduate School.

The requirement for a final comprehensive examination for a master's level degree can be met in many ways. The achievement of a successful final examination is a required degree milestone that must be formally recorded with the Graduate School. Acknowledging that online degree programs may present unique challenges, final examination mechanisms include but are not limited to the following examples:

- Programs may choose to implement traditional question-and-answer style comprehensive examinations. These may be in a written, oral or combined format;
- For programs that include a formal thesis, the document itself, combined with its oral presentation/defense before a faculty group may serve as the final examination requirement;
- For programs that include a formal culminating project (such as an architectural model, a physical prototype, a performance, a portfolio or some similar observable product) the product

itself, combined with its presentation to the faculty in some agreed venue may be the final examination;

- In some programs, there may be a "Capstone" or another integrative course that is completed at or near the conclusion of the program. Capstone courses typically include explicit objectives requiring that material from throughout the curriculum will be brought to bear on discussions, a project or other activity. Successful completion of the capstone course is viewed as evidence of mastery across other curricular elements, and hence successful completion of the capstone course may be seen as meeting the final examination requirement;

- Some programs require an internship or comparable experiential component. Required internships may take place after significant course work has been completed and provide an opportunity for students to apply/combine skills or knowledge acquired earlier in the program. Or, experiences obtained during the internship may inform or otherwise contribute to coursework taken later in the program. In such scenarios, formal faculty affirmation of successful completion of the internship, perhaps in combination with other requirements, may meet the final examination requirement;

- Some programs may involve a "lockstep" series of structured, integrated courses sequenced in such a manner that successful completion of those taken late in the curriculum depends on the effective incorporation of material completed earlier. In this model, success in completing courses or other requirements at or near the conclusion of the curriculum may be seen as the *de facto* final comprehensive examination.

Supervisory Committees and Final Examinations for Master Degrees

Supervisory Committees or some similar manifestation of graduate faculty responsibility for degree program requirements are required for all master's degrees.

Thesis and Formal Project Degree Programs

For on-campus master's degrees that include a traditional thesis, the supervisory committee is just that. It is composed of at least two members of the Graduate Faculty from the academic unit offering the degree. Students with formally identified minor areas of study must have additional committee member(s) representing the minor field(s). For thesis degree programs, it is expected that the Supervisory Committee Chair or Co-Chair and the candidate will be physically present in the same room for the final thesis examination. Exceptions to this Graduate School requirement will be granted only under the most unusual circumstances. Academic units that embark on, or wish to continue existing thesis degree programs that may include international collaborations or other attributes that may make a formal, in-person final thesis presentation difficult, are cautioned and are reminded of this policy. They are urged to plan (and if necessary to budget) for the logistics and perhaps the travel or similar expenses that may be involved in meeting this requirement. While it is desirable that other committee members are also present physically, programs may choose to allow committee members other than the Chair or co-Chair to attend a final thesis examination by means of contemporary communications technology. The academic unit offering the degree program must specify, and must monitor compliance with its own policies regarding the physical presence of committee members other than the Chair or Co-Chair and any minor field representatives.

For on-campus master-level degree programs that require submission of a formal project (such as an architectural model, a physical prototype, a performance, a portfolio or some similar observable product) and which perceive that product to be the equivalent of a thesis, expectations regarding committee membership and physical presence for a final examination are the same as for thesis degrees.

Non-thesis Degree Programs

Master-level degree programs (on campus or in a distance learning mode) that do not require a thesis or equivalent, and do not provide for a formal minor, may allow for a supervisory "committee" composed of a single graduate faculty member, who would also be designated as the Supervisory Committee Chair. For programs that include variation in the selection and sequencing of courses, the student's academic advisor (if that person is a member of the graduate faculty) may serve as the supervisory committee. In lockstep programs, it may be more efficient for the program director or graduate coordinator to serve as the designated supervisory committee for all students in the program. But in all circumstances a supervisory committee chair must be identified for each master's degree candidate, and recorded with the Graduate School.

The designated supervisory committee chair is responsible for recording the date on which the final examination milestone has been achieved.

In online or off-campus programs, the examination may be completed remotely without the physical presence of committee members. However, the academic unit's policy must specify arrangements for electronic security, proctoring and the identification of the candidate.