SMS Moderator Guidelines for Exams & Defenses
Effective: Fall 2022

The function of the moderator is to ensure that qualifying exams and thesis/dissertation defenses are administered in accordance with the policies and procedures of the School of Marine Science. The moderator attends and presides over exams and defenses, ensuring that legitimate questions are asked of the student, that the exam/defense is not simply pro forma, and that there is fairness and evenness in the exams.

Each department should select at least two of their Associate Professors or Full Professors to serve as moderators, for three-year terms. Additionally, the ADAS (Associate Dean of Academic Sciences) and the Chair of the AC (Academic Council) will serve as substitute moderators.

Qualifying Exam Guidelines

This guidance document summarizes the moderator's role during each portion of the qualifying exam.

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. 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.

Prior to the exam.
About one week prior to the exam, the moderator is advised to email the committee and confirm that there are no reservations with going forward with the exam.

If remote participation is required: As early as possible, but at least one week before the exam, the moderator will schedule the Zoom meeting for the exam and send the connection details to participants (via email with CC: to Jen Hay). **Adding a password for the zoom meeting is also strongly encouraged.** To minimize connection issues that might disrupt the continuity of the exam, moderators will strongly encourage remote participant(s) to install the Zoom app. It is important to test connectivity in advance of the exam as some desktops do not have cameras and microphones and speaker settings can mute sound transmission. For those who have not used Zoom before, the first step is to download a small software interface. Once the app is downloaded, the meeting link provided in the invitation should work, or the participant can paste the Meeting ID number in the "join a meeting" box on the screen, and select "computer" for the audio option. The option to use a phone for the audio connection may be used if it is the only way to keep a committee member connected. Additional instructions for using Zoom are provided here.

Introduction and closed-door committee meeting.
The major advisor usually introduces each committee member and the moderator. After introductions by the major advisor, the moderator explains the structure (ground rules) of the exam to the student and committee. After the student is excused from the room, the moderator facilitates a brief discussion among committee members regarding the student's prospectus. It is expected that if a committee member has severe reservations about the prospectus they will have contacted the student and major advisor well in advance of the exam. However, if major differences exist among committee members regarding the proposed research, the moderator will attempt to facilitate a consensus decision prior to the student's presentation.

The Moderator will attempt to identify any issues and facilitate committee resolution in advance of the exam.

Student Presentation. The student provides a twenty-minute discussion of the proposed research. During the presentation the committee should refrain from asking questions except for points of clarification. The moderator notifies the student of the time at twenty minutes and does not let the presentation exceed thirty minutes. Additionally, the committee may need to be reminded that they should refrain from asking questions during the presentation, except for points of clarification.

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Effective: Fall 2022

Questioning. It is the moderator's responsibility to maintain an exam atmosphere and lead rounds of questioning. Usually there are two rounds of questioning, with each committee member having the floor for 5 to 10 minutes during each round. Questions in the first round are typically related directly to the proposed research while those of the second round are broader in scope, including general knowledge of marine science, particularly as it relates to the student's area of specialty. Questioning often starts with a committee member from the School of Marine Science, with the outside committee member and major advisor ending the questioning in each round. It is permissible for a committee member to build on another's line of questioning during that individual's turn providing it is acceptable to the committee. The moderator should ensure that the student (and not a committee member) answers each question. Committee members will have an opportunity for discussion after the exam. If necessary, the moderator may call for an intermission during the course of questioning to provide the student or committee an opportunity to regroup.

Deliberation. Once the questioning is completed, the moderator asks the student to leave the room and requests the committee members to refrain from speaking.

The moderator then conducts a straw poll of the student's performance on the exam. Remote participants may use the Zoom chat box or e-mail to send a vote directly to the moderator.

This pass/not-pass vote is non-binding and simply provides a starting point for discussions of the student's performance. The moderator facilitates discussions towards a consensus decision. Once a decision has been reached, it is the major advisor's prerogative to recall the student and explain the outcome of the exam. In the event that the committee does not unanimously pass the student, the moderator should refer the committee to the Qualifying Exam Guidelines so that they can determine whether the exam warrants a "conditional pass" or a "no-pass".

One negative vote is sufficient for a conditional pass. Two negative votes constitute a no-pass. A conditional pass generally means that the student is required to do additional reading, perhaps take a course, followed by a discussion or oral exam with one or more committee members. If the student does not pass the qualifying exam they must retake the exam within six months. A no-pass on the second exam is grounds for dismissal from the program. In cases of conditional passes or no-passes, it is the moderator's responsibility to notify the Associate Dean of Academic Studies of the outcome as soon as possible following the termination of the exam.

The student returns to the meeting room.

The moderator should record the outcome of the deliberation on the "Qualifying Examination Grade Form". The committee may also choose to sign the "Prospectus Acceptance Form" at this time. The student will initiate the milestone forms 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

SMS Moderator Guidelines for Exams & Defenses
Effective: Fall 2022

Thesis/Dissertation Defense Guidelines

This guidance document summarizes the moderator's role during each portion of the M.S. Thesis or Ph.D. Dissertation Defense.

Students, advisor(s), members of the committee, and the moderator are expected to attend the seminar presentation and defense in-person, however flexibility will be provided for committee members who need to participate remotely via Zoom web conferencing due to extenuating circumstances. 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.

Prior to the defense.
About one week prior to the defense, the moderator is advised to email the committee and confirm that there are no reservations with going forward with the defense.

If remote participation is required: As early as possible, but at least one week before the defense, the moderator will schedule the Zoom meeting for the private defense meeting and send the connection details to participants (via email with CC: to Jen Hay). **Adding a password for this zoom meeting is also strongly encouraged.** To minimize connection issues that might disrupt the continuity of the exam, moderators will strongly encourage remote participant(s) to install the Zoom app. It is important to test connectivity in advance of the defense as some desktops do not have cameras and microphones and speaker settings can mute sound transmission. For those who have not used Zoom before, the first step is to download a small software interface. Once the app is downloaded, the meeting link provided in the invitation should work, or the participant can paste the Meeting ID number in the "join a meeting" box on the screen, and select "computer" for the audio option. The option to use a phone for the audio connection may be used if it is the only way to keep a committee member connected. Additional instructions for using Zoom are provided here.

Public presentation: The thesis/dissertation defense begins with a public seminar presented by the student. It is the major advisor's prerogative to introduce the student at the public presentation, but the moderator is expected to attend and preside over all other aspects of the oral presentation and defense. This includes oversight of questions from seminar participants following the oral presentation and the defense itself. Bob Polley will manage the Zoom webinar platform for the public seminar and will facilitate the connectivity of those who want to ask questions. Committee members should be encouraged not to monopolize the public questioning session following the seminar, as they will have opportunities for detailed questioning of the student during the defense.

Defense: Following the public presentation, the moderator and committee reconvene for a closed-door thesis or dissertation defense, which includes a closed-door committee meeting, two rounds of questioning, and deliberations. The moderator presides over these, as outlined below.

Introduction and closed-door committee meeting. Upon reconvening, the moderator explains the structure (ground rules) of the defense to the student and committee. While the student is excused from the room, the moderator facilitates a brief discussion among committee members regarding the student's thesis or dissertation. Prior to questioning, the moderator should confer with the committee in the student's absence to determine if there are any major reservations concerning the thesis or dissertation. It is expected that if a committee member has severe reservations regarding the

thesis or dissertation they will have contacted the student and major advisor well in advance of the defense. If differences exist among committee members regarding a specific criticism, the moderator should attempt to facilitate a consensus decision prior to questioning.

The moderator will ask the student to return to the meeting room.

SMS Moderator Guidelines for Exams & Defenses
Effective: Fall 2022

Defense Questioning: It is the moderator's responsibility to maintain a professional defense atmosphere and lead the two rounds of questioning. The moderator should ensure that the student (and not a committee member) answers each question. If necessary, the moderator may call for an intermission during the course of questioning to provide the student or committee an opportunity to regroup.

Deliberation. Once the questioning is completed, the moderator asks the student to leave the room and requests the committee members to refrain from speaking.

The moderator then conducts a straw poll of the student's performance on the defense. Remote participants may use the Zoom chat box or e-mail to send a vote directly to the moderator.

This pass/not-pass vote is non-binding and simply provides a starting point for discussions of the student's performance. The moderator facilitates a consensus decision of the committee. 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. Corrective actions may include significant revisions to the thesis/dissertation with subsequent committee review, or in some cases, further research. Once the committee has reached a decision, it is the major advisor's prerogative to recall the student and explain the outcome of the defense.

The moderator should record the outcome of the deliberation on the "Defense Acceptance Form".

At the defense, the moderator should also determine the proper routing order for the "Thesis or Dissertation Final Acceptance Form". Typical routing order is as follows: #1-3) individual committee members, #4) co-advisor, if applicable, #5) major advisor, and #6) student. The student will initiate these milestone forms 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).
- [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 the public defense seminar, including Zoom webinar instructions.

SMS Moderator Guidelines for Exams & Defenses
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Guidance for Public Seminars for Thesis and Dissertation Defenses

Bob Polley (VIMS ITNS) will manage the Zoom webinar platform to run the public seminar presentation.

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

—Adopted unanimously by the Academic Council, October 1999; revised December 2016; interim guidelines adopted by Academic Council and approved by Associate Dean of Academic Studies, March 2020; updated September 2022.