

Senate Document #6679

DATE: July 19, 2012

TO: Directors of Graduate Studies & Department Chairs, departments and programs offering degrees with candidacy (DMA, Eng. & PhD.), and School Deans

FROM: Richard Roberts, Chair, Senate Committee on Graduate Studies

SUBJECT: A Reminder on PhD Candidacy Issues

During the Spring Quarter of 2012, the Faculty Senate Committee on Graduate Studies (C-GS) examined the current University regulations regarding doctoral candidacy. These policies were last revised in 1974. At that time, the Senate agreed that admission to candidacy was a significant opportunity for faculty to appraise a doctoral student's performance and to make a sober assessment about the prospects of successful and timely completion of the doctorate.

Admission to candidacy for the doctoral degree is a collective judgment by the faculty of the student's department or school on the potential to successfully complete the requirements of the degree program. Presumably, since the PhD is a research degree, criteria for admission to candidacy need to reflect the faculty assessment of the candidate's capacity for original research. Neither the Senate nor C-GS provided guidance to departments on the kinds of assessments to make. Since 1974, the Senate and C-GS have required that such a robust assessment be made by the end of the candidate's second year in the program. Failure to be admitted to candidacy results in the student's dismissal from the degree program. Admission to candidacy marks the end of a doctoral student's initial study period, often thought of as an evaluation period. Once admitted to candidacy, the student has significantly more rights and privileges and cannot easily be dismissed from the PhD program if later found to be incapable of producing PhD quality research.

C-GS believes that these principles remain sound, even if they do not perfectly fit each department's or program's established practices. The result of our discussion was a reaffirmation of the current policies, and a shared understanding of the following expectations. Our goal is to encourage departments and programs to assess their current practices and to assess where gaps may exist between these principles and practices.

1. Admission to candidacy must be taken seriously as a realistic assessment of a candidate's abilities to complete the PhD and conduct research. C-GS thus encourages departments to examine whether their current procedures for assessing a student's readiness for admission to candidacy adequately reflect the important decisions to be made. For example, many departments include a procedure for assessing mastery in the field, which is sometimes referred to as the "qualifying exams." **Mastery in the field is not the same as the capacity to conduct original research.**

2. C-GS expects departments to adhere to the University policy requiring that a decision on admission to candidacy be made by the end of the student's second year in the program. C-GS believes that early attrition is much better for the student, the faculty advisor, and the department than late attrition. Thus, if in the judgment of the graduate studies committee, there are serious doubts about a student's likelihood to succeed in the program, such decisions should be taken at this stage.

3. CGS also discussed the matter of extension of the pre-candidacy period beyond two years. In some departments, students who fail to achieve one or more of the requirements for admission to candidacy (such as failing the qualifying exam) are offered an extension. In cases of extension of pre-candidacy, C-GS expects that a clear plan be developed for the student, and that a reassessment be completed within two academic quarters.

4. The original 1974 candidacy policy also stated that candidacy is valid for a period of five years. Median time to degree at Stanford University is 5.75 years. In other words, most doctoral students should be able to complete their degrees within the seven years (2 years pre-candidacy plus 5 years candidacy) prescribed by University policy. Should students require an extension of candidacy, departments should require a rigorous assessment by the faculty of the student's progress and likelihood of completion. Extension of candidacy should not be automatic.

C-GS believes that these policies and expectations will contribute to the continued success of our PhD students and our PhD programs.