

The Graduate School
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

**Academic Policy Regarding Approved Substitutes for Master's Degree
Comprehensive Exam and/or Thesis Requirements**

A hallmark of graduate education at the master's level is broad exposure to a specific discipline, culminating in an independent project that assesses student competence in their field. For the master's degree, a written or oral comprehensive examination (or both) and a thesis are required milestones. A master's examining committee oversees the completion of these milestones. Programs have the authority to request approved substitutes in meeting these milestones, normally within the guidelines of its field or accreditation requirements.

Examples of approved substitutes vary widely and align with disciplinary standards. Programs are urged to develop strenuous alternatives that show mastery of the program subject matter. The following guidance is provided:

- A written product (e.g., technical report, white paper, portfolio) or an appropriate culminating experience (e.g., theater performance, art showcase, web-based products) is required for a thesis substitute. Variations on research papers and projects should be similar to a traditional research thesis but may be more targeted or practical as suited to the discipline.
- A course (e.g., capstone class) can only substitute for comprehensive exams, not for a formal thesis. These courses should synthesize all material studied in the program – not just in a review format but through a set of discussions and assignments where all material from the program is brought together to complete the students' learning.
- Other common exam substitutes include conference-style presentations of students' projects with questions and input from all faculty and audience members; an oral exam before a committee of faculty focused on the final culminating product and expanding questions to the broad field; and a more practice-oriented experience with clinical or site-based expectations and faculty oversight.
- Group or shared projects are acceptable, as long as each student's role and assessments are discrete. Clarity on roles and evaluation criteria is paramount, as the culminating experience for each student should not rely solely on the performance of other students.
- The master's examining committee requirements should be met through faculty engagement within the specifics of the discipline and the nature of the proposed

experience. Of specific note, students should have multiple faculty engage with them both to provide input from different perspectives and to avoid risks from power dynamics. Programs may invoke a specific review process in the case of non-majority or non-unanimous outcomes of the master's examining committee.

- Assessment criteria should be provided in the proposal. Of specific note, programs should endeavor to separate any class-based grade from the milestone outcome (i.e., a student should not pass or fail doubly for the same work).

Proposal Submission Process

Proposals for substitutes are taken to the Academic Policy Committee of The Graduate School for feedback and approval. The Graduate School should be involved early in the planning process to provide guidance. While there is no standard format for requesting a substitute, programs should address the following:

- State if the proposed changes are for the comprehensive examination requirement (written or oral), the thesis requirement, or both.
- Provide the motivation and background for the proposed substitute.
- Confirm the proposal has been created and approved internally in the academic program and any school-level reviews needed.
- Describe the proposed structure for the change, including academic requirements, faculty involvement, administrative support, and resources.
- Confirm students will still meet all registration requirements (i.e. at least three credit hours of thesis/thesis option registration (993/992), registration in the semester in which the exam/approved option is taken, and registration in the semester in which the thesis is defended or thesis option is completed).
- Confirm how the master's examining committee requirements for faculty oversight and evaluation will be met.
- If new courses are to be created, plan to submit them for approval through the normal campus process.

The Graduate School will provide examples of approved substitute proposals on request.

When students complete an approved substitute, the appropriate milestones forms to be filled out and submitted to The Graduate School can be found at: [Master's Comprehensive Exam or Approved Substitute Report](#) and [Report of Approved Substitute for a Master's Thesis](#).