

# **The Graduate School University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**

## **Academic Policy Regarding Approved Substitutes for Master's Degree Comprehensive Exam and 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; however, programs have the authority to request approved substitutes in meeting these requirements, normally within the guidelines of its field or accreditation requirements.

Examples of approved substitutes are capstone courses, technical reports or independent research projects. Typically, capstone courses can only substitute for comprehensive exams, not for a formal thesis. These capstone 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. 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. The Graduate School will provide examples of approved substitutes on request.

Programs are urged to develop strenuous alternatives that show mastery of the program subject matter and independent learning experiences and/or presentation experiences. The Graduate School also urges programs to review any accreditation requirements prior to making any significant curriculum changes.

### **Proposal Submission Process**

Proposals for substitutes are taken to the Academic Policy Committee of The Graduate School for feedback and approval. Senior Staff (dean, associate, and assistant deans) of The Graduate School should be involved as early as possible to provide guidance in the planning process.

While there is no standard format for requesting a substitute, programs should address the following issues in submitting their proposal to The Graduate School:

- Provide the motivation and background for the proposed substitute.
- Confirm the proposal has been created and approved internally by the appropriate parties.
- Describe the proposed structure for the change, including academic requirements, faculty involvement, administrative support, and resources.
- State if the proposed change is for the comprehensive examination requirement, the thesis requirement, or both.
- Submit the Request for Curriculum Change forms for approval through the normal process, if new courses are to be created.
- Confirm students will still meet all registration requirements (i.e. at least three credit hours of thesis/thesis option registration (393/392), 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).
- Provide any other supporting materials to assist with a thorough review of the request.

When students complete an approved substitute, the appropriate 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](#).