These are current policies as of March 2014. They include revisions approved in 2011 by the entire department.

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Purpose of the qualifying exam:

Our qualifying exam serves several purposes. First, it ensures that students clearly unprepared to continue to a PhD do not remain more than two years. Second, passing awards a Masters degree, but does not guarantee that any faculty member will agree to supervise a student for a PhD. Third, it encourages students to review and consolidate their knowledge of basic Physics. Finally, even in cases where students pass, it serves as a flag for students whose skills are marginal in particular subjects and which should be remedied.

University policy on exams is in the Graduate Catalog.

Policies:

1. Exams are three hours per subject, and proctored. (No open-ended exams.) The preparers are responsible for proctoring.

2. The test level is advanced undergraduate. We will provide an example of one or two undergrad texts for each subject to the students and preparers in order to identify the exam level and possible topics.

3. Open or closed book is at the discretion of the preparers. The preparers tell the students the rules for the specific exam as early as possible (several months, at least).

4. Previous questions (but not solutions) are made available beforehand (several months in advance). (Note these are now available on our web site, public but not linked.)

5. Each exam committee will have three faculty; all full-time permanent faculty will participate.

6. Each exam with solutions must be prepared at least one week before the test is given to ensure that the test has been timed and the questions are soluble. We further recommend that each proposed problem be solved by a committee member under conditions approximating the actual exam, but leave the details of preparation and checking of questions to each committee.

7. Preparers grade their exams within a week of the test, and the department announces results shortly (within several days) thereafter.

8. Students must pass all four sections, and may retake individual sections once without retaking the entire exam.

9. We will offer all exams on a regular annual schedule at the beginning of fall semester, just before classes begin. Furthermore, we will ask incoming students to take the exams on arrival to help assess their strengths and encourage them to come prepared for graduate study. This first test will not count against their two tries.

10. The department will save the actual exams, though the students
may look at them after they’re graded. Grading is in principle pass/fail, though for the sake of the students and accreditation, it’s useful for the grading to be somewhat detailed, with a score that reflects the percentage of the material of which the student demonstrated mastery.