The three-part First Examination for doctoral students in Comparative Literature is normally taken the semester following the completion of 30 credits of course work. It consists of a number of essays of varying length (written in situ over the course of four hours) and a qualifying paper of 7,500-8,000 words in length presented on the day of the exam. The examination directly addresses one of our Program’s learning goals, according to which students “are expected to demonstrate thorough knowledge of literary history from Ancient to contemporary periods.” More specifically, it tests students’ familiarity with a range of major works in at least two literatures and their ability to analyze these works in their critical and historical contexts. It also tests students’ command of the theory and methods of Comparative Literature.

We prepare students for this exam in a variety of ways from the moment they enter the program and have their first meeting with an advisor. In their first year, students are encouraged to select courses that can help them to address gaps in their knowledge. In addition, each semester the Program offers workshops aimed at helping students to develop the necessary studying strategies to pass this exam. At these workshops, the DEO goes over previous exams with the students and reviews the common pitfalls they may face.

The last major review of this exam was undertaken by our Program in 2012-3. As a result of that revision, a third in situ section of the exam was replaced by the qualifying paper. Our goal was to help our students to professionalize earlier on in their careers. The essay writing done as part of an in situ exam has merit as a pedagogical exercise that tests for familiarity with a range of works beyond a student’s stated area of specialization, but students are unlikely to draw on this mode of analysis and expression throughout their careers. By asking for a “near-publishable quality paper” instead of a third essay, the exam encourages students to revise papers they have written and creates an opportunity to build a publication portfolio.

The exam is read and graded by an ad hoc committee convened by the DEO. Over the last five years, this committee has been able to confirm that the exam continues to successfully demonstrate students’ knowledge of literary history from a range of periods. Our assessment has looked at
exams taken by our students since 2013. In that period of time, 71 students have taken the exam, 8 have passed with Distinction and 3 have failed. As per our program’s rules, two out of the three students who failed were allowed to retake the relevant parts of the exam and did pass on their second attempt. The third student was asked to leave the program upon failing the exam for a second time.

Our data thus suggests that this exercise continues to serve its purpose: it gives the committee a sense for how students are progressing and allows the Program to intervene when students are in trouble, offering them the necessary assistance to get them back on track or giving them the opportunity to reconsider their career choice in a timely fashion. Finally, the qualifying paper has allowed us to get a broader sense for students’ abilities. Those students who may not work well under time pressure now have a chance to round out their performance on the exam through the writing they have done for this paper. This latest round of assessment shows that over the past five years, students have consistently met benchmarks set by this exam in terms of breadth of knowledge and critical rigor. We thus feel that our coursework is successfully preparing them to do well on this exam. In particular, the quality of the qualifying papers (which are most often revised versions of seminar papers) shows that our faculty is giving students appropriate feedback on writing assignments.

Feedback from students have shown that the exam, while often a dreaded exercise, is later remembered fondly. We often ask students who have performed well on this exam to come to workshops and share their strategies for reading and writing. These students report that the exam has prepared them to teach introductory literature courses on other CUNY Campuses and has served them well on the market because it helps them demonstrate breadth in their preparation. Finally, we have also heard from students that the experience of studying for this exam builds community (at least for some cohorts): we encourage students to work in groups in order to prepare for this exam.

Another review of this exam is currently underway and addresses the content of the reading list. This review will continue to take into account the ways in which our discipline is evolving. Over the next couple of years, as our student body grows and demonstrates new research interests, we expect to revise the reading list with an eye toward including more contemporary and global texts and media.