Ph.D. Program in English
Report on First Examination Assessment

A. Learning Goals
The Learning Goals of the portfolio First Examination are as follows.

Students successfully completing the First Examination will be able to demonstrate:

1. knowledge of a variety of critical theories and methods and the ability to use these theories and methods to elucidate different features and meanings in specific texts; [critical theories/methods learning goal]
2. an ability to perform detailed and persuasive analysis of texts; [textual analysis learning goal]
3. a broad range of knowledge of literary and other cultural texts outside a primary area of specialization. [comprehensive knowledge learning goal]

B. Data Collection and Findings
Currently, our First Examination is a “Comprehensive Examination,” a day-long on-site examination in which students must write a series of essays on a variety of subjects. Last Spring, the Curriculum Committee collected information about how other Ph.D. programs in the Humanities at the Graduate Center structured the First Examination and discussed which models might be appropriate for our Program. Early in Fall 2015, the Curriculum Committee surveyed English Program faculty and students about the appropriateness and effectiveness of the First Examination Learning Goals and of the Comprehensive Examination as an instrument for achieving those goals. Whereas some faculty defended the value of the Comprehensive Exam, many faculty and almost all students felt that a timed examination was not the most effective instrument for determining the readiness of first-year students to continue in the Program, in part because such an examination did not correspond to the kind of academic work required of students either in the English Program or in the profession at large.

In a discussion of the survey results, the Curriculum Committee decided to refine the Learning Goals and to restructure the First Examination as a Portfolio Examination, in which students would produce work at home in familiar professional genres such as the Review Essay, Syllabus, and Conference Paper. The Curriculum Committee drafted a version of the Portfolio Examination and sent it to the Program for comments. Although some faculty and most students praised the draft of the Portfolio Examination as a significant improvement on the Comprehensive Examination, several faculty voiced concerns about particular elements of the new structure: it did not test comprehensive knowledge, it required students to define an area of specialization too early in their career, it required greater training of first-year students, etc. Responding to these concerns, the Curriculum Committee revised the Portfolio Examination by adding comprehensive stipulations (matching those of the Comprehensive Examination) and by requiring students to write an “Intellectual Autobiography” that would provide a narrative of their areas of study to date and that would explain how their work on the Portfolio Examination...
explored different areas of interest. We also suggested how mentorship and coursework during the first year would help first-year students prepare for the exam.

The Curriculum Committee presented this draft of the Portfolio Examination to the Executive Committee in April. The Executive Committee generally approved of the shift from a timed Comprehensive Examination to a Portfolio Examination but raised several concerns: the new exam emphasized secondary texts at the expense of primary texts; its comprehensive stipulations were too confusing; it required too much work of students.

The Curriculum Committee met again and modified the exam to address these reservations. We reduced the requirements of the Review Essay and added a fourth option to the exam, an Annotated Bibliography that placed more emphasis on primary texts. We simplified the mechanism by which students could fulfill three comprehensive stipulations across the entire exam. We also emphasized that faculty should work with students—both in courses and as mentors—during the first year to help them prepare and write sections of the exam. The Curriculum Committee presented the revised Portfolio Examination to the Executive Committee in May and it was approved.

C. Next Steps
Moving from a timed Comprehensive Examination to a Portfolio Examination represents a significant change for our Program. We will closely monitor how well the new examination works and make necessary adjustments. Next year, the Curriculum Committee will produce a grading rubric to help faculty graders evaluate success on the exam. The Executive Officer will write to faculty to suggest that they allow first-year students to produce parts of the Portfolio Examination (e.g., the Review Essay or Conference Paper) to fulfill course requirements. The Executive Officer will speak with faculty teaching our “Introduction to Doctoral Studies in English” (required of first-year students) about how they might introduce research and writing skills relevant to the Portfolio Examination. The Program will collect and make available to first-year students models of each part of the Portfolio Examination: the Review Essay, Annotated Bibliography, Syllabus, and Conference Paper. Finally, we will sponsor one or more workshops to help first-year students familiarize themselves with the exam. Workshops on Professional Development (e.g., writing and presenting conference papers) will also contribute to first-year students’ familiarity with the professional genres in which the Portfolio Examination requires them to write.

D. Appendix

The new Portfolio Examination is reproduced below.
THE FIRST EXAMINATION: A PORTFOLIO MODEL

ELIGIBILITY

The First Examination will be due August 15. Students who have open grades will not be permitted to submit the First Exam.

GRADING

The Examinations Committee will comprise twenty-one members: there will be seven subgroups of three faculty, each of which subgroup will read three Exams. Grades will be Pass or Fail. In the event of a significant discrepancy among the graders, the Executive Officer will make a determination. For students whose main area of concentration is Composition/Rhetoric, one of the three faculty readers will be a specialist in Composition/Rhetoric. Grades will be due to the Executive Officer by the first week in September.

Of the three Exams read by each faculty member, one will be designated as an Exam that the faculty member should be available to discuss with the student who wrote it, should the student wish to take advantage of this opportunity. In this way, the First Exam provides an opportunity for mentoring and professional development.

For each section of the Exam, the Curriculum Committee will create a grading rubric that will spell out the criteria for passing or failing. To pass, each part of the Exam must not only fulfill the explicit instructions and requirements for that part, but must also be clear, detailed, and carefully written.

SUPPORT

To prepare students for the Exam, the Curriculum Committee will suggest to faculty a range of practices they might incorporate into their courses, e.g, assigning published review essays (as models), or requiring students to deliver an oral presentation that surveys an area of scholarship (thus practicing one component of the review essay). Moreover, the Program will strongly recommend that faculty allow first-year students to fulfill part of a course’s writing requirements with work that can be later submitted as part of the Portfolio, i.e., a review essay, annotated bibliography, syllabus, or conference paper. Faculty should include a paragraph in the course syllabus explaining which of these options are available to students and encouraging students to seek advice about how coursework (in one or more courses) might be applied towards a part or parts of the First Exam. The required course for first-year students, “Introduction to Doctoral Studies in English,” will also provide opportunities to write in these genres, particularly the Intellectual Autobiography and the Annotated Bibliography [see below].
The Program will sponsor workshops on preparing for the First Exam and will also create an archive of review essays, annotated bibliographies, syllabi, and conference papers as models for students to consult. The Program will encourage first-year students to meet with mentors and professors throughout the year for advice pertaining to the First Exam (e.g., asking faculty about books in their field that might be appropriate for the Review Essay, identifying appropriate venues for the Conference Paper).

The Curriculum Committee will write a preamble to the First Exam explaining how the various parts (as well as particular stipulations for comprehensiveness) are intended to promote intellectual and professional development.

**THE EXAM:**

**INTELLECTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

Each student will write an Intellectual Autobiography: a statement (of no more than 1200 words) of the topics or areas in which the student’s scholarship to date has concentrated and in which the student anticipates their scholarship will develop in the future. The Intellectual Autobiography provides practice writing in a particular professional genre (namely, the preamble to a grant proposal) and provides the framework for the student’s demonstration of comprehensive knowledge in the First Exam. As part of the Intellectual Autobiography, students should explain how in one or more of the three parts of the First Exam they demonstrate comprehensive knowledge by engaging with material that falls outside their areas of concentration to date, whether in terms of chronological period, nationality, theoretical or methodological approach, genre, media, or topic. In explaining how these comprehensive requirements have been met, students might also choose to reflect critically on how having to meet those requirements for the First Exam was productive or unproductive in advancing their intellectual development at this stage of Ph.D. work.

**STRUCTURE AND COMPREHENSIVE REQUIREMENTS**

Students must submit any three out of four parts of the First Exam: a Review Essay, Annotated Bibliography, Syllabus, or Conference Paper. The overall Exam must fulfill the following comprehensive stipulations: 1) the texts discussed must come from at least three different centuries; 2) there must be discussion of at least one pre-1800 text and at least one post-1800 text; 3) the texts discussed should represent at least two different national traditions in English (e.g., British, United States, or Anglophone).

These comprehensive stipulations might be fulfilled in one part of the Exam or in more than one part of the Exam. For instance, a student might fulfill all three comprehensive stipulations in the Annotated Bibliography by addressing primary and secondary texts that cover different centuries (pre- and post-1800) and national traditions. Alternatively, a student might fulfill all three comprehensive stipulations in two or three parts of the Exam. For instance, the Review Essay might fulfill stipulations #1 and #3 (e.g., two books on 19th-century American literature, one book on 20th-century British literature), and the
Conference Paper might fulfill stipulation #2 (a paper on a medieval text).

The student will submit with the Exam a checklist showing how the three comprehensive stipulations have been fulfilled. In the Intellectual Autobiography, as explained above, the student will also provide an account of the ways in which the Exam expands the student’s area(s) of concentration to date.

**PART 1. REVIEW ESSAY**

The Review Essay must be 12-15 pages long. So as to enter into current conversations in a particular field of study, the student must discuss three scholarly texts—monographs, essay collections, or significant journal essays/book chapters—that have been published within the previous ten years.

The Review Essay should begin by framing the three texts in a larger scholarly discussion (e.g., drawing on older scholarship in the field), thus reflecting on the shape of a particular field of study. Demonstrating knowledge of a field of study will require reading beyond the three books as preparation.

Students can fulfill some or all of the First Exam's comprehensive stipulations in the Review Essay by choosing scholarly studies of texts from three different centuries; from the pre-1800 and post-1800 periods; and from two different national traditions.

**PART 2. ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

The Annotated Bibliography comprises an annotated bibliography of 15 primary and/or secondary texts on a particular topic and a 1500-word rationale explaining the choice of these texts and how they define a particular area of scholarly exploration. (The rationale anticipates the Oral Examination rationale, which asks students to explain how the three lists define an area of expertise). Individual annotations should be 150-200 words long.

Students can fulfill some or all of the First Exam’s comprehensive stipulations in the Annotated Bibliography by choosing primary texts that represent or secondary texts that address material from three different centuries; from the pre-1800 and post-1800 periods; and from two different national traditions.

**PART 3. SYLLABUS**

The Syllabus should be based either on an actual course the student will be teaching in the fall semester—most likely a writing course—or a course that is on the English curriculum at the college at which the student has been assigned to teach [e.g., either a writing or a literature course that the student might teach at some point during the next three years].
The Syllabus should include a daily breakdown of readings, assignments, and scheduled in-class activities.

Along with the syllabus, each student will submit an account (of no more than 1500 words) of how he would teach any one text from one class meeting on the syllabus (the text might be a poem, an essay, or part of a novel or longer work covered during a single class meeting). In this account, the student should first explain the overall design of the course (e.g., the aims and organization of the course theme/approach; the rationale for the selection of texts; the course objectives). The student should then explain how the selected text contributes to the overall design or purpose of the course. Finally, the student should produce a close reading or formal analysis of the selected text that demonstrates how he or she would teach about literary/rhetorical form and interpretation to undergraduates. If they so choose, students can also explain how they would design an in-class exercise or writing assignment around the selected text.

Students can fulfill some of the First Exam's comprehensive stipulations in the Syllabus. For instance, a student who designs a syllabus for a Medieval through 17th-century British literature survey might produce a close reading of one of the *Canterbury Tales* and explain how their pedagogical approach to that text contributes to the overall design of the course: this would fulfill the pre-1800 stipulation, the three century stipulation, and part of the two national traditions stipulation. A student who designs a syllabus for a writing course might produce a rhetorical analysis of a 20th-century American essay that would fulfill the post-1800 stipulation, part of the three century stipulation, and part of the two national traditions stipulation.

**PART 4. CONFERENCE PAPER**

The Conference Paper must be no longer than 2500 words.

The student must include an actual Call For Papers [CFP] from a recent or upcoming academic conference, and write the Conference Paper as if for this particular conference. The form of address and rhetorical stance taken in the Conference Paper should be appropriate for the imagined audience.

The student must include a 200-word abstract of the Conference Paper.

Students can fulfill some of the First Exam’s comprehensive stipulations in the Conference Paper by discussing one or more texts from different centuries, from the pre-1800 or post-1800 periods, or from different national traditions.

In the Fall, the English Program will sponsor a mini-conference or conferences at which students who have just taken the First Exam will have the chance to deliver the Conference Paper. Alternatively, English Program Area Groups will be invited to hold some form of event or mini-conference at which First Exam Conference Papers representing a particular field might be delivered. Delivering the Conference Papers will contribute to professional
development, as productive feedback can be provided about effective presentation strategies.

SOME SAMPLE EXAMS

Sample A
In the Intellectual Autobiography, a student describes her area of concentration as the Victorian novel and postcolonial studies. She writes her Review Essay on representations of India in Shakespeare, 18th-century Britain, and 19th-century Britain (fulfilling both the pre-1800/post-1800 and three centuries requirements, and demonstrating comprehensiveness outside of the area defined in the Intellectual Autobiography). She produces a Syllabus for a course on American poetry (fulfilling the two national traditions requirement and demonstrating additional comprehensiveness outside the area defined in the Intellectual Autobiography). She produces a Conference Paper on a Victorian novel.

Comprehensiveness Checklist
1. Three different centuries:
   - Review Essay: 16th-c, 18th-c, 19th-c.
2. Pre-1800 and Post-1800:
3. Two national traditions:
   - Review Essay: British
   - Syllabus: American

Sample B
In the Intellectual Autobiography, a student describes his area of interest as Twentieth-Century African American Rhetoric and History of Teaching. He writes an Annotated Bibliography on discourses of race in 19th- through 20th-century American literature and culture (fulfilling the post-1800 and part of the three centuries requirements, and demonstrating comprehensiveness outside the area defined in the Intellectual Autobiography). He produces a Syllabus for a writing course focused on African American Rhetoric. He produces a Conference Paper revised from a first-year course on Early Modern Globalization (completing the pre-1800 and the two national traditions stipulation and demonstrating additional comprehensiveness).

Comprehensiveness Checklist
1. Three different centuries:
   - Annotated Bibliography: 19th-c, 20th-c
   - Conference Paper: 17th-c
2. Pre-1800 and Post-1800
   - Annotated Bibliography: 19th-c
   - Conference Paper: 17th-c
3. Two national traditions:
   - Annotated Bibliography: American
   - Conference Paper: British