Learning Goals:
The First Exam, taken in the summer after the first year in the Program, tests students’ basic competence to undertake high-level doctoral work, as manifested by analytical aptitude, rhetorical skills, and broad knowledge. Students successfully completing the First Exam will demonstrate:

a) broad, deep, and detailed knowledge of British, American, and other Anglophone literatures;
b) knowledge of a variety of critical theories and the ability to use these theoretical approaches to elucidate different features and meanings in specific texts (Part IA);
c) a working understanding of the vocabulary and protocols of close reading, especially of poetic texts (Part IB);
d) the ability spontaneously to improvise and organize an engaging and coherent response to perennial literary issues and problems;
e) depth of knowledge of a particular author or literary period (Part IC);
f) historical range of knowledge of literary texts from earlier and later periods (Part II).

Exam Structure and Student Preparation:
The First Exam is comprised of four parts: (IA) the “passport” essay, written at home, demonstrating knowledge of theoretical approaches through a reading of a single literary work; (IB) a close reading of a short poem; (IC) an essay on a single author, period, or problem, with three different exemplary cases, in response to one of several questions emphasizing historical perspective; (II) an essay focusing on a single theme or issue as manifested in literary works from three different periods (at least one pre-1800 and one post-1800). In any given year, the essay questions for parts IC and II include a selection from previous exams, combined with new questions solicited by the Exam Committee chair and/or EO from other members of the committee to ensure variety, continuity, and relevance. The poems for part IB, which range across all the major periods of English and American literature, are selected for their representative aesthetical and historical qualities as well as their analytical potential. Students are encouraged to prepare for the exam, in part, by consulting a detailed guide to the exam, by attending workshops offered by the Program, and by taking specific courses to fill in gaps in knowledge. Most English courses require students to practice the analytic and argumentative skills tested by the exam; our single required course, “Introduction to Doctoral Study in English,” which as of Fall 2012 will be required of first-year students, addresses several topics (theory, canonicity, disciplinarity) relevant to the exam.

Grading Criteria and Procedure:
Operating under a “Grading Guidelines” document, three-member subcommittees of the Exam Committee read the anonymous exams. Readers assign a grade (Fail, Pass, Distinction) to each part of the exam, supported by brief evaluative comments, and assign an overall grade to the exam. Grading criteria include breadth of knowledge; methodological versatility; factual accuracy; close reading skill; effectiveness of argumentation; and quality of writing. Each subcommittee chair collates and provides the results to the Exam Committee chair and the EO. Where significant disagreements occur, an additional reader will grade the exam, and the EO will make a final disposition. Failed parts of the exam may be retaken once. In cases of failure, the
EO meets with the student to provide feedback and to recommend measures that should be taken to address the deficiencies of the first attempt.

Outcomes, Assessment, and Revision:
An analysis of data for the past four years (2008-2011) shows that results have been generally satisfactory on parts IC and II, with an average of only 2 students annually, out of 31-34 total, having to retake either part. Higher rates of failure have occurred in part IA, the “passport essay”: 22 students out of 131 over the past four years, 15 of these in the past two years alone. During this time period, faculty readers have insisted, more rigorously than in the past, that the essay not exceed 1250 words. The space constraint may be one reason why fewer students have succeeded in defining, differentiating, and applying three different theoretical approaches to a given text. In consultation with the Exam Committee, the Curriculum Committee and EO have revised the terms of the passport essay, to allow students to demonstrate familiarity with theory in a more nuanced and self-reflective way, and at greater length (1500-2000 words). The new format will take effect for the first time in Fall 2012. Over the past four years, 12 students out of 131, 10 in the past two years alone, have failed Part IB. Examiners have regularly noted students’ poor grasp of poetic form, especially prosody, and the tendency to pad the essay with literary-historical background information in place of rigorous analysis of the poem’s form, imagery, and argument. The Curriculum Committee has recommended changing the language of the prompt for the close reading in order to emphasize the importance of detailed, sustained analysis of poetic form and argument.

In 2008, as part of the Middle States reaccreditation of the Graduate Center, the English Program assessed the First Exam. Particular recommendations from that assessment—clarifying the instructions for parts IA and IB, updating the chronological period rubrics—have already been implemented. Among the recommendations that have emerged from the current assessment, it has been suggested that the exam be made more comprehensive and that it reflect changes in the discipline of English in the academy at large. Another set of recommendations involves refining the grading guidelines for the exam (perhaps by constructing a grading rubric) and providing opportunities for the Exam Committee to discuss the criteria and expectations they bring to their evaluation of the exam.

Assessment Process
Through reflection on the annual results of the exam, the English Program engages in an ongoing assessment of the effectiveness of the First Exam in addressing the learning goals articulated above. In Fall 2010, the EO, in consultation with the Exam Committee and Curriculum Committee, recommended a revision to the prompt for the passport essay (part IA). The Curriculum Committee drafted a revision of the prompt, which was further modified and approved by the Executive Committee. In Fall 2011, the EO and the chair of the Exam Committee gathered and reviewed First Exam outcome data from 2008-2011. Following a Curriculum Committee analysis of the data and discussion of the present version of the exam, the chair of the Curriculum Committee drafted a document following the Pilot Assessment Project Template. The EO and chair of the Exam Committee contributed to the document, which was reviewed by the Executive Committee. Since all English committees have student members, students have been involved in all discussions that have led to changes in the exam.