Dear Botany and Plant Sciences faculty,

The Botany and Plant Sciences Educational Advisory Committee (EAC) met on May 1, 2023 to discuss changes to the format of the graduate student oral qualifying exam and dissertation defense close-door meeting. The proposed changes would allow students, in consultation with the committee chair, the flexibility to be able to conduct their oral qualifying exam and/or dissertation defense close-door meeting in-person, via hybrid format (some members online, some in-person), or fully online. We are writing to the department faculty to summarize the Educational Advisory Committee’s proposal as Graduate Division has instructed us to make a decision on this matter.

Prior to the pandemic, the oral qualifying exam and dissertation defense close-door meetings required that all committee members participate in person. Due to the constraints of the pandemic, these meetings were moved to zoom. Graduate Division has asked all departments to define their new guidelines for the format of oral qualifying exams and dissertation defense close-door meetings.

The Botany Graduate Student Association (BGSA) sent out a survey to graduate students asking about their experiences in taking their oral qualifying exams. Over the past few years, we have had many examples of both formats of the oral qualifying exam. The BGSA received 22 responses out of 70 total graduate students. **The graduate student consensus was overwhelmingly in favor of giving graduate students the flexibility to be able to conduct their oral qualifying exam and/or dissertation defense close-door meeting in-person, via hybrid format, or fully online depending on the circumstances, with all 22 student responses indicating this preference.**

The EAC proposes to allow the student, in consultation with the respective committee chair, to decide the appropriate format for the exams given the specific needs/circumstances of the student. **In-person oral qualifying exams and dissertation defense close-door meetings are strongly recommended and every effort should be made to hold these discussions in person.** However, if unexpected circumstances exist that prohibit a fully in-person meeting, including but not limited to a student conducting necessary research outside of Riverside or a faculty member falling ill, a hybrid or fully online option should be made available, in agreement with the committee chair and student. If no decision can be arrived at in this manner, then the Educational Advisory Committee must be brought in to help with the decision. If the oral qualifying exam and/or dissertation defense has been scheduled for in-person, but a committee member has emergency circumstances, then remote accommodation should be made available. The priority should be to hold the exam and/or defense on the originally scheduled day, unless extenuating circumstances prevent this. **The EAC unanimously voted in favor of these proposed changes.**

We are now turning the final decision on the format of the dissertation defense meeting over to the faculty of the Botany and Plant Sciences department. We ask that you carefully consider the proposed change and speak with members of the EAC or the BGSA EAC representatives, Claire Mauss and Stephanie Martinez, if desired.

Thank you,

Botany and Plant Sciences Educational Advisory Committee