

Policy on the Ph. D. Comprehensive Examinations
February 8, 2008
Joint Program in Survey Methodology/Michigan Program in Survey Methodology

Purpose of the Examination

The comprehensive exam is designed to assess whether a student has sufficient knowledge and creativity to complete a dissertation.

Format and Coverage

The comprehensive examination will consist of a written research proposal and an oral examination. The research proposal would be based on the student's research paper from the Doctoral Seminar or on another topic if the seminar paper was not considered to be acceptable by the course instructors. The research proposal should be completed at the end of a student's second year in the PhD program.

The written research paper will consist of a review of relevant literature on a topic selected by the student and a proposal for research into the topic. The topic will be approved by the instructors of the seminar or by the student's advisor if the seminar paper is not used. The paper should address one or more specific problems that would be appropriate for a dissertation. The problem should be one that can feasibly be done given the resources typically available to a student doing a dissertation. Methods of data collection and/or analysis should be proposed to investigate the problem. The seminar paper is already expected to contain these elements.

The paper could later be refined to become the student's dissertation proposal, but this is not a requirement. The student will have the option of selecting another topic in conjunction with the thesis advisor.

The examination committee will consist of four faculty members, not including the instructors from the doctoral seminar. If the student has already selected a thesis advisor, the advisor will not be part of this committee. The advisor is also expected to have limited input into the actual writing of the research paper so that the paper is a better indicator of the student's knowledge. The advisor can review the student's ideas and offer advice and criticism during the student's writing of the paper.

After reviewing the written paper, the committee will conduct an oral examination of the student that will typically be 2 hours or less. This examination is designed to test the student's knowledge of the selected research topic and will not include a presentation by the student. The examination will cover the proposed research and can also include wider inquiries to test the student's knowledge of issues related to the research proposal and potential solutions to problems.

Schedule

The research paper would ordinarily be submitted to the committee before the end of the summer after the student's second year in the program, assuming the student enters the program in a Fall semester. Some flexibility will be needed for students who enter at the beginning of the Winter/Spring semester. The student may revise the paper based on comments received in the doctoral seminar prior to submitting it to the committee.

The examination itself would typically be scheduled for early in the Fall semester (that is, by October 1). The student would work with his or her committee to set the date for the examination, and the Director of the program would approve the final date selected. In unusual circumstances (e.g., illness or other severe personal emergency), exceptions to this requirement may be granted at the discretion of the standing Examination Committee.

Grading

Students will be graded as Pass, Conditional Pass, or Fail. Pass is a grade assigned to examinations that demonstrate mastery of the relevant material and indicate that the committee is satisfied that the student is capable of carrying out satisfactory dissertation work.

Conditional Pass will be given to students who, in the judgment of the examination committee do not perform satisfactorily on the written paper, the oral examination, or both. The student will be instructed to take some remedial steps, which may include revising their papers in response to comments, re-taking an oral examination, or doing additional course work. The particular steps will be left to the discretion of the committee. The committee will determine whether the steps are performed satisfactorily, but when a conditional pass is given, the expectation is that the student will be able to make satisfactory revisions and should continue on to write a thesis.

A Failing grade means that the student did not demonstrate sufficient mastery of the research literature and practices of the field to permit continuation in the Ph.D. program. Normally, students given this grade would not be permitted to pursue the Ph.D. further. However, students may petition the faculty to submit a new research paper within the next 6 months. This will require a vote of the full Faculty. The vote will be the final decision of the Program. Students will be given only one additional chance to submit a paper; a passing grade must be obtained on the second try.

Timing of the Implementation of the New Policy

Students admitted in Fall 2008 would be subject to the new rules. Those admitted before Fall of 2008 who haven't already taken the comprehensive examination can select whether to be examined under the new policy or the old one.