

# DOCTORAL COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

## WHAT'S PRESCRIBED BY THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

Following is what the Graduate School Handbook says about the Doctoral Comprehensive exams. <http://handbook.unc.edu/phd.html>

“A doctoral written examination, a doctoral oral examination, and a final oral examination covering the dissertation and other topics as required by the examining committee are required for doctoral degree completion.

The first two items together constitute a comprehensive examination of the student’s command of his or her field. If the student declares a minor, the student will be examined on the minor in at least one of the two doctoral examinations. Together they should:

- assess the extent and currency of the candidate’s knowledge in a manner that is as comprehensive and searching as the best practices of that field require;
- test the candidate’s knowledge of all transferred courses;
- discover any weaknesses in the candidate’s knowledge that need to be remedied by additional courses or other instruction; and
- determine the candidate’s fitness to continue work toward the doctorate.

The final oral examination is primarily a true defense of the dissertation. It may be open to the public, limited in attendance to the candidate and the committee, or a combination of the two. Questions that relate the dissertation to the field are appropriate.”

### **Examining Committee:**

“A committee of at least five members is required. A majority of the members of a doctoral committee must be regular members of the UNC-Chapel Hill Graduate Faculty from the student’s major academic program. Other members may be special appointees to the Graduate Faculty. Doctoral programs are encouraged to include scholars from outside the program to serve as members of doctoral committees.” The committee should be in place before the student completes an outline of his/her qualifying paper. If a committee member is not a member of the UNC Graduate School faculty and a fixed-term appointment is required, please contact the Doctoral Program Coordinator to complete the procedure. Each doctoral student is expected to consult with members of the dissertation committee at frequent intervals throughout the progress of his or her research and will be required to submit a progress report to each member of the committee at least once a year.

Academic programs determine the order of doctoral written and oral exams, but before the student may take the second exam (be it written or oral) he/she must have fulfilled, or will have fulfilled by the end of the semester in which the exam is to be taken, all required courses and the minimum residence requirement for the doctorate. If the second doctoral examination of the dissertation prospectus, the Report of Doctoral Committee Form (<http://gradschool.unc.edu/pdf/wdcomm20100503.pdf>) must be submitted to and approved by the Graduate School before the examination. Please give this form to the Doctoral Program Coordinator for submission to the Graduate School.

## PROCESS FOR THE QUALIFYING EXAMINATIONS

In the School of Social Work, the doctoral comprehensive examination consists of (a) the preparation of the qualifying paper, (b) an oral examination on the contents of the paper; and (c) the preparation of the dissertation proposal and an oral defense of the dissertation proposal.

### **Content of the written examination**

The doctoral qualifying paper will consist of a single paper that demonstrates the capacity of the student to integrate information from research, relevant literature, and course materials in order to frame the statement of the problem, literature review and theoretical frameworks sections of the dissertation. The paper will formulate an issue or problem of importance for social work and identify a specific issue for research. The qualifying paper will include a critical examination of problem to be investigated and follow a sequence of steps that provide a careful review and analysis of the research that has been conducted on that problem, the theoretical frameworks that have attempted to explain the problem, relevant interventions that have addressed the problem, and research strategies that have been used to examine the problem. The qualifying paper is to include at least the following sections:

- a) Statement of the research problem and its significance
- b) Critical review of previous research addressing the problem or issue
- c) Critical analysis of theoretical frameworks or perspectives for examining this problem, selecting 2-4 major theoretical perspectives
- d) Critical review of intervention programs, strategies, or approaches in the problem area
- e) Critical review of research methodologies or approaches for examining this problem or of the important methodological issues in doing research in this area of interest (roughly three approaches or issues, if appropriate)
- f) Conclusions and implications.

The qualifying paper should be a disciplined and focused analysis of the relevant scholarship involved in your qualifying area. The paper should be reasonably comprehensive, but must also be disciplined -- the final product should provide a foundation for the dissertation research, but may contain material that is not necessarily to be included in the dissertation proposal. The anticipated length of the qualifying paper is to approximately 50-60 pages, including references. This means that a careful synthesis is necessary rather than an extensive narrative description.

This proposed outline is to be applied flexibly to fit the particular research problem and approach of each dissertation.

### **Criteria for evaluating the written exam**

- a) It should demonstrate critical thinking.
- b) It should include content addressing oppressed populations.
- c) The review of literature should show evidence of the use of empirical data.

- d) It should be carefully and clearly written, with style and citations consistent with the APA style manual.

The student and their qualifying examination committee should review the Written Qualifying Examination Rating Form for specific guidance on the criteria that will be used to evaluate the quality of the qualifying paper. This Rating Form offers criteria that can be used for each section of the qualifying paper and provides the committee members with a simple tool for assessing their ratings of the paper and providing recommendations to students as they prepare their paper for the examination.

The qualifying examination paper does not have to be publishable at the time of the examination. At some time before completion of the dissertation, the student is strongly encouraged to revise the examination paper into a review article for publication and to submit it to a refereed journal. Additionally, students are encouraged but not required to make a public presentation on their qualifying paper; this may be at the school or at a professional meeting.

### **Process for planning and evaluating the written examination**

While taking the dissertation seminar (SOWO 913 Advance Research Methods in Social Intervention), the student will discuss the contents of the qualifying paper with his/her Dissertation Committee Chair and produce a detailed outline of the qualifying paper content. Subsequently, the student will obtain final approval of the outline from the Chair.

The student and Chair will compose a memorandum to go out to the student's committee under the Chair's name stating that the two of them have agreed on the content the student has outlined for the qualifying paper, and requesting amendments from the members if they see any deficiencies in the outline. The intent, however, is for the Advisor to have primary responsibility for helping the student delineate appropriate content for the examination. All of this should happen by the end of the semester before the one in which the qualifying paper and oral examination of the qualifying paper are to be completed.

The student will then write the paper by the date agreed upon.

The committee will read the paper and make a judgment about whether the paper is of passing quality, using the program's qualifying examination form. If committee members believe that changes are needed, they will provide directions for revisions in writing to the committee chair, who will summarize and transmit them to the student. When the revisions are completed and the committee members have read them, the Chair will ascertain that all committee members agree that the qualifying paper is of passing quality. The student, Chair, and committee will then schedule the oral examination at the earliest possible date.

### **Timing of the Written and Oral Examination of the Qualifying Paper**

The qualifying paper will be written and the oral examination will be conducted no later than the end of the semester following the one in which the student has completed her or his coursework. This will mean that the qualifying paper should be completed sometime before the end of the semester.

The student has the option of completing both the qualifying paper and the oral examination of the paper during the last semester of coursework.

Responsibility for timeliness of reading/returning drafts is shared by the student, the committee members, the dissertation chair, and as a last resort, the doctoral chair. The student is responsible for informing committee members when he/she will be delivering drafts and asking committee members how much time they will need to review drafts. At a minimum, faculty should be given two weeks to read the qualifying paper.

### **The Oral Examination of the Qualifying Paper**

The oral examination is intended to clarify any questions the committee members have about the paper and to provide the student with feedback from the committee about the paper.

The oral examination will consist of a discussion of the contents of the written paper. The student will be expected to explain any portions of the paper or to elaborate on any portion of the paper. It is the Chair's responsibility to ensure that the student is accountable only for the qualifying paper content agreed on when the outline was approved by the committee.

### **Including the Dissertation Proposal in the Oral Examination of the Qualifying Paper**

During the same semester in which she or he is preparing the qualifying examination, the student may also complete the dissertation proposal, so that it can be reviewed, revised, and approved by the committee at the same meeting as the student's oral examination of the qualifying paper. This is an option and not required. Students in consultation with their Chair may choose to schedule a second meeting with their dissertation committee to present and defend the dissertation proposal. Content of the dissertation proposal is described in the section of the manual dealing with the dissertation.

Following the oral examination on the qualifying paper, the committee will formally vote on whether the exam is graded as passing. The written and complete oral examination will be graded as "pass with distinction," "pass," or "fail." This vote must be unanimous.

The student may fail sections of the qualifying paper or the oral examination. If a student does not pass any portion of the written or oral examination, the committee will negotiate a written plan about what remediation will be required. The committee members and the student will sign the plan, indicating understanding and agreement. The student will have until the end of the summer following the semester in which the examinations were taken, or, if not taken in the spring semester, until the end of the subsequent semester, to complete the revision of the examination. If the student fails any part of the examination a second time, he or she will be terminated from the doctoral program. This decision is subject to the normal appeals procedures of the School of Social Work and the university.

If the committee members agree that the student has passed the oral examination on the qualifying paper, the committee and the student may go on to discuss the dissertation proposal in the same meeting, and if they agree, the committee may approve the dissertation proposal.

### **Examination Forms**

"Immediately after each examination has been given, results should be sent to The Graduate School on the [Doctoral Exam Report Form](http://gradschool.unc.edu/pdf/wdexam.pdf) (<http://gradschool.unc.edu/pdf/wdexam.pdf>) . If the report of the first doctoral oral shows that the dissertation prospectus has not been examined or that it has been considered but not accepted, a separate report must be filed with The Graduate School as soon as the prospectus is approved." <http://handbook.unc.edu/phd.html>

When the student has scheduled the oral examination on the qualifying paper, he or she should pick up from the Doctoral Program Office or download from the Graduate School website the two Graduate School forms, which record the written and oral exam of the qualifying paper, the oral defense of the dissertation and the committee composition. The student should type the requested information on the form before the examination.

After the examination, at which the committee members will have signed the forms, the student should return them to the Doctoral Program Coordinator for proper filing and forwarding to the Graduate School.

### **Failure of Comprehensive Examination**

*“A graduate student who fails either a written or oral examination may not take the examination a second time until at least three months after the first attempt. The student should work with his or her academic program to identify areas needing additional emphasis and to establish an action plan to prepare for taking the exam a second time.*

*A student who fails an examination for the second time becomes academically ineligible to continue in The Graduate School.*

*When special circumstances warrant, a student made academically ineligible under the conditions stated above may be reinstated upon petition initiated through the student’s academic program. Students and academic program representatives must fill out the [Request for Reinstatement to Graduate School Form](http://gradschool.unc.edu/pdf/wrenstmt.pdf) (<http://gradschool.unc.edu/pdf/wrenstmt.pdf>). In addition, no student may continue in a program or take an examination a third time without approval by the Administrative Board of The Graduate School.” - <http://handbook.unc.edu/phd.html> (Failure of Examinations).*

