Ph. D. Comprehensive Examination Policy
September 14, 2018

Joint Program in Survey Methodology
Michigan Program in Survey Methodology

Purpose of the Examination

The Comprehensive Examination (CE) is designed to assess whether a student has sufficient knowledge, creativity, and aptitude to develop and complete a dissertation. More specifically, the CE tests students’ ability to identify research questions and design a research study that helps to resolve the problem, communicate the study’s rationale and design in writing, and defend the CE paper in an oral exchange with a faculty committee.

Expectations

The CE is designed to establish that the Ph.D. student

1) has a thorough knowledge of the relevant literature,
2) is capable of identifying methodological problems that are worthy of investigation,
3) can formulate research questions and hypotheses centered on those problems,
4) demonstrates the knowledge of research design and statistical analysis methods (experimental, quasi-experimental, observational) required to design and interpret research studies that are capable of addressing the research aims,
5) is able to defend the proposed research, and
6) has a plan for what the next steps might be, conditional on the outcomes of the proposed investigation.

A Ph.D. candidate should be able to demonstrate ability to do all of 1) to 6), both in writing (1 - 4) and in an oral defense (5 – 6).

The CE – composed of both the written research proposal and the oral defense – is the final milestone a student a student must pass in order to advance to candidacy. The CE paper will most likely – but not necessarily – have grown out the students’ work in the Doctoral Seminar and benefitted from feedback from the instuctors and fellow doctoral students. The CE oral defense is a meeting of the student and a designated CE committee in which the student gives a brief introduction to the topic and responds to questions raised by CE committee members.

The CE begins with a written paper proposing a novel research idea written by the student. See the Examination Paper Format and Coverage section for policies related to the examination paper. Although the paper is typically the result of a student’s
investigation of a particular topic developed during the Doctoral Seminar, students may choose another topic than the one developed in the Seminar.

The normal progression of the CE process is for a student to settle on a topic at the latest by January or February of the second year in the Ph.D program, typically the beginning of the fourth term of participation in the Doctoral Seminar. By the end of April and the end of the Doctoral Seminar students should have completed a draft paper that Seminar instructor(s) have examined and provided feedback on to the student. See Examination Process section for details.

Students then prepare a final paper to be discussed with the CE committee members in an oral defense to be held no later than the end of May of their second year. Of course, it is acceptable, but not required, for a student to schedule their oral defense earlier in the term or in an earlier term (as long as it follows passing the Qualifying Exam). See Candidacy section for policies pertaining to the exam results.

**Examination Paper Format and Coverage**

The written research paper will consist of at least three sections: (1) a description of a problem or gap in the literature identified by the student and accompanied by a review of relevant literature, (2) a proposal for a research study that would fill this gap in that literature, and (3) a detailed description of the study design that considers possible outcomes and their implications. The paper must be clearly written. It is expected to be 20-30 pages, with double spaced, 12 point font and one inch margins, not including tables, references, figures, and abstract (although an abstract is not a required component). Shorter papers are likely to contain inadequate detail and papers that longer likely contain unnecessary detail. Students are strongly encouraged to submit a paper within the recommended range. It is possible that the committee may reject a paper or return a CE paper to the student before reading it if it is not of sufficient quality.

The paper should address a problem that would be appropriate for a dissertation. While not necessary, it is recommended that the problem should be one that can feasibly be addressed given the resources typically available for dissertation research. Methods of data collection, generation, or analysis should be proposed to investigate the problem.

Students are strongly encouraged to use the Comprehensive Exam as the basis for their dissertation proposal. The student may select a different topic for dissertation research but this is inefficient because it does not build on work already completed and effort already invested. However, there are examples of students who have successfully changed topic between the CE and dissertation.
Examination Process

While preparing the paper, a student is allowed to consult with any faculty member, including but not limited to Doctoral Seminar instructors, an academic or (if one has been chosen) dissertation advisor, or the CE committee, about content and format. The faculty advice can include 1) whether the topic is suitable for a CE paper, 2) pointers to relevant bodies of literature the student may not be aware of, and 3) whether the proposed research is well designed. Advice does not include detailed feedback on theory or design nor editorial assistance to correct grammar, format, or organization. Individual faculty members will determine what kinds of discussions with the students they feel able to take part in, given these broad guidelines.

The Candidacy committee will identify the members of the student’s CE committee. The student is required to propose several names as members of the CE committee, which will consist of four faculty members. However, the final determination of the committee is left to the Candidacy committee. Doctoral Seminar instructors and the student’s dissertation advisor are excluded from membership. A student can discuss CE committee membership with the Candidacy committee before the end of February. The CE committee should be formed by the end of March. The Candidacy committee will designate one member of the CE committee as chair. Once the CE committee is formed, the student is responsible for scheduling the exam with committee members, arranging a conference room (and video connection, if needed) and notifying the CE committee members about these arrangements. Program administrative staff may help to schedule a conference room use and help with establishing a video connection (if needed).

The student must deliver the paper to the CE committee members and Candidacy committee at least 14 calendar days (i.e. including non-business days) before the examination. Failure to submit the paper 14 days prior to the examination will result in the student failing the comprehensive exam, barring extenuating circumstances.

The oral defense typically lasts no more than two hours. The defense may include a brief student presentation (usually no more than 20 minutes) to provide a framework for the discussion. The defense will consist primarily of faculty questions and student responses moderated by the chair. Questions focus on the content of the paper and presentation, but can also include wider queries about issues related to the research proposal and potential solutions.

A student who fails to schedule the exam for no later than the end of May of their second year or who fails to deliver the CE paper to her or his committee at least 14 calendar days before the exam will fail the CE exam. The student can petition to “re-take” the exam. If that petition is successful and the student does not pass the exam, the student will not be able to continue in the PhD program. If the petition is not successful, the student will not be able to continue in the program.
Candidacy

Student performance on the CE will be graded as Pass, Conditional Pass, or Fail. Students will receive the results of their exam in writing from the program director.

*Pass* indicates that the examination committee believes the student has demonstrated competence in identifying a problem or gap in the research literature worthy of research in a dissertation, as well as in designing research of the sort required for a dissertation. A student who passes the CE will be recommended for candidacy to the respective Graduate School.

*Conditional Pass* indicates that in the judgment of the examination committee the examination was not satisfactory, but there is a reasonable expectation that the student will be judged to pass the exam following a revision of the paper. The CE committee will communicate to the student how and by when the original paper should be revised. The student must keep the CE committee apprised of their progress while preparing a revision of the paper. A revised CE paper must be defended orally prior to the start of the next academic year so that if the student passes unconditionally, he or she can advance to Candidacy by the start of the fall semester of his or her third year in the program.

A student whose grade is *Fail* will be removed from the program. A student who fails the CE can petition the Director of their program within one month of the oral defense to retake the CE. The Director will then call for a vote by the full faculty. If the petition is denied, the student will not be able to continue in the program. If the faculty approve the petition, the student must retake the CE by the end of the summer so that they can advance to Candidacy in the fall semester. A student may retake the CE only one time. This means that the student must earn a Pass (not a Conditional Pass) when re-taking the CE exam in order to remain in the program.

When students pass the CE, they will be asked by their program to provide a copy of their paper for future cohorts of PhD students to use as an example. This is optional.

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1. A faculty committee which oversees the administration of the Qualifying and Comprehensive Exams.
2. At this stage in a student’s program, they would not formally have a “chair” or “advisor” for their dissertation committee but may have been working with a faculty member on research ideas that have now been incorporated into their comprehensive exam paper. If so, this faculty member would be excluded.