

## **Comprehensive Exams & Dissertation**

### **Written Comprehensive Exam**

Through this written examination, the student is expected to demonstrate a deep understanding of foundational and contemporary higher education literature, models, and theories. The graduate coordinator sends out an announcement each semester asking who plans to take the written comprehensive exam. Students can contact the graduate coordinator to register or simply respond to the email.

#### **Written Comprehensive Exam Format**

The Comprehensive Exam format changed in 2017. The following section and link provides a detailed description of the new guidelines and expectations for the exams:

The comprehensive exam is a take home exam consisting of two parts.

#### **Part I**

Methods analysis of an article (5-7 pages double spaced). The focus of the methods analysis of an article is on the research methods used in the article. Students choose whether they want to critique an article that uses qualitative or quantitative methods. The faculty will choose the particular article. The students will write their responses, concentrating on the methods used. An analysis does not mean simple criticizing the weakness of the methods, it should also speak to the strengths of the methods employed in the research.

#### **Part II**

Framing a problem (15-20 pages double spaced), selected by the student in consultation with their advisor. The focus of the paper is fourfold:

- a) An integrative literature review on a problem that identifies the key schools/traditions in the literature, key authors within those schools/traditions, and gaps in the literature (what we don't know), specifying the contribution you are going to make;
- b) Working out of that literature review, develop a conceptual framework, coming out of the theories that the student has addressed in their integrative literature review. Having identified the gap, the student needs to synthesize literature they have reviewed to challenge, confirm, disrupt, or extend the theories and concepts in that

literature. So, the student's conceptual framework should be aligned with the lit review, and elaborate

on the idea of the contribution they are going to make to the literature and the theories on the student's chosen topic area;

c) Develop some research questions, and then frame working propositions or hypotheses around them that utilize the concepts in the student's conceptual framework. Again, make sure the student has "alignment" between their integrative lit review, their conceptual framework and their research question;

d) In a couple of pages, discuss the methods the student will utilize to address and answer these questions. Again, be sure to think about alignment of each part of this paper.

### **Oral Comprehensive Exam Format**

A. In scheduling orals comps there are two options.

1. Some students, those who have already worked with their advisors to develop dissertation proposals, choose to schedule the orals on the same day, and back to back with their dissertation proposal meeting.

2. Most students schedule the orals first, and then later develop their dissertation proposals and organize that proposal meeting.

a. Members of this oral doctoral exam committee should consist of Higher Education faculty with whom the student has taken classes. Ideally, three members of a student's eventual dissertation committee will be included. Students approach each faculty member to request that they sit for their oral exams.

B. The orals take approximately one hour (sometimes 15 minutes more).

The exam is a general exam about what the student has learned in the classes in their higher education program, although some students provide the committee with a short written statement ahead of time (sometimes five pages or so) giving the committee an idea of what they are thinking about in terms of their dissertation work. That can help inform the questions and conversation in the exam, but the orals are a general exam, not a pre-proposal exam. The general format is the same regardless of the doctoral exam committee members, but the makeup of the committee shapes how the exam plays out in that different faculty bring diverse areas of expertise, so the content of

every unique student exam will be different based on which faculty they include on the committee.

The student has approximately 10 minutes at the beginning of the oral to discuss (without notes) concepts, theories, readings that have shaped how they think about higher education. Different students handle this differently. Some discuss this in the context of their growth in the program. Some go straight to the concepts/theories/readings.

In either case, after the student finishes this discussion, the committee members weigh in with various questions. Each committee member gets the opportunity to ask questions. The questions can be follow-ups to what the student has discussed, but they can also be more general questions not related to what the student has discussed.

After an hour, the student is asked to leave, and the committee deliberates, inviting the student back in to hear the results of the exam.

B.1. It is up to the student to select the date and time, polling their doctoral exam committee to come up with a time that works.

B.2. Students should ensure that they have filed their doctoral exam committee (See Dissertation section below for further info on the dissertation committee) in Grad Path, AND that they have filed a separate step on Grad Path indicating the date and time of the exam.

B.3. Students need to work with the Graduate Program Coordinator to schedule a room for the exam. Students can select a room outside the CoE that has meaning for and/or is comfortable for them, but then the student must take responsibility for scheduling that room.

C. When the results of the student's oral exam are filed by their advisor (when the student schedules the date and time of the exam in Grad Path, it generates an email to the advisor with a link to filing the results of the exam in Grad Path), the next step you take is to develop your dissertation proposal and select the dissertation committee, which can be different from the oral exam committee. (See Dissertation section below for further info on the dissertation committee).

C.1. As indicated above, some students do their proposal meeting (which generally takes about 1 1/2 to 2 hours) "back-to-back" on the same day as and right after their orals. Some students do their proposal meeting on a different date in the future.

C.2. In either case, when the student's proposal has been accepted by the committee (most proposal meetings lead to some revisions, which are provided by the student to the dissertation chair), the Grad Program Coordinator (currently Diana Peel), must go in to Grad Path and indicate that an accepted proposal is on file. That then leads the student to be formally advanced to candidacy.

## **Fees**

When a student passes the oral comprehensive examination and all coursework on their Plan of Study is complete, they advance to doctoral candidacy. At that time, their bursar's account will be billed the candidacy fees of \$35.00 This is a one-time fees and the student will not be billed again if they change their anticipated graduation date. Consult the candidacy fees page for more information.

## **Dissertation**

One of the first stages of the dissertation is student's selection of their dissertation committee. The Graduate College requires a minimum of three members, all of whom must be current UA faculty members that are tenured, tenure-track, or approved as tenure equivalent.

Students identify a Higher Education (HED) faculty member to be their dissertation chair and ask them if they would be willing to serve in this capacity.

- It is not necessary that the student's current Ph.D. advisor serve as the dissertation chair.
- Exceptions can be made to select a Chair from the Educational Leadership (EDL) program in the EPSP department.
- Students should consult with their dissertation chair and together identify two other dissertation committee members from within or outside the EPSP department. The student can then ask if those faculty would be willing to serve on the committee as well. Although the norm is for students to choose committee members from within HED or within EPSP, we are an interdisciplinary program that encourages students to take classes outside the program and department. Therefore, it makes sense to have students, in consultation with their advisor, decide if there might be faculty from outside the program, department, or college whose expertise is more closely aligned with the dissertation topic and/or methods.

- Students can add a fourth member (or more) if they wish -- tenured or tenure-track, or approved special members. (Special members must be pre-approved by the Dean of the Graduate College).
- All dissertation committee members are expected to attend the proposal meeting/defense and the entire final dissertation defense.

### Dissertation Proposal (meeting)

Students need to turn in their proposal at least 3 weeks before they plan to defend. Proposal length should be roughly 35-45 pages double spaced. However, the form and length of proposals varies considerably, depending on the chair and on the student and on the type of dissertation being proposed. All proposals, though will include some sections on statement of the problem/significance and contribution to the field, integrative literature review from which come key theories and concepts being utilized, discussion of

methods that addresses research design, data gathering, and data analysis. Students should consult with their chairs for greater detail.

- The student must file in Grad Path what their dissertation committee is (3 members minimum).
- The student is responsible for scheduling the dissertation proposal meeting with their committee members.
- Students need to work with the Graduate Program Coordinator to schedule a room for the proposal defense. Students can select a room outside the CoE that has meaning for and/or is comfortable for them, but then the student must take responsibility for scheduling that room.
- Generally, there are revisions required to the proposal. The form of those are decided upon by the dissertation committee. Most commonly, the student is required to file a several page memo to the dissertation chair indicating the changes that will be made to the proposal (rather than rewriting the entire proposal), but that is up to the discretion of the committee.
- When the proposal has been accepted, the Grad Program Coordinator (currently Diana Peel), must go in to Grad Path and indicate that an accepted proposal is on file. That then leads the student to be formally advanced to candidacy, which means they can begin their dissertation process.

## IRB Approval of the Dissertation

After the dissertation proposal is approved, students should submit an application to be reviewed by UA's Human Subjects program for approval. A student needs to first take the CITI Human Subjects Certification and write the date that it was completed on the Research Personnel form, which is submitted along with the Human Subjects Protection Program application form and necessary attachments. Links to the application process and forms can be found here (Must be completed prior to data collection).

## Final Dissertation Defense

A total of 18 dissertation units are required for completion of the program. Students should plan to defend their dissertation proposal after comprehensive exams have been taken and prior to enrolling in their dissertation units. Dissertation units are to be completed as students work on their dissertation.