

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS

The following Frequently Asked Questions and Answers are provided as a guide to our graduate students preparing for comprehensive examinations. Additional questions or specific unique situations will be addressed as necessary.¹

1. What are the comprehensive exams?

They are standardized exams (meaning all students that year take the same one and are graded by the same graders) taken on designated days of the year (currently administered three times a year). They are designed to measure students' proficiency in the core areas of our discipline and Ph.D. program. These are (1) methods, statistics and theory (or the "tool" exam) and (2) EITHER (a) crime and justice OR (b) law and society, depending on the students' chosen specialization within the Ph.D. program.

2. What is the purpose of comprehensive exams?

The purpose of the comprehensive written exams, along with the oral examination conducted by the student's supervisory committee, is to ensure that students have acquired a base level and breadth of knowledge (proficiency) in the areas of Criminology, Law and Society sufficient for a doctoral candidate who is prepared to pursue a dissertation project. This is different than the dissertation project, the written dissertation, and defense of the dissertation which are designed to ensure students can conduct solid, sound research, make an original contribution to knowledge, and become an expert in a particular topic or research area of the field.

3. How many comprehensive exams must a student take?

Students must successfully pass two exams. (1) A tool exam in methods, statistics and theory. This exam will require the student to demonstrate proficiency in the application of methodological/statistical techniques and theories relevant to the study of criminology, law and society, broadly speaking. (2) An area exam in the student's chosen area of specialization. Depending on the area of specialization, students will be required to possess a mastery of knowledge within either the (a) Crime and Justice or (b) Law and Society area.

4. When must a student take the comprehensive exams?

Ordinarily, exams should be taken at the end of coursework. These exams should normally occur no later than the 5th semester following Ph.D. program admission.

¹ Initial answers prepared by Jodi Lane, Graduate Coordinator, with Graduate Committee Input (Ron Akers and Eve Brank), December 2007

5. What information is covered on these comprehensive exams?

One exam tests proficiency in methods, statistics, and theory. The second exam tests proficiency in an area of specialization—either (1) crime and justice or (2) law and society.

6. How should a student decide which area exam to take?

This should be decided in discussion with your dissertation chair and committee, taking into consideration your career goals and your chosen area of interest (either crime and justice or law and society). For the Ph.D. program generally, students choose either the crime and justice track or the law and society track, which will determine which area exam you take.

7. What is the testing procedure for the comprehensive exams?

The exams are in-house, lasting up to nine hours on one day. There will be three examination dates per academic year. Generally, the first offering will be in August on the Saturday before the Fall semester classes start, the second will be in January on the Saturday after the start of Spring Semester classes, and the third will be in April (the exact date will be announced and scheduled based on avoiding holidays and the end of the semester). The comprehensive exam committee will make every effort to accommodate requests for scheduling exams on alternate days because of religious observances if requests are made well in advance. Either of the area examinations or the tool exam may be taken at any of the three offerings. Written exams are ordinarily not scheduled during the summer.

8. What is the format of each comprehensive exam? (How many required or optional questions are there?)

The tool exam will consist of four questions--two required questions (one in theory and the other in methods and statistics) and two questions that the student can choose from a list. On the area exam the student must answer three questions from a list of questions (some may be required). Each area comprehensive exam committee will make the decision on which are required and which are optional.

9. What materials are permitted or restricted while taking the comprehensive exams? (e.g. food, music, scratch paper, etc...)

The exams are closed book. Scratch paper and disks on which to submit the completed exams will be provided by the exam committee. Students should bring their own pens/pencils. No music is allowed (because this ensures consistency across students given that we cannot prevent students from putting notes on the devices used to play music). Food and drinks are allowed if the exams are not taken in university administered computer labs (where food is restricted by the university). Computers and a quiet environment will be provided

by the comprehensive exam committee. Students may self-monitor to choose to stop the exam to eat, go to the bathroom, take a break, etc.

10. How does a student go about studying for the comprehensive exams?

Effective study habits vary by student. It may be useful to make notes on readings, for example, by outlining the major theoretical approach, authors' arguments, methodology, results, and limitations for each reading. For readings covered in courses, it might be useful to note that professors' discussion of the article (e.g., what is its major contribution? What are its limitations? What does it add to the literature or provoke in terms of research topics?). Of course, interests and specializations of program faculty often influence what material is covered on exams. It may also be useful to create study groups with other students who are taking the exam or to discuss the exam experience with students who have taken them in previous semesters (including reviewing their memory of the types of questions).

11. Where can a student find a reading list for the comprehensive exams?

On the CLS website, <http://www.crim.ufl.edu/grad/currgrad.html>
The lists and copies of most of the readings (for the law and society comps) are posted on WebCT. Contact a faculty member on the exam committee for access to this page.

12. Are the comprehensive exams confined to the prepared reading lists?

No, the reading lists are designed to help you with preparation, but are not exhaustive.

13. How often are the reading lists for the comprehensive exams updated?

Because the lists are not considered exhaustive, but only meant to be a guide to help the students, there is no regular schedule for updating the reading lists. Students are welcome to contribute reading suggestions to either committee.

14. Why is one reading list much longer than the other (CJ vs. L&S)?

Because they were created by different exam committees. Because these lists are not designed to be exhaustive, but rather study guides, it is not necessary that they be the same length. These lists were created based on the expertise of the faculty in the areas (crime & justice and law & society).

15. Is there a recommendation or requirement to which comprehensive exam is taken first (area or method/tool)?

There are no requirements about which one is to be taken first. Students may choose based on their preparation levels and discussion with their dissertation chair and committees.

16. Should a student look for additional readings beyond the reading lists?

Yes. A good place to start is readings assigned in classes. Discussions with dissertation chairs may also help find readings. It will also be helpful to look at the table of contents for the major journals for recent years and be familiar with the work published there.

17. Are old comprehensive exams available to students?

Students who have taken previous exams regularly share them with new students.

18. To adequately answer a comprehensive exam question what type of information should be provided, how many sources of information should be provided, and is there any general length or word count to an adequate answer?

There is no “cookie cutter” response to how comprehensive exam essay answers must look. There is no word count or length specifications for the essays. They should be written in direct response to, and cover all of the issues raised in, the questions posed and in article or paper format with citations and references². Students should provide all important sources related to the question, and the length depends on how succinctly one can provide the relevant information in the time available (i.e., it depends on the students’ writing styles). Students should consider the number of questions they must answer and the amount of time they are allotted and balance their writing time so that they have enough time to answer each question.

19. What happens if a student fails a comprehensive exam?

If a majority of graders fails a student on more than one question, the student fails the exam and must retake it. To allow for additional preparation, re-examination will occur the next time that the exam is officially offered by the department (see item "b" above). If the committee decides that the student has not passed the qualifying examination or any part of it, one re-examination is permitted. If a majority of graders fails a student on one question, the student receives a conditional pass on the exam and will be given an opportunity for remediation. The remediation will consist of writing a seminar-style paper that address areas of weakness identified from the failing answer; the paper’s topic will be assigned by the comprehensive exam committee. The paper will be due no later than six weeks from the exam date and will be graded by the exam committee members within two weeks of its receipt. If the student fails this remediation, the student will fail the overall exam and will have only one other opportunity to retake the overall exam. The comprehensive exam committee chair shall provide the overall exam result (pass/fail/conditional pass) and the pass or fail results for each

² A note about references and citations: The committees do not expect students to have memorized names and dates of everything published in the relevant areas, but rather you should have a general knowledge of who the “big” name scholars are and close to when they did their seminal work.

question to the student within two weeks of the exam date. Each grader should provide information on failed questions that can be summarized by the comprehensive exam committee chair and given to the student and to the student's supervisory committee chair. Each student should be notified of the results through email. The supervisory committee chair and graduate coordinator must also be notified. (Rule Passed Spring 2006 by CLS faculty)

20. How are the comprehensive exams graded?

Each appointed committee member submits a "pass" or "fail" written grade for each exam question within two weeks of the date the exam is offered. A majority of graders must issue a pass on each question to pass the exam.

21. What are the oral exams?

They are oral exams conducted by the supervisory committee to ensure the student is proficient in the tool and area of specialization and is prepared to proceed to the dissertation phase of the degree program. Students answer questions posed by the supervisory committee and other faculty present at the exam. Often the questions arise from feedback from the grading committees on the written comprehensive exams, as well as the committee's own interests/experiences with the student.

22. What is the purpose of the oral exams?

They are oral exams conducted by the supervisory committee to ensure the student is proficient in the topics covered on the tool and area of specialization exams and is prepared to proceed to the dissertation phase of the degree program. The oral exams are reported as satisfactory or unsatisfactory by the supervisory committee on a form transmitted to the Graduate School. That is the only report required by the Graduate School for purposes of admission into doctoral candidacy. Results of the written comprehensive exams are internal to the department only.

23. Does a student need to do an oral exam for each comprehensive exam?

No, the student takes one oral exam within 30 days of successfully passing both comprehensive exams (after the second exam is completed and passed).

24. How many faculty members need to attend a student's oral exam?

The students' supervisory committee MUST attend. The physical presence of the chair and the external member are required by the Graduate School. The participation of all other members is required but it is possible for the participation of one (or in special circumstances more than one) of the other members to be by phone or other electronic means. Other faculty members may also attend, if they choose. Graduate students may also attend but may not participate in the questions or discussion.

25. How does a student prepare for the oral exams?

Students should discuss the results of the comprehensive exams with the chair of their supervisory committees. In addition, it may help to meet with the remainder of the committee and discuss their expectations prior to the orals.

26. How are the oral exams graded?

After the orals are completed, the student is asked to leave the room, and the committee discusses their perceptions and opinions of the students' abilities and proficiency in the areas covered. The committee generally decides in that discussion whether or not the student has passed the orals.

27. How much work can be done on a student's dissertation proposal (if any) before they have finished their comprehensive exams?

This depends on one's supervisory committee, and students should discuss this issue with their own supervisory chairs. Generally, students pass their comprehensive exams, including the written portion and the oral defense of those written exams first. The oral hearing or defense and approval of the written dissertation proposal by the supervisory committee is a separate hearing and generally occurs later. Regardless of when the proposal hearing is held, students are required to place a copy of the proposal in the department and to give notice of the proposal hearing to the faculty at least 10 working days before it occurs.