PhD Comprehensive Examinations

Objectives:

The PhD comprehensive examinations are an integral part of the Ph.D. degree in Criminology and Criminal Justice. They represent the part of the program that requires students to demonstrate their understanding of the central issues facing the discipline. It also requires students to have formed their own positions on these issues and to demonstrate they have the ability to articulate and defend these positions. As such they place an emphasis not only on what people know but also on how they can use what they know and if they have developed an understanding of how what we know can be transformed through research, theory development, and action. The student is expected to demonstrate in the examinations their reasoned perspective on the literature in our field and their ability to integrate that literature to describe future developments.

Development of Exams:

There are two comprehensive examinations -- theory and general. Each examination is created by a faculty committee. The committee members are:

General: Jim Lynch, Denise Gottfredson, Laura Dugan, Brian Johnson, Jean McGloin, Larry Sherman, Kiminori Nakamura

Theory: Ray Paternoster, Gary LaFree, Sally Simpson, Terry Thornberry¹, Tom Loughran, David Maimon, John Laub

The committees develop an exam by soliciting questions from each committee member. A committee chair puts a draft exam together based on the contributed questions. This draft exam is circulated among the committee members and revised based on feedback from the committee. Each exam includes eight questions, from which the student can choose four to answer.

The theory examination includes the following topics:

- history of criminological theory;
- meanings of and trends in theory development;
- contemporary theories of crime and criminal behavior; and
- research testing these theories, and applications of these theories to types of crime (e.g., drugs, violence, white collar) and groups of special interest (e.g., women, minorities, juveniles, and victims).

The theory exam generally asks questions that require a deep understanding of a discrete body of theory and research.

¹ Dr. Thornberry is on leave in Spring 2014 and will not be participating in the comp process.
The general examination covers the theory of and research on law enforcement, adjudication, and corrections as well as issues in crime control and prevention. Specifically, the general comp contains questions related to the following areas:

- The criminal justice system (police, juvenile and adult courts, corrections)
- Crime prevention and control (effectiveness; policy; trends)
- Crime, criminal justice and public policy (crime trends; trends in criminal justice administration; population change and criminal justice)
- The role of research in the criminal justice system (evidence based policy; diffusion of innovation)

The following topics might also be included in the general exam, but only in the context of the broader areas listed above. That is, a question on courts might ask specifically about drug treatment courts; a question of juvenile crime prevention might ask about risk and protective factors for juvenile delinquency; or a question on policing might ask about strategies for policing gangs. These sub-areas will not appear as stand-alone questions requiring in depth responses.

- Race, ethnicity and criminal justice;
- Specialized courts (e.g., drug treatment courts, community courts, teen courts) courts;
- Risk and protective factors of juvenile delinquency/drug use;
- Guns and crime;
- Drugs and crime; and
- Gangs.

As there are several areas on which students might be tested, the general comp requires broader reading and preparation, with less depth in any one area.

Timing and Logistics:

Students entering the Ph.D. program in Spring ’09 or later will be required to take comp exams by the end of year 3 and 4 of their DE Ph.D. sequence, or the end of year 2 and 3 of Ph.D. program for students entering into Ph.D. from another MA program.

The theory and general examinations are given on the last Friday before classes in January and the last Friday in June each year. They are each six hours in length. One faculty member proctors the exam. This function rotates among faculty members.

Students may bring a list of references into each exam. The list must be organized alphabetically and may contain no additional notes related to the content of the sources. The list will be handed in with the completed comp.

All examinations must be word-processed. If students require a non-typing accommodation, they can elect to handwrite their answers during the exam, and then type them in on the next business day. These students must leave the answers with the
examiner at the end of the examination, then return to the Department on the next business day to key in the exact text they have handwritten during the examination. The text will be proofread by staff; any variation between the two versions will be taken as a case of academic dishonesty.

Exam Preparation:

Unlike most Ph.D. programs in Criminology and Criminal Justice, ours requires only two courses (in statistics and methods). Our program requires few courses because the faculty believes that self-directed study for comprehensive exams is a helpful educational experience. Students are expected, within a two to three year period, to organize what is known about the topics covered in the two comprehensive exams, to familiarize themselves with current research in these areas, and to develop their own opinions about the state of the research and knowledge in each area.

Preparation for the theory and general comprehensive is facilitated by taking required and recommended courses. These are not required of all students but are highly encouraged because they provide guidance regarding the kind of material that should be covered during exam preparation.\(^2\) It must be understood that completion of these courses is not all that needs to be done to prepare for comprehensives. In addition to satisfactory performance in course work, the students must develop their own positions and organize the literature in a way that leads them to be able to "profess" the discipline.

The faculty recommends that students take the following courses to help prepare themselves for the comps:

- **Theory**: History of Criminological Thought (CCJS654) and other theory-related courses (e.g., Gender & Crime, Corporate Crime; Comparative Criminology; Life Course Criminology).

- **General**: Policing (CCJS601); Courts & Sentencing (CCJS602); Corrections (CCJS653); Juvenile Delinquency (CCJS652).

Students also form study groups and register for independent study credits with faculty members to help prepare for the examinations. Students are also encouraged to practice writing a few timed essays so that they become accustomed to writing in the allotted time frame. These practice essays are also useful for obtaining feedback from faculty members.

Copies of past examinations are available from the Graduate Coordinator. Students are encouraged to obtain copies of past exams to familiarize themselves with the usual content and structure of the exams.

\(^2\) There will be times when particular courses are unavailable. In these cases, students should get a copy of the latest syllabus and pursue a non-directed independent study.
A note on reading lists: As part of the process of preparing for the exam, students are expected to develop their own reading list. They might do so by referring to course reading lists, conducting library searches by topic, and asking faculty for advice about key readings. The faculty regards the development of the reading list as an important part of the comp studying process.

Grading Procedures:

Comprehensive examinations are graded by all members of the comprehensive exam committees described above. Each grader grades each question “pass” or “fail,” with a recommendation for-or-against “pass with distinction.” One member of the committee tabulates scores by student in a matrix by de-identified graders. Each student is allowed to review the matrix for their own examination, but not for other students. All examinations with 75% of the total possible points pass. Those with less than 75% fail unless the faculty decides to pass the examination. The faculty committee meets after the grades have been submitted to discuss potential failing exams. For each failed examination in which at least two (2) graders have given the examination a score of three (3) or higher, the faculty decides (during the post-grading meeting) whether to change the grades in order to pass the examination.

Faculty have two weeks to grade the exams after receiving them (usually the following Monday). This is the standard time given to faculty to evaluate other important documents (e.g., theses and dissertations). Given that the committees often meet to discuss exam results after the grading is complete, students should not expect to be notified of their exam outcome until about three weeks after they completed the exam. The faculty is fully committed to providing a careful review of the students comps in a timely fashion and will work hard to have the results ready within three weeks of the exam date.

Failing a Comprehensive Exam:

Once a student fails a comprehensive examination, they have the right to take the examination a second time, only if they have complied with the following procedures:

1) Selected a comprehensive study advisor from among the faculty
2) Developed a plan for studying for the examination, which may include reading, attending relevant graduate classes or comprehensive study sessions, and taking written practice examinations under time deadlines for feedback by faculty
3) Obtained written certification in a letter from the advisor to the Chair certifying that a reasonable study plan has been completed.

Students who choose to retake a failed exam must do so the next time the exam is given. A student who fails a comprehensive a second time shall be terminated from the doctoral program.
Common Reasons for Failing Exams:

Following are the three most common reasons why students fail comprehensive exams:

- Answering a question other than the one asked
- Omitting or mis-summarizing key studies
- Running out of time (usually evidenced by a brief and incomplete response to the fourth question)

Additional Evaluation

All exams are also graded according the following criteria.

**Evaluation for Each Exam**

Please rate each exam according to the Criteria A, B, and C. Each criterion should be rated as High Pass (3), Pass (2) or Fail (1).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>High Pass (3)</th>
<th>Pass (2)</th>
<th>Fail (1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. <strong>Demonstrates an understanding of core theories and concepts</strong></td>
<td>Exhibits mastery of subject matter and pertinent literature. Demonstrates exceptional understanding of theory and concepts.</td>
<td>Exhibits a solid understanding of subject matter and pertinent literature. Demonstrates a good understanding of theory and concepts.</td>
<td>Exhibits no or very little understanding of subject matter and pertinent literature. Demonstrates no or very little understanding of theory and concepts.</td>
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<td>B. <strong>Demonstrates ability to think critically</strong></td>
<td>Exhibits excellent critical thinking skills. Demonstrates a wide breath of knowledge and understanding of important arguments, issues and problems.</td>
<td>Exhibits good critical thinking skills. Demonstrates a considerable knowledge and understanding of important arguments, issues and problems.</td>
<td>Exhibits no or very little critical thinking skills. Demonstrates no or very little knowledge and understanding of important arguments, issues and problems.</td>
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<td>C. <strong>Demonstrates ability to express complex ideas in clear and well-organized written arguments.</strong></td>
<td>Arguments are exceptional in their development and presentation. Writing of a quality that could be publishable.</td>
<td>Arguments are good in their development and presentation. Writing of a quality that is consistent with graduate studies.</td>
<td>Arguments are weak in their development and presentation. Writing of a quality that is not consistent for this to pass graduate studies.</td>
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