

Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy

Guidelines for Doctoral Qualifying Exams

April 2013

"The qualifying exam is intended to demonstrate the student's mastery of certain topic areas and his/her competence to conduct thesis research,"

[Policies and Procedures manual]

This document explains how qualifying exam rules specified in the Friedman School's *Policy and Procedures* manual are to be implemented in practice. Please read those formal procedures carefully, in tandem with these informal guidelines. The following text serves as guidance to both students and faculty on issues of importance to the doctoral qualifying exam process. Such guidance will be updated from time to time with input from doctoral candidates as well as from examiners. Anyone wishing to add content or seek clarification should contact the Dean for Academic Affairs. In the event of inconsistencies between this document and the formal procedures stated in the Policies and Procedures Manual, the latter is the definitive source of guidance.

Principles

Academic Purpose

As per the school's Policies and Procedures manual, the purpose of the exam is to allow those being examined to demonstrate mastery of the topics and skills needed to conduct independent thesis research. The student must demonstrate adequate factual knowledge of relevant topic areas and be able to effectively synthesize, interpret, and make use of that knowledge to the satisfaction of the committee.

Professionalism

The student and committee members should strive for professionalism in all aspects of the exam process, including communication, behavior and dress. While the examiners may seek to put the student at ease, levity should be kept to a minimum and the tone of interaction kept academic.

Confidentiality

Formal interactions during the qualifying exam and its outcomes must be kept strictly confidential by everyone who was in the room. While any Friedman School faculty may attend the exam, they should not discuss the performance of any student or the actions or words of examiners on the committee with any other person not officially engaged in the process.

The Exam Process

When Should a Student Sit the Qualifying Exam?

Students typically arrange to sit the qualifying exam between 3 and 9 months of successfully completing all required coursework. The amount of time taken to prepare for the exam depends on the individual needs of the student.

Scheduling the Qualifying Exam

The process is initiated by submission of the Request for Doctoral Qualifying Examination form to the Dean for Academic Affairs (DAA). The DAA assembles and announces the members of the examining committee. It is the responsibility of the student to then communicate with the committee to define dates for delivery of the written question and for the oral exam. The student typically suggests a range of possible dates by email to the members of the committee. Once a tentative date has been determined, the student works with the Friedman School's Office Manager to identify and reserve an appropriate room. The Office Manager will do the booking. If the student needs to change the time of the exam once set, he/she should, a) contact the chair of the examining committee and the DAA to request a time/date change, offering a clear explanation and valid reason for the change; b) interact with exam committee members to establish a new time; c) confirm a new room booking with the Office Manager.

Does the Student Have Input into the Examining Committee?

The examining committee is chosen on the basis of expertise in the areas to be examined. The student typically has no role in selection of the committee members. However, *prior to definition of the committee by the DAA*, if the student has an objection to a specific faculty member's participation this request may be made to the DAA. This request will be kept confidential. Only one such request may be made.

Is interaction allowed with examining faculty prior to the exam?

Prior to receipt of the written research proposal question, the student may interact with members of the examining committee. This takes the form of one meeting with each examiner independently, where the examiner describes his or her personal style of questioning and the scope of questioning in the topic area for which he or she will be responsible. The student is responsible for scheduling such meetings. During the individual meeting, the following information can be shared by the examiner: a) how they approach the process and material covered in the exam, b) what they are broadly looking for in the student's responses (in relation to demonstration of mastery of content and of competence to undertake advanced research), and c) broadly what topic areas could be covered in their section of the exam. The examiner may also suggest sources from which the student could study for that section of the exam.

Students find it useful to practice the oral component of the exam with other students.

Students may request that a faculty member who is not on their examining committee conduct a practice exam in his or her area of expertise.

How Does the Qualifying Exam Start?

The student, in concert with the examining committee, will agree upon the date and time that the written research proposal question will be delivered. The question will be sent by email, and the written response returned by email no later than 7 days after the question was sent.

Is interaction allowed after the exam has started?

The student's receipt of the written question signals the start of the exam and after this point the student should not seek or receive any assistance regarding the written question from faculty, from other students, or from anyone else *until after the completion of the oral examination*. The only exception is if the student requests clarification of written question after it is received, if needed, from the chair of the examining committee. Responses to requests for clarification will typically be general in nature. For example, if a student requests clarification about whether a human or animal model should be employed, the response may be, "If the instructions accompanying the question do not specify the type of experimental model, you are free to choose the model you feel most appropriate".

Can a student see questions posed for the written portion of previous exams?

Yes, there is an informal folder in hard copy for consultation in the Office of Student Affairs.

What is fair game for the written exam?

The written exam takes the form of a research proposal (as described in the Policies and Procedures Manual). It is modeled on grant proposals such as those submitted to the National Institutes of Health, United States Agency for International Development or similar funding agencies. It seeks to determine if the student can, in a short period of time, design research to answer a question that is relevant to the student's area of interest, but not focused on their planned topic of doctoral research.

The written question will have been approved by the Doctoral Exam Oversight Committee, composed of the DAA, the department chairs and at least one program director, which reviews draft questions to ensure that the question is feasible, makes reasonable demands on students' likely knowledge, and is sufficiently challenging to demonstrate appropriate skills.

In evaluating the student's response, the examiners will look for clear statements on the significance of the problem, research hypotheses that are to be tested, justification of the approach proposed (including sampling decisions, analytical methods to be used, assumptions made), and clarity regarding usefulness of potential findings. If a student has a specific query regarding interpretation of the written question, he or she should contact the exam committee chair, copying the DAA, and ask for clarification.

Starting the oral exam

The student may be asked to leave the room at the outset to let the committee have a short discussion on approach. Management of the exam is the responsibility of the exam committee chair. Once the exam starts, the committee chair usually seeks to 'break the ice' by asking the student to talk about academic and career interests. This is an opportunity to allow the student

to compose him/herself. Committee members may use such information as starting points for their questions. The student should not, however, take more than a few minutes doing this.

The order of the four oral exam components (defense of the written proposal and the three topic areas) is at the discretion of the committee chair. The defense of the written proposal typically occurs first, but the student is permitted to request the order of remaining sections.

What questions can be included in the oral exam?

The oral sections of the exam allow examiners to a) understand what the student knows and how well he or she can express such knowledge; b) assess mastery of defined topic areas, and c) assess students' ability to synthesize information across topic areas, disciplinary boundaries, and relevant domains of research. The exam is *not* restricted to content of syllabi or readings. Current affairs (for example, newspaper articles relating to nutrition) may be called on to illustrate or inform a question or an answer. An examiner may choose to cover many questions in a broad sense or fewer questions in more depth—that is not pre-determined. Examiners are entitled to ask a question that does not appear to be core to his/her topic area; questions may cover the full breadth of a student's academic preparation (courses, seminars, readings and broader issues-of-the-day). Competency to undertake research and pursue doctoral level interaction with peers relates as much to articulate mastery of a variety of subject matters demonstrated in the oral exam as it does to the text of the written exam. Questions may make reference to the student's written response during the oral exam.

Conduct of the Exam

Examiners and the student are expected to maintain a respectful, professional manner throughout the exam process. Neither student nor examiners should convey any expectation concerning the outcomes of the exam. The examining committee is expected to maintain strictly professional demeanor throughout the exam, including after the exam once the outcome has been conveyed to the student.

English language

Students should feel free to ask examiners to rephrase a question whose intent is not clear. Likewise, examiners may ask a student to clarify his/her answers. Clarification may be especially important for students whose mother tongue is not English. However, it is expected that students be able to conduct the exam and express themselves adequately in both written and spoken English.

Use of the white board

This is permitted for students who wish to use the board either to illustrate answers in graphical form or to use equations, or to structure verbal responses by creating an outline of the response so that they don't lose their train of thought. An examiner may ask the student to draw a graph or elaborate on a conceptual framework. However, students should not use up too much time writing out answers since this too may give the appearance of delaying tactics. In other words, the board is there to be used by the student, but overuse is not helpful. The committee chair may ask the student to use less time composing responses or writing on the board if it is felt that too much exam time is being used up that way.

What may the student bring into the exam?

The student should discuss this with the examining committee chair prior to the oral exam. Since students must defend the written proposal, a copy of the proposal is typically allowed, along with a page or two of notes relevant to the proposal. However, the student and chair should discuss if the student may annotate points for discussion or clarification in the proposal. Students should not prepare handouts or slide presentations to be delivered at the oral exam.

A student may bring a beverage or food if desired. If the student desires to bring additional items into the exam, this should be discussed with the chair in advance of the exam.

Can examiners pose questions outside of their own (the faculty member's) area of expertise?

Yes, as approved by the chair. Any examiner can jump in with a question even when it is not his or her turn as long as the question is relevant to the ongoing line of Q&A and does not use up too much time.

Can the student's adviser or other faculty members sit in on the exam?

Yes. Any Friedman School faculty member can attend the exam, and even ask a question during the exam *with permission of the exam committee chair*. It is the chair's responsibility to ensure that such questions are relevant, appropriate, and that they do not take too much time away from the formal examining committee's time for posing questions. If present during the exam, the academic adviser should not in any way seek to influence the process or outcome of the exam.

Outcome of the Exam**Pass or Failure of the Qualifying Exam**

The student must pass all four elements of the exam (the written plus the three oral sections). Some examiners keep their own running tally of 'adequately answered' questions, and base their final vote on an assessment of demonstrated mastery of knowledge, coupled with an identified potential for the student to succeed in the doctoral program. Each examiner votes on each section at the end of the exam (once the student, the student's adviser, and any other faculty present during the exam, have all left the room). The student is not informed how individual examiners voted or what the vote tally may be; the committee takes collective responsibility for passes or failures. There is no such thing as a 'partial' or 'conditional' pass. The student either did or did not meet the conditions required for a pass.

What happens if the student fails the exam the first time around?

Students are given two attempts at passing the qualifying exam. If the student does not pass on the first attempt, the committee should provide feedback regarding deficits and can suggest remedial courses or other activities to be undertaken prior to the second attempt at the qualifying examination. In the event that the student fails the exam, the committee chair writes a summary of the reasons on the exam outcome form prior to its conveyance to the Office of Student Affairs. Areas of feedback may include i) poorly articulated answers, ii) inability to respond directly to specific questions posed, or iii) insufficient detail offered in

responses to allow examiners to assess topic mastery, and on areas particularly in need of strengthening. The student may request a subsequent meeting with the committee chair and other committee members to get further insights regarding areas of weakness in the exam, or areas that would benefit from further study.

If the student is judged to have passed the written part of the exam but failed the oral portion, the student does not automatically have to re-do the written part of the exam; that is up to the examining committee. When a student is deemed to have done well on the written portion, the committee has the discretion to waive the need to retake that portion of the exam, thereby focusing the second exam on the oral components. However, even if a second written research proposal is not requested by the committee, the student is still responsible for oral defense of the original proposal at the second oral exam.

If failure of the first exam was due, at least in part, to poor execution of the written test, the student can be tasked with a second written examination, following the same procedures as for the first.

The second attempt at the qualifying exam

After the student has completed any recommended courses or activities, and in accordance with the timeline set forth in the Policies and Procedures Manual, the second exam is scheduled. The intent of the second exam is not to assess the degree of improved performance compared to the first attempt, but to assess *de novo* whether or not the student is adequately prepared to take on independent doctoral study as demonstrated through mastery of each required section of the doctoral qualifying exam.

For the oral portion of the second exam, a 4th faculty member will be present in the room, assigned by the DAA, as an impartial observer of the proceedings (typically one of the members of the doctoral exam process oversight committee). He or she will have read the written responses from the first exam and will be aware of the weaknesses evidenced in the first exam. He or she will not actively participate in the exam except at the express request of the committee chair.

What happens if the student fails the exam the second time?

Failure of the second exam results in withdrawal from the School. Those who fail are judged to be unprepared for doctoral research (unable to express mastery of topic areas, defend their views, or synthesize relevant material across multiple domains, etc.).

In the event of a second failure, the committee chair advises the student that he/she did not pass the exam. The chair will briefly elaborate on areas of weakness that led the committee to its decision, and before the committee disbands, the chair will write out those reasons clearly on the exam decision form which will be handed to the Office of Student Affairs.

The student will receive a formal letter informing him/her of the decision and the timeline of next steps. The student will be withdrawn from the School at a time determined by the DAA, taking into account the student's circumstances.

Content Areas for the Oral Exam**Can questions on statistics be asked?**

Yes, since they relate to core competencies required by the school. Questions on statistical methods as well as on study design may be part of the oral defense of the written question and/or part of any of the oral sections.

Can questions that go beyond the three topic areas be asked?

Yes. The exam questions are not limited only to the three topic areas and the written paper.

Common Specialization Topics (“Third Area”) for Oral Exams

The qualifying exam consists of the written component plus three oral components: namely, general nutrition, the student’s program, and a third area (which is typically the student’s specialization). A student may request the third oral exam topic to be different from his/her specialization, subject to approval by the committee and the DAA. Students may request to be examined in a Program area other than their own program, again subject to approval.