



Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination Guidelines

Purpose and Outcomes

All students in the Ph.D. in Higher Education program are required to take the comprehensive examination, which consists of written and oral parts. The comprehensive exam is typically taken at the end of the student's coursework *or* during the student's last semester of coursework. Both the oral and written portions of the comprehensive examination should be successfully completed before the student is allowed to move to the candidacy phase of the program; however, students can register for up to six hours of dissertation credit prior to or while taking the comprehensive exam.

The purpose of the comprehensive examination is to ensure that students are able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the field of higher education and knowledge of the scholarly literature about current practices, trends, and issues in higher education.
- Demonstrate high level critical thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) in their writing.
- Determine, obtain, analyze, synthesize, and critically evaluate research literature related to a given topic.
- Demonstrate an understanding of historical precedents.
- Show an ability to use and/or interpret basic concepts of research design and methods.
- Communicate effectively through written and verbal means and follow APA guidelines.

Procedural Guidelines

Eligibility: Students are eligible to take the exam if they (1) have completed all coursework or are in their last semester of coursework, (2) have a grade-point average of at least 3.25 on all coursework presented as part of the degree program, (3) have a designated Doctoral Advisory Committee, comprised of three members of the Higher Education faculty, (4) have an updated program of study on file, and (5) all official paperwork has been filed as per University of Arkansas Graduate School rules.

Application Process: Students must secure the approval of their doctoral program advisor for permission to take the examination. The advisor will verify that the student has met all the eligibility requirements. After receiving the advisor's permission, the student should complete and submit the HIED Doctoral Candidacy Exam Application to the advisor.

Academic Integrity: Students must sign the Higher Education Program Honor Code Statement prior to beginning their written comps. The University of Arkansas [Academic](#)

[Integrity Policy](#) and the honor code statement will apply to both the written and oral comprehensive examinations. Any act of academic dishonesty may result in dismissal from the program.

Initial Meeting with Doctoral Advisory Committee: Prior to beginning the written exam, the student must meet with their Doctoral Advisory Committee. The student is responsible for arranging this meeting, which should last no longer than 30-45 minutes. The purpose of this meeting is for the student to inform the Doctoral Advisory Committee about the topic and timeline of the exam. The student should prepare a brief overview of their comprehensive exam purpose and topic and share it with the committee members in advance of the meeting. This meeting is the only opportunity the student will have to obtain clarification of the exam guidelines and receive faculty input on the selected topic.

Timeline for the Written Comprehensive Exam: Students will have 4 weeks to complete their written comprehensive exam. The 4-week timeframe begins on the designated start date agreed to by the student and their Doctoral Advisory Committee. Students must submit their paper as a Microsoft Word document attachment sent by email to each member of the student's Doctoral Advisory Committee. The exam is due by 11:59 p.m. on the last day of the 4-week timeframe. It is the student's responsibility to make sure they receive a confirmatory email from each Doctoral Advisory Committee member indicating that they have received the written exam.

Grading of the Written Comprehensive Exam: The three faculty members who comprise the student's Doctoral Advisory Committee will grade the written comprehensive exam. Members of the Doctoral Advisory Committee have 2 weeks to assess the student's performance on the written exam. The Student will receive one of three scores on the written exam: "*pass*," "*remediate*," or "*fail*." The scoring rubric is provided in Appendix A.

A grade of "*pass*" must be received for the student to move to the oral part of the comprehensive exam. The chair of the Doctoral Advisory Committee will inform the student of the results and the next steps in the process.

In case of "*remediate*," the student will be provided with specific guidelines and a new timeline by their advisor after consultation with the other members of the Doctoral Advisory Committee. The guidelines will set forth the specific deficiencies in the student's written exam and what needs to be done to *remediate* the exam (this may involve writing an addendum to the paper or rewriting the portion or the entire exam). The student will be given a "*remediation*" timeframe (typically 2 weeks) and a specific submission date. If the Doctoral Advisory Committee determines that the student's *improved/remediated* paper is a "*pass*," they will be allowed to proceed to the oral defense. However, if the student's exam after remediation still does not result in a "*pass*," they will be deemed to have *failed* the exam and will be asked to complete a new exam (new application process and a revised topic).

If the student does *not pass* the exam on the second attempt, the Doctoral Advisory Committee will meet with the student to consider their performance and continuation status in the Higher Education Doctoral Program. At its sole discretion, the student's

Doctoral Advisory Committee reserves the right to require the student to complete additional coursework and/or additional remediation activities before the next attempt at taking the comprehensive exam, or to dismiss the student from the Higher Education Doctoral Program. If the Doctoral Advisory Committee recommends student dismissal, full higher education faculty vote will be taken.

Oral Defense of the Comprehensive Examination: Students will receive notification from their doctoral advisor when they may schedule their oral defense. Members of the student's Doctoral Advisory Committee will assess the student's performance on the oral exam using "*pass*" or "*fail*."

Students who receive a "*pass*" on both the written and oral portions of their comprehensive exam will move to the dissertation (candidacy) phase of the program. If, however, the student receives a "*fail*" on the oral defense, they will be allowed to schedule a second oral defense. The date will be set in consultation with the doctoral advisor. If the student "*fails*" the second oral defense, the student's Doctoral Advisory Committee will meet to determine the student's status in the program and the remediation steps.

Expectations

For the written comprehensive examination, students are asked to prepare a scholarly literature review related to a potential dissertation topic. The scholarly literature review requires that the student conduct a comprehensive review of existing research on the topic of their choice to illuminate a research or problem of practice in higher education. The paper should be 20-30 pages in length, double-spaced, excluding the cover page, references, and any appendices, and should follow APA guidelines. The scholarly literature review should consist of, but are not limited to, the following sections: (1) statement of the problem; (2) objectives or purposes of the review; (3) thorough review and synthesis of relevant research literature; (4) emergent conclusions and implications for policy and/or practice; and (5) scholarly significance and future research directions. The bulk of the written exam will focus on the thorough review of relevant research literature. In addition to presenting and discussing the findings from existing research, students should incorporate information about the methods and research design to be able to contextualize the findings. In general, in scholarly literature reviews, approximately 80% of all references come from research-based referred journal articles. The remaining 20% may come from books, book chapters, and non-referred sources, such as reports from professional organizations, media coverage, opinion writing and essays, personal philosophies of experts, interviews, etc. The written comprehensive exam will be assessed on coverage, synthesis, methodology, significance, and rhetoric. The exam scoring rubric is provided in Appendix A.

For the oral comprehensive examination, students are asked to prepare a brief presentation on the topic summarizing key conclusions of their scholarly literature review. The student will prepare any handouts/materials and/or incorporate audiovisual supplements, as they deem appropriate. The oral comprehensive exam will be scheduled for an hour. The student will have 10-15 minutes to make a presentation; the remaining time is reserved for questioning the student about the exam or the dissertation topic.

Appendix A: Written Comprehensive Exam Scoring Rubric

Category	Criterion	Fail	Remediate	Pass
Coverage	Justified criteria for inclusion and exclusion from review	Did not discuss the criteria for inclusion or exclusion	Discussed the literature included and excluded	Justified inclusion and exclusion of literature
Synthesis	Distinguished what research has been done on the topic from what needs to be done	Did not distinguish what has and has not been done	Discussed what has and has not been done	Critically examined the state of research on the topic
	Placed the topic or problem in the broader scholarly literature	Topic not placed in broader scholarly literature	Some discussion of broader scholarly literature	Topic clearly situated in broader scholarly literature
	Placed the research in the historical context of the field	History of topic not discussed	Some mention of history of topic	Critically examined history of the topic
	Acquired and enhanced the subject vocabulary	Key vocabulary not discussed	Key vocabulary defined	Discussed and resolved ambiguities in definitions
	Articulated important variables and phenomena relevant to the topic	Key variables or phenomena not discussed	Reviewed relationship among key variables and phenomena	Noted ambiguities in literature and proposed new relationships
	Synthesized and gained a new perspective on the literature	Accepted literature at face value	Some critique of literature	Offered new perspective
Methodology	Identified the main methodologies and research techniques used to investigate the topic, and their advantages and disadvantages	Research methods not discussed	Some discussion of research methods used to produce claims	Critiqued research methods and introduced new methods to address a problem
	Related ideas and theories in the field to research methodologies	Research methods not discussed	Some discussion of appropriateness of research methods to warrant claims	Critiqued appropriateness of research methods to warrant claims
Significance	Rationalized the practical significance of the research problem	Practical significance of research not discussed	Practical significance discussed	Critiqued practical significance of research
	Rationalized the scholarly significance of the research problem	Scholarly significance of research not discussed	Scholarly significance discussed	Critiqued scholarly significance of research
Rhetoric	Wrote with a coherent, clear structure that supported the review	Poorly conceptualized, haphazard	Some coherent structure	Well developed, coherent
	Followed APA guidelines	Multiple and significant APA errors	Multiple but minor APA errors	Minimal to no APA errors

Boote, D. N., & Beile, P. (2005). Scholars before researchers: on the centrality of the dissertation literature review in research preparation. *Educational Researcher*, 34(6), 3-15. <http://edr.sagepub.com/content/34/6/3>