

Qualifying Examination Guidelines

Overview

Students admitted into the HPPR program will work under the supervision of a Doctoral Advisor, to complete a program of dissertation research designed to develop professional skills required to establish a career as a public health scientist. Key components of the dissertation process include: selecting a doctoral qualifying examination committee, preparing for the doctoral qualifying examination, admission to doctoral candidacy, selecting a doctoral dissertation advisory committee, developing and defending a dissertation proposal, conducting the proposed research, preparing manuscripts to summarize and disseminate findings, and a final defense of the dissertation process. The dissertation process begins immediately upon admission to the doctoral training program.

The Doctoral Qualifying Examination is designed to develop a foundation for the preparation and defense of a dissertation proposal. The student is not expected to demonstrate comprehensive acquisition of all relevant knowledge and skills. Rather, responses should provide evidence that the student has developed an understanding of substantive and methodological issues relevant to a dissertation topic that is appropriate to the student's stage of professional development. Specifically, exam responses are expected to demonstrate knowledge of literature addressing key issues relevant to the general area of dissertation research, comprehension of research methods, results and implications presented in the literature; and insightful analysis addressing strengths and limits of studies relevant to the defined dissertation topic.

Students must have completed at least 21 hours of HPPR required core coursework before being eligible to begin their examination process. Students must complete 9 hours of Mentored Research before advancing to candidacy. (For example, full-time students may complete the examination process no sooner than the third semester (i.e. summer) of their second year of study, and must complete the examination process no later than the first semester (i.e. fall) of their third year of study to demonstrate academic progress.) Note: Students must demonstrate academic progress to continue in the program. If students do not demonstrate academic progress, they will be administratively dismissed from the program. (See policy/definition of academic progress linked here: <http://secure.uams.edu/cophstudent/student-handbook.aspx#academicprog>).

Preparing for the Qualifying Examination

The Doctoral Advisor will serve as Chair of the Qualifying Examination Committee. The Chair must be a doctorally prepared member of the UAMS College of Public Health Faculty with a primary appointment in the Department of Health Behavior and Health Education. The Chair and student will identify two additional faculty members to serve on the committee. The Chair and one additional committee member must have primary appointments in the College of Public Health.

Students must have completed 9 hours of Mentored Research before advancing to candidacy. As a component of Mentored Research, students will begin working with their Qualifying Examination Committee to clarify the general scope and initial focus of a dissertation topic. Students are encouraged to meet with their Chair on a weekly basis to prepare for the examination and must meet with the Chair on at least a monthly basis to demonstrate adequate academic progress. The Chair and members of the Committee will provide the student with guidance identifying literature relevant to the dissertation topic. Based on consultation with the Qualifying Exam Committee and independent review of relevant literature students should compile a bibliography that lists source materials to be utilized when preparing responses for the Qualifying Examination.

Qualifying examination Content and Format

Students will be asked to provide written responses to 4 questions. The four examination questions will be developed by the Committee with substantive input from the student. Questions will cover the domains: 1) a substantive content area addressing a health behavior, illness, or public health issue; 2) theoretical constructs

and/or conceptual models relevant to the selected substantive content area; 3) research designs and methods appropriate for the scientific study of identified substantive and theoretical issues; 4) ethical concerns regarding the etiology, management, or experimental study of the selected content area. Questions may also address the relevance of substantive and theoretical issues and the application of methods to community-based public health and factors contributing to disparities in the selected content area.

Suggested Meeting Structure:

The student’s literature review and bibliography are expected to evolve over the course of regular meetings with the Chair. These meetings will be structured to accomplish the following four goals:

- One: The student will demonstrate how literature included in the bibliography is relevant to the dissertation topic that is being clarified and defined in the ongoing meetings.
- Two: The student will develop the knowledge base and intellectual skills required to prepare written responses for the qualifying examination questions. Four intellectual skills particularly relevant to the qualifying exam that are defined in Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning Domains include: the ability to demonstrate knowledge of relevant literature; the ability to comprehend research methods, results and implications presented in the literature; the ability to apply principles and concepts identified in the literature to develop a dissertation topic; and the ability to analyze strengths and limits of studies reported in the literature as a foundation for proposing well defined research questions and methods required to address those questions. The student should become familiar with the Qualifying Exam Rubric operationalizing the skills defined in Bloom’s Taxonomy that will be used by the Qualifying Examination Committee to evaluate written responses for the exam
- Three: The Chair will provide ongoing mentorship to assure that the literature reviewed by the student and included bibliography adequately represents all six domains to be addressed in the Qualifying examination, appropriately identifies key issues in the general area of dissertation research, and establishes a foundation that will help the student develop and defend a dissertation proposal. The relative importance of each domain and the scope of literature included in the bibliography representing each domain will be determined by the Committee.
- Four: The Chair will provide ongoing mentorship fostering the development of intellectual skills required to prepare written responses to the qualifying examination questions that will demonstrate potential to develop and defend a dissertation proposal. The Chair should use the rubric operationalizing skills defined in Bloom’s Taxonomy to monitor and promote the development of intellectual skills that are expected to be reflected in written responses for the qualifying examination questions.

Preparing and Submitting Written Responses

The Doctoral Advisor will determine when the student has defined the general scope and initial focus for their dissertation topic in detail sufficient to allow the Qualifying Examination Committee to prepare four examination questions. The Advisor should be confident that the questions can be answered by the student based on source materials listed in the bibliography. Once this determination is made, students may designate the semester in which they plan to complete the qualifying examination by submitting a request to the Chair of the Qualifying Examination Committee and to the HPPR Director(s) of Training. Any changes to this request (i.e. student decides to delay the exam) must be communicated to the HPPR Director(s) of Training in writing no later than one week prior to when the exam was scheduled to occur.

Semester	Submit request to designate exam dates	Exam Period Begins Student Receives Questions	Exam Period Ends (Student Submits Questions)	Exam Committee Presents Recommendations.
Fall	September	October	1 st Friday of November	3 rd Friday of November
Spring	February	March	1 st Friday of April	3 rd Friday of April
Summer	May	June	1 st Friday of July	3 rd Friday of July

Students will have two weeks after receiving the Qualifying Examination questions to prepare and submit written responses. During this time period the student may not consult with anyone regarding the preparation of the responses.

Format for the Qualifying Examination:

- Responses should be double spaced with 0.5” margins and 12 point font).
- Arial, Times New Roman, and Calibri fonts are required.
- Type density, including characters and spaces, no more than 15 characters per inch.
- Written response for each question is limited to 5 pages.
- References are not included in the 5 page limit.
- Tables and figures should be imbedded within the text of the paper (10 point font minimum).

The written response for each question should cite source materials that appropriately acknowledge the literature on which the response was based. The student should use the Qualifying Examination Rubric to frame the content and structure of written responses. The process of developing the bibliography, defining the scope and focus of a dissertation topic to be addressed in the qualifying examination questions, and preparing the written responses to the qualifying examination questions should demonstrate potential to synthesize and evaluate literature addressed in the qualifying exam to develop and defend a dissertation proposal.

Reviewing written responses

The Qualifying Examination Committee will use the Qualifying Examination Scoring Rubric to record scores for written responses to each of the four qualifying exam questions. Criteria used to determine whether written responses demonstrate potential to develop and defend a dissertation proposal are defined on the scoring rubric. After review, the committee will provide the student with an overall average score along with noted strengths and areas for improvement. Students who score an average of 2 or greater on all three domains will pass the candidacy exam and be recommended for advancement to candidacy. Students who do not score an average of 2 or greater on all three domains, will fail the candidacy exam and may be recommended for administrative dismissal from the program.

Exam Retake and Appeal Process

Students who fail the candidacy exam can petition the HBHE faculty for a one-time exam retake. To petition for a one-time exam retake students must provide a petition letter that includes 1) a clear statement requesting the opportunity to retake the exam, 2) any extenuating circumstances that the student feels the faculty should take into consideration, 3) a proposed plan for addressing identified areas of weakness, and 4) a timeline for completing the retake exam. Letters should be provided to the HPPR Director (s) of Training. Please note that though the format will remain the same, the content of the retake exam questions may differ from the original exam at the committee’s discretion. Failure to pass the exam a second time will result in administrative dismissal from the program. A majority vote by the HBHE faculty is required in order to advance a student to doctoral candidacy or dismiss a student from the program.

Time sequence for Qualifying Examination components

- Doctoral Advisor / Chair of Qualifying Examination Committee assigned on admission
- Chair and Student initiate regular meetings and identify two additional committee members during first semester of study to define the scope and focus of a dissertation topic
- The Doctoral Advisor determines the student has defined the general scope and initial focus for their dissertation topic in detail sufficient for the Committee to prepare final examination questions

- Student designates the semester in which they plan to take the qualifying examination by submitting a request during the semester that immediately precedes the semester in which the examination will be taken
- The request deadlines allow the committee at least four weeks to prepare the final qualifying examination questions.
- Chair provides the student with the four final exam questions on the date designated in the request; at least 4 weeks before the faculty meeting at which written responses will be discussed
- After a 2 week writing period, student submits questions, written responses, bibliography; at least 2 weeks before the faculty meeting at which the responses will be discussed (1st Friday of the designated month)
- Committee reviews written responses, and presents strengths, limits, pass/fail recommendations, and dissertation development plans at a regularly scheduled faculty meeting (3rd Friday of the designated month)
- HBHE faculty discuss committee reviews and recommendations; and votes to advance the student to candidacy or dismiss the student from the program

Dissertation Development Plan

Students who are advanced to doctoral candidacy will work with their doctoral advisor to prepare a detailed dissertation development plan to be included in their formal degree plan no later than the end of the academic term immediately following their advancement to doctoral candidacy. Activities intended to develop a dissertation proposal may include: independent review and evaluation of literature addressing relevant content, theory or research methods; directed study with dissertation committee members and/or other relevant experts to achieve clearly defined goals; drafting/revising materials that develop and/or demonstrate the application of targeted cognitive skills to prepare specific components of the dissertation proposal (e.g. define a research question, develop an outline; justify methods for assessment, intervention, and/or data analysis, evaluate strengths and limitations of relevant research methods, establish a conceptual framework for the overall dissertation proposal and individual manuscripts). The plan should describe the purpose, content, and structure of each activity and describe how they will support the development of a dissertation proposal. The plan should include measurable goals for proposed activities that reflect performance criteria addressed by training activities and demonstrate tangible progress towards developing a dissertation proposal.