Qualifying Examination Policies - PhD in Epidemiology

Students successfully completing required coursework (other than electives) with a grade of “B” or greater in every course will be required to pass a written doctoral candidate (qualifying) examination demonstrating mastery of advanced content in epidemiology and the ability to integrate concepts and apply methods before progressing to dissertation work. Students must receive a passing grade on the examination in order to become a PhD candidate.

Student Eligibility to Take Qualifying Examination

Students who have successfully completed the required coursework (other than electives, Instructional Methods and Teaching Practicum, dissertation hours) with a grade of “B” or greater in every course will be eligible to take the qualifying examination. Typically, a full-time student could complete the examination after 2-3 years of taking PhD coursework. The qualifying examination is offered once per year in early September. A student who desires to take the qualifying examination must notify the PhD Program Director in writing (via email or other written communication) no later than May 1 of the year in which the student wishes to take the examination.

A student who has indicated an intention to take the qualifying exam who then decides not to take the exam or is otherwise unable to take the exam must discuss this with the PhD Program Director and come to agreement with the PhD Program Director about an alternative plan. Such arrangements should be finalized at least one week prior to the start of the examination week. Emergencies requiring a student to deviate from this policy must be communicated immediately to the PhD Program Director; if a student makes his/her request to miss all or a portion of the exam less than a week before the first day of the scheduled exam sessions, the Program Director may require supporting documentation. In general, students will not be permitted to complete a subset of the exam sessions and miss others, especially if the student’s absence from the exam sessions could have been predicted by the student in advance.

Students requiring accommodation due to disability in exam administration should refer to the COPH Policy Statement on Students with Disabilities, available in the COPH Course Catalog and on the COPH website. Accommodation requests must be made to the PhD Program Director at least two weeks prior to the administration of the examination.

Format for the Examination

The examination will consist of both an in-class and a take-home portion. Both sections will assess student knowledge and ability to apply concepts in five areas:

- Bias, confounding, and effect modification
- Study design
- Measurement of exposures, outcomes, covariates, and risk factors
• Study implementation
• Data management and analysis

The exam will be comprised of two components – an in-class exam and a take-home exam.

**In-class Exam**
The in-class exam will occur on the Thursday following Labor Day each year. The exam will begin at 8:00 AM and conclude at 5:00 PM, with one hour for lunch. Prior to the exam, the faculty will select two articles from the peer-reviewed literature and identify questions for each article that require the student to critique the article in the areas listed above. Students will be given the articles on the Friday before the exam so that they have time to read and consider the articles prior to the day of the examination. **On the day of the exam, students will randomly select an exam number at 7:45am, which will be recorded by the Program Coordinator. The exam number will be used instead of the student’s name on the exam so that grading can be done blindly.** Also on the day of the exam, students will be provided with the specific questions to be answered for each article (one article in the morning and the second article in the afternoon). Students will be allowed to use a computer to complete their answers. At the end of each segment of the day, students will save their responses onto a thumb drive provided by the program and will submit that thumb drive to the exam’s proctor. The proctor will print two copies of the student’s answers; the student will keep one copy and the program will receive one copy.

**Take-Home Exam**
At the end of the in-class exam, the student will be given 4 research questions devised by the faculty. The student will select one question and develop a research proposal to address that research question, **using the National Institutes of Health’s R03/R21 format.** The completed proposal will be due by 5:00 pm in one week, i.e., on the Thursday following the in-class exam day. Students will submit their proposal to the PhD program director by email. No time extensions will be given. The program director will verify by return email that he/she has received the protocol and successfully accessed the files.

**Examination Grading**

The examination will be graded by faculty in the Department of Epidemiology, with passage determined as follows:

- Grade of 80% or better – unqualified pass
- Grade of 70-80% – oral examination required
- Grade of 69% or below – fail

A student who achieves a grade of 80% or better will be considered to have successfully passed the qualifying examination. A student who receives a grade of 70-80% on the examination will
be required to complete an oral examination for the section(s) they did not pass. If the student is determined by the faculty to have passed the oral examination, he/she will be considered to have passed the qualifying examination. If the student does not pass the oral examination, he/she will be considered to have failed the qualifying examination.

A student who earns a grade of 69% or below will be considered to have failed the qualifying examination. A student who fails the examination will be offered one opportunity to retake the qualifying examination (the following year). If the student passes the examination (with or without an oral examination) on the second administration, he/she will then be considered to have successfully passed the qualifying examination. If the student does not pass the examination on the second administration, he/she will be administratively withdrawn from the program.

The author of each question will be asked to provide a rubric for their question. All primary faculty, except for the chair, will be asked to grade every question on the qualifying exam. If there are major discrepancies in the grade (e.g. a >20% difference in the grades) for a question (or questions), the chair will be asked to grade that question (those questions).

**Grading Time Line**

The PhD Advisory Committee will, as part of their October meeting agenda, review each student’s performance on both sections of the written qualifying examination and determine the outcome for each student. The PhD Program Director will send a letter via email (hard copy via certified U.S. Mail) to each student individually by October 31 after the exam, informing him or her of the outcome of the PhD Advisory Committee’s deliberation. If the student requires remediation (e.g. via oral examination) deadlines and additional details of the remediation requirements will be included in the letter.

Oral examinations that may be required will be completed no later than November 30 after the exam. The PhD Advisory Committee will, as part of their December meeting agenda, review each student’s performance on all oral examination sessions and determine the outcome for each affected student. The PhD Program Director will send a letter via email (hard copy via certified U.S. Mail) to each student who was required to complete an oral examination by January 5 after the oral exam session(s), informing him or her of the outcome of the PhD Advisory Committee’s deliberation.

**Implications of Completion of Qualifying Examination**

Once the qualifying examination is successfully completed, the student may continue in the program, registering for elective and dissertation credit hours as approved by the student’s advisor and dissertation chair. A student who has not completed the qualifying examination or
remediation requirements as described above may not register for dissertation credit hours (but may register for elective credit hours). Exceptions to this policy may be made only by a vote of the PhD Advisory Committee.
Schedule for the Qualifying Exam

April: Faculty write their qualifying exam questions

May/June:

Due May 6: Faculty submit their exam questions and the corresponding rubric to Lafischbach@uams.edu.

During May /June faculty meetings: Faculty discuss the exam questions and select questions.

July/August: During July/August faculty meetings: Faculty finalize the wording for that year’s qualifying exam.

September:

Exam Administered: 1st Thursday after Labor Day – 2nd Thursday after Labor Day (e.g. Sept 5 – 12, 2019).

Exam Grading: All faculty will receive a copy of the students’ responses to all questions and will begin grading by the Monday following the end of the examination.

October:

Due October 1: Faculty will submit their graded exams to the Program Director by October 1.

Doctoral Committee Meeting (the first Thursday after October 1): The doctoral committee will review the grades to determine the outcome of the examination for each student.

The chair will review the summary of the grades, and regrade any questions, as needed.

October 31: Students will be notified of their outcome.

November:

Before November 30: Oral examinations

December:

Doctoral Committee Meeting: The doctoral committee will review the grades to determine the outcome of the oral examination for each student.

January:

January 5: Students taking the oral examination will be notified of their results.
Questions for the faculty regarding the qualifying exam:

1) How will the oral examinations for the in-class portion be handled?
2) Are there any additional edits that needed before the revised policy is approved?