The Comprehensive Examinations Quick Guide

Note: Students working under a doctoral program protocol in effect prior to fall semester 2016 should consult with their department chair about proper procedures.

The comprehensive examinations mark a significant milestone in the doctoral program, a bridge from coursework into the dissertation. Successful exams will serve a three-fold purpose with reference to scholarly credentials, strategic planning, and refining the student's own academic convictions.

First, the exams demonstrate to the members of the committee the student’s breadth and depth of knowledge in the chosen field through substantive research and the ability to develop critically constructive arguments. In this sense, the exams serve a credentialing purpose, a way to certify a level of expertise in a given field of study. This can also be useful on the job market as the exam topics can indicate areas of specialization for both teaching and research.

Second, students should consider for strategic purposes the latest trends in their chosen fields and where future research and publishing needs might appear to which they can contribute. In devising specific topics and constructing bibliographies for the exams, students may want to consider questions like these: How do you want to be known in the wider academy? Do you picture yourself, for example, primarily as philosophical or constructive theologian? As a textual critic or social historian? As religious practitioner or religious educator? Pedagogical issues should also be considered: What will prepare you best for teaching broad subjects (e.g., an introduction to religion course or a survey of Christian history) as well as demonstrate areas of specialization in your teaching portfolio? Committee member selection is also important for these strategic purposes as well as for the content of the exams.

The best exams will also reflect the student’s own passionate convictions. What matters to you in doing this scholarly work and why? Finding where your own passion intersects with the wider needs of the academy and for positioning your teaching and research in the marketplace will also generate the energy and determination needed to complete this phase of the program.

Students and faculty advisors should consider this three-fold purpose in plotting the two years of coursework, mapping the proposal, and selecting committee members.

Coursework and Planning

Students should meet with their advisors early in the program to discuss particular areas of interest and strategize about coursework. While not every course taken will be reflected in the comprehensive exams, the courses should prepare the student to demonstrate proficiency in both primary and secondary areas of concentration, show competence in an appropriate university discipline, and contribute to the ongoing refinement of the student’s particular research goals, which will come to fruition in the dissertation.

It is not unreasonable and often beneficial to make a two-year plan for coursework during the first semester of the program. This plan may and often does change – which is
one of the purposes of the coursework – but the plan itself can start the process toward developing a comprehensive exam proposal.

**Initial Mapping**

Ideally, toward the end of the second year of coursework, students should start outlining particular topics of interest in both the primary and second areas of concentrations and prepare a preliminary bibliography for these. Consider how the format for each exam (whether a timed exercise, a paper, or the development of a course) matches the credentialing and strategic purposes noted above.

The student and exam coordinator (which might still be but is not necessarily the student’s initial advisor in the program) meet to refine the proposal, identify potential committee members, and discern where additional feedback for particular areas is needed (such as, for example, additions to the bibliographies from one or more of the committee members).

**Committee Selection and Finalizing the Proposal**

Based on the conversation with the Coordinator, the student prepares the penultimate version of the proposal and solicits commitments from the other committee members to serve on the committee as well as feedback on the proposal.

The student meets with the coordinator to discuss any additional feedback from the committee and review the penultimate draft of the proposal.

**Comprehensive Exam Proposal Approval Process**

There are both hardcopy and digital steps in the process toward formal approval of the comprehensive exam proposal. On the appropriate hardcopy form, the student should obtain these signatures:

- Academic Secretary, verifying research language certification.
- GTU Dean, approving composition of the committee.
- Committee Members, approving proposal.
- Department Chair, approving the committee and the proposal.

The student returns the completed form to the Academic Secretary. In addition, the student should upload the completed proposal to the appropriate assignment link on Taskstream and the Coordinator should be indicated as the “evaluator.” The coordinator completes the evaluation form for the proposal and returns it to the student, who submits this evaluation form via email to the academic secretary.

**After the Oral Exam**

At the end of the oral exam, results are indicated on the appropriate form, signatures obtained, and the form is submitted to the Academic Secretary. Students should upload completed exam materials to the appropriate assignment link on Taskstream and the Coordinator is selected as the “evaluator.” The Coordinator should make comments on the exams that indicate the major points of affirmation and notes for improvement as indicated during the oral defense. The Coordinator completes the corresponding evaluation form for the defense and returns the form to the student through Taskstream. The Student submits this form to the Academic Secretary via email.