



Higher Education &

Ph.D. | **HESAL**

Student Affairs Leadership

Comprehensive Exam

Policies and Procedures

PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION

Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership doctoral students are required to successfully complete written and oral comprehensive examinations before developing a dissertation proposal and conducting a research study. The purpose of the comprehensive examination is to stimulate reflection on students' previous studies and experiences, while pushing them to look ahead to a possible area for conducting their research. In this sense, the comprehensive examination process is meant to be a "bridge" between the concepts, theories, and practices introduced in the program and a future researchable topic area.

To achieve this purpose, there are several guiding principles of the examinations:

- The exam is intended to allow students to apply relevant theories, concepts, and practices experienced during their doctoral program;
- The exam is intended to assist students in thinking about the most significant trends and problems facing leaders of higher education and student affairs organizations;
- The exam is intended to promote students' creative thinking about future research studies; and
- Therefore, the exam is not a dissertation research proposal, but is intended to allow students to demonstrate a comprehensive and broad-based view of higher education and student affairs leadership practice and research.

To assist students in preparing for and thinking through the trends, issues, and problems they will explore in the comprehensive exam, the purpose, design, and expectations of the exam are provided to students early in their doctoral program. It is expected, therefore, that students will be better able to apply concepts from their courses, share ideas and insights with their peers, and clarify questions and issues with their Program Advisor and faculty throughout their program of studies.

Exam Format

The Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination, as required by the Graduate School, consists of two portions, a written exam and an oral exam. The **written examination** is comprised of five sections (*A detailed, recommended format for the exam begins on page six of this document*):

1. Environmental Scan—A Macro Perspective
1. Literature Review and Problem Identification
1. Leadership Organizational and Developmental Implications
1. An Agenda for Research
1. Research Paradigm, Epistemology, and Methodology

The **oral portion of the exam** is scheduled upon successful completion of the written exam. The major purposes of the oral exam are threefold:

1. to clarify and expand on the written comprehensive examination;
1. to demonstrate a workable knowledge and ability to interpret and critique salient ideas, concepts, and theories pertinent to higher education and student affairs leadership; and
1. to ascertain a student's readiness to carry out the research tasks associated with the completion of the doctoral program.

SCHEDULING OF THE EXAMINATION

Both the written and oral portions of the exam have specific scheduling timelines dictated by the HESAL program and the Graduate School which must be followed for successful completion of the examination. While faculty provide guidance and assistance, the student is ultimately responsible for following through with the necessary protocol.

Scheduling and Eligibility for the Written Portion of the Exam

Once the student has fulfilled all the eligibility requirements to take the exam, the **written exam** is scheduled by the student's Ph.D. Program Advisor and may be taken at any time that is agreed upon by the student, Program Advisor, and Program Committee. The exam is completed in a take-home format and decisions about beginning and ending dates are determined between the student and Program Committee, with a maximum of six weeks allowed.

In order to take the **written comprehensive examination**, a student must:

1. have been granted regular admission to the program;
1. have filed an approved plan of study;
3. have completed at least 36 hours (including HESA 760, 761, 780, 781, and 782), of work applicable toward the degree, and at least 24 hours on the UNC campus;
4. have maintained a grade average of at least 3.0 in his/her degree program;
5. have received a progress letter after a minimum of 10 hours (which must include Doctoral Core Seminar One);

6. have received a second satisfactory progress letter from the Program after the completion of HESA 782;
7. have had an oral comprehensive examination committee appointed; and
8. have obtained written approval from the program advisor.

A student must obtain and complete a form titled "Permit to Take Written Comprehensive Examination" from the HESAL program office at least **two weeks before the exam is scheduled to begin**. In addition to the Permit form, the cover sheet, on which the beginning and ending dates are identified, must be enclosed. Program Advisor approval must be obtained prior to submission of the forms to the HESAL program office.

Scheduling and Eligibility for the Oral Portion of the Exam

In order to take the **oral examination** the student must have successfully passed the written portion of the exam. The program advisor will report the results to the Graduate School on the bottom portion of the Permit to Take Written Comprehensive Examination. **The results of the written comprehensive examination must be on file in the Graduate School two weeks prior to the scheduling of the oral examination.** The Program Advisor will direct the student to contact the Committee to arrange the date, time, and place of the oral exam. After arrangements have been made, the Program Advisor will send the Graduate School a completed "Request to Schedule Doctoral Examination" form no later than two weeks before the exam. The Graduate School will approve and publicize the date, time, and place of the exam in University-wide announcements. All members of the faculty are invited to attend, and other graduate students may attend, with permission of the Program Advisor.

EVALUATION OF THE EXAM

Comprehensive Examination Committee

Written Examination

The written examination is evaluated by the student's Program Committee, which consists of the Program Advisor, one other faculty member from the HESAL program, and one other member from the UNC Graduate Faculty. The third member may be from any UNC program subject to approval by the Program Advisor; a scholar from another institution may be appointed to that role with special authorization of the Graduate Dean.

Oral Examination

Each student is assigned a Comprehensive Examination Committee composed of members of the student's Ph.D. Program Committee and a representative of the Graduate Faculty who is chosen in consultation with the Program Advisor and appointed by the Graduate Dean. The representative of the Graduate Faculty must be from a program other than HESAL. This committee, chaired by the chair of the Program Committee, is responsible for conducting the oral comprehensive examination.

Criteria on Which the Examinations are Evaluated

Criteria on which the Ph.D. Comprehensive Examinations are evaluated include the following: (*A synopsis of these criteria can be found on page eight*). The student will demonstrate:

1. A workable knowledge of salient ideas, concepts, theories, and scholars in the field.
2. The ability to interpret and critique these ideas, concepts, and theories at an advanced intellectual level.
3. The ability to apply these ideas, concepts, and theories to higher education and student affairs research and practice.
4. Evidence that the Ph.D. Program has made a difference in the student's scholarly approach to higher education and student affairs research and practice.
5. Readiness to move ahead independently in conducting a dissertation study.

More specifically, the responses to the **written examination** will be judged by the following criteria:

1. Rationale and clarity of addressing a *significant* higher education and student affairs leadership, student development, organizational, and/or policy issue;
2. Clarity and continuity of thinking grounded in concepts established in the literature;
3. Articulation of a rational case related to relevant factors;
4. Clearly addressing all parts and parameters of each component of the exam outlined in this document;
5. The written examination must be well organized, concisely, and precisely written, and must conform to the guidelines of the American Psychological Association Publications Manual, 5th edition. The paper may not exceed 50 pages, exclusive of references and attached figures.

Assessment and Evaluation of the Written Examination

The **written examination** will be read and evaluated by all members of the student's Program Committee. The following assessment system will be used:

Honors Pass—The student has responded to all parts of the examination in an outstanding manner.

Pass—The student has responded to all parts of the examination in an acceptable manner.

Fail: Retake Permitted—The student has failed to respond in an acceptable manner to one or more of the parts asked and this is the first time the exam has been taken. The exam cannot be retaken until the next semester.

Fail—The student has failed to respond in an acceptable manner to one or more of the parts asked, no retake is permitted, and the student's program is terminated.

All but one of the Program Committee members must agree to a grade of Pass or Honors Pass for a student to successfully complete this exam. The chairperson of the committee will file the results with the HESAL Program Office and forward the results of the examination to the Graduate School.

Written Examination Feedback System

Members of the student's committee shall have two weeks, exclusive of University breaks and the summer term, to read the examination and report their evaluation to the Program Chair. Upon receipt of Committee evaluations the Program Chair shall consult with the Committee if necessary to finalize the decision, and shall then communicate the decision to the student. When the results of the written comprehensive examinations have been reported, students should meet with the chair of their committee (who normally is the Program Advisor) for the purposes of:

1. reviewing the feedback given on these exams;
2. preparing for the oral comprehensive examination; and/or
3. if the student has not passed the written portion of the exam and is allowed a re-take, assisting in preparing for re-taking the written portion. The committee chair may request that the student meet with other committee members as needed.

Written Examination Retake

Students who fail the **written comprehensive exam** may, at the discretion of their committee, be allowed **one** retake of the exam. This retake will be scheduled by the chairperson of the Program Committee. A second permit, along with a cover sheet indicating dates of the exam, must be filed by the student at least two weeks in advance of the retake. If a student fails the retake examination, his/her degree program will be terminated.

Assessment and Evaluation of the Oral Examination

In addition to the five general criteria listed above for the written examination, the responses to the **oral examination** will be judged by the following criteria:

1. The responses must be well organized.
2. The responses must be clearly and precisely presented.
3. The responses must address all aspects of the question.
4. The responses must demonstrate a depth and breadth of content knowledge related to the question being asked.
5. The responses must be well grounded in appropriate literature.

The performance on the **oral examination** will be judged by the student's Comprehensive Examination Committee. The following evaluation system will be used:

Honors Pass—The student has responded to all questions on the examination in an outstanding manner.

Pass—The student has responded to all questions in an acceptable manner.

Will Pass if Meet Stated Conditions—Specific conditions must be met for the student to pass.

Unsatisfactory—A retake of the oral examination is permitted. The retake must be scheduled during a subsequent semester.

Fail—No retake is permitted, and student's program is terminated.

All but one of the Comprehensive Examination Committee members must agree to an evaluation of Pass or Honors Pass or that stated conditions have been met for a student to successfully complete this exam. The chairperson of the committee will file the results with the HESAL Program Office and forward the results of the examination to the Graduate School on the "Report of the Oral Comprehensive Examination" form. If the evaluation is "Will Pass if Meets Stated Conditions," the specific conditions required for an evaluation of "Pass" will be reported to the Graduate School on this form.

Oral Examination Feedback System

The oral exam is scheduled for two hours. At the conclusion of the exam the student and all guests are excused, and the Committee assesses the student's performance on the exam. When the Committee has reached a decision, the student is invited to meet, at the discretion of the committee, with the entire committee or with the Program Advisor to be informed of the outcome and to receive feedback. Typically the student will meet again with the program advisor for further discussion of feedback and to discuss, as necessary, any conditions set by the Committee for the student to pass the exam.

Oral Examination Retake

Students who receive an evaluation of unsatisfactory or who do not satisfactorily meet the conditions of a "conditional pass" may be allowed one retake of this exam. The retake examination will be scheduled by the Program Advisor in accordance with Graduate School timelines.

Comprehensive Examination

RECOMMENDED FORMAT

The purposes of this written comprehensive examination are for you to demonstrate a broad knowledge of historical trends and current issues facing educators *in higher education and student affairs*, to examine *leadership, organizational, developmental and other* theories and concepts, and to identify a research method appropriate for understanding a *higher education and student affairs leadership problem*, and propose an *agenda for research, possibly leading to the dissertation*. *Criteria for judging the exam are listed below the recommended format.*

Part I. Environment Scan – A Macro Perspective

Describe one or more significant higher education and student affairs leadership, organizational, developmental, policy and/or other trend(s) at a global, national, regional, and/or state level. Discuss these trends in terms of salient indicators from the past, occurring presently, and anticipated in the future. Provide a transition that connects the trends you identified to the focus of your literature review.

NOTE: This macro view provides a broad perspective on trends rather than a narrow focus on a problem that you explore later in this examination.

Part II. Literature Review / Discourse and Problem Identification

Provide a review of the literature or discourse that frames a clearly identified set of problems or challenges related to the trends noted in your environmental scan. In your review, include significant theories and concepts from your doctoral studies, as well as findings of previous research related to these problems, challenges, theories and concepts. At the conclusion of your analysis:

- Identify a problem or challenge you believe to be important for consideration by higher education and student affairs leaders today, and
- Provide a rationale as to why this is a significant problem or challenge.

Part III. Leadership, Organizational, and Developmental Implications

Based on the literature review and problem identification in Part II, address the following:

- Identify individuals and/or groups that want to solve the problem or confront the challenge and discuss why they are interested in its resolution; (include issues of values and beliefs, e.g., equity, justice, individual and collective well-being)

- Discuss the potential barriers faced by higher education and student affairs leaders as they work with those interested in resolving the problem; (include adequacy, inadequacy, and/or possible bias of relevant information about the problem) and
- Prepare a set of recommendations for leaders that take into consideration the barriers discussed above and that are aimed at resolving the problem, and provide a rationale that supports these recommendations.

NOTE: These recommendations should: be consistent with the link between the macro perspective and the significant problem you identified; link, as appropriate to relevant course knowledge and content; and address relevant factors (e.g., past, present, and future political, cultural, social, economic, technological, legal) that could have positive and negative effects on the possibility of successfully achieving the desired goals. Most of these factors likely have some impact on your issue.

Part IV. Proposed Agenda for Research

Propose a research agenda, including the following:

- Identify and discuss five or six different issues worth empirically investigating that might reasonably contribute to a better understanding of the problem or challenge; and
- Select one research issue from above and identify three to five research questions and/or hypotheses grounded in different conceptual frameworks, theories, and/or prior research explored in Part II. Make sure you demonstrate your versatile ability to look at an array of paradigms and research methods and explain how they can be used differently depending on what you want to know or how you frame the question.

Part V. Research Paradigm, Epistemology, and Methodology

Using one of the identified research questions, describe and defend the choice of a research paradigm, ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods that can be useful to study this question. (Make sure they are consistent). In describing the study, include the proposed design, setting, population and sample as appropriate, procedures and data analysis consistent with the research paradigm chosen, and criteria for rigor (e.g., reliability and validity, or trustworthiness and authenticity, as appropriate to the methodology).

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership

Comprehensive Examination

SYNOPSIS OF CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING QUALITY

The general criteria for assessing a student's performance on the HESAL Ph.D. Comprehensive Exam (written and oral) are as follows:

1. A workable knowledge of salient ideas, concepts, theories, and scholars in the field.
2. The ability to interpret and critique these ideas, concepts, and theories at an advanced intellectual level.
3. The ability to apply these ideas, concepts, and theories to higher education and student affairs research and practice.
4. Evidence that the Ph.D. Program has made a difference in the student's scholarly approach to higher education and student affairs research and practice.
5. Readiness to move ahead independently in conducting a dissertation study.

More specifically, the response to the written examination is judged on the following criteria:

1. Rationale and clarity of addressing a *significant* higher education and student affairs leadership, student development, organizational, and/or policy issue;
2. Clarity and continuity of thinking grounded in concepts established in the literature;
3. Articulation of a rational case related to relevant factors;
4. Clearly addressing all parts and parameters of each component of the exam outlined in this document;
5. The written examination must be well organized, concisely, and precisely written, and must conform to the guidelines of the American Psychological Association Publications Manual, 5th edition. The paper may not exceed 50 pages, exclusive of references and attached figures.

In addition, the oral examination is evaluated on the following criteria:

1. The responses must be well organized.
2. The responses must be clearly and precisely presented.
3. The responses must address all aspects of the question.
4. The responses must demonstrate a depth and breadth of content knowledge related to the question being asked.
5. The responses must be well grounded in appropriate literature.