

HESAL PH.D. COMPREHENSIVE WRITTEN AND ORAL EXAMS POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership doctoral students are required to successfully complete comprehensive examinations before developing a dissertation proposal and conducting a research study. The examination process consists of written and oral components.

PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION

The purpose of the comprehensive examination process is for students to show their ability to think as an independent scholar/practitioner.

Students demonstrate their expertise by:

- 1) synthesizing theory, research, and practice on a selected topic;
- 2) producing a concisely written, coherent scholarly paper; and
- 3) presenting the ideas developed in the exam to their doctoral committee.

To successfully complete the comprehensive exam, students must reflect on learning that occurred in the content, research methods, and doctoral core courses in the HESAL PhD program. Comprehensive exams are not a dissertation research proposal, which is a separate component of the doctoral program.

The **written portion** of the examination requires:

- Identifying a topic that touches on a broad range of higher education and student affairs issues, trends, or problems;
- Demonstrating a comprehensive and broad-based view of higher education and student affairs leadership practice and research;
- Applying relevant theories, concepts, and practices to the selected topic;
- Thinking creatively about future research studies;
- Connecting to the broader social science field and social conditions; and
- Self-reflecting on researcher positionality.

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. Clarifying and expanding on the written comprehensive examination;
2. Demonstrating a workable knowledge and ability to interpret and critique salient ideas, concepts, and theories pertinent to higher education and student affairs leadership; and
3. Providing committee members the opportunity to ascertain a student's readiness to carry out the research tasks associated with the completion of the doctoral program.

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

1. Rationale and clarity of addressing a *significant* higher education and student affairs leadership topic or problem that demonstrates a workable knowledge of salient ideas, concepts, theories, and scholarly research in the field.
2. The ability to interpret and critique ideas, concepts, and theories at an intellectual level commensurate with doctoral education.
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. Clearly addressing all parts and parameters of each component of the exam outlined in the document; and
6. Readiness to move ahead independently in conducting a dissertation study.

The HESAL faculty provide this document to students early in their doctoral program to assist them in identifying possible trends, issues, and problems that can be explored in the comprehensive exam. It is expected that students will consider multiple topics and ideas for the comprehensive exam with peers and the faculty throughout their program. The final topic selection is made in consultation with student's Research Advisor/Chair.

STEPS IN THE EXAMINATION PROCESS AND SCHEDULING

Doctoral Committee Formation

Students must form a Doctoral Committee prior to beginning the examination process. The necessary forms for collecting members' signatures are available on the Graduate School's website. Once formed, committee members traditionally continue throughout the proposal and dissertation phases of the program. The Doctoral Committee usually consists of 4 members:

- The Research Advisor/Chair. A student's first step when forming a committee is to ask one of the HESAL faculty members of their willingness to serve as Research Advisor/Chair. All other potential committee members should only be approached after consulting with the Research Advisor/Chair. After agreeing to serve as a student's Research Advisor/Chair, the faculty member traditionally becomes the program advisor. The chair must have Doctoral Research Endorsement (DRE) from the UNC Graduate School.
- Another HESAL faculty member, selected in consultation with the Research Advisor/Chair. This individual must have DRE or Graduate Faculty (GF) status.
- A faculty member with DRE or GF status from any UNC program, selected in consultation with the Research Advisor/Chair. Individuals are often selected for content or methods expertise. A scholar from another institution may be appointed to

serve as the third member of the committee upon receiving Graduate Faculty Equivalency (GFE).

- A faculty representative from outside the HESAL program. This individual helps ensure the examination process follows general protocols and the student is treated fairly throughout the process.

Scheduling and Eligibility for the Written Portion of the Exam

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 the Research Advisor/Chair provides guidance and assistance, the student is ultimately responsible for following through with the necessary protocol.

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

1. Been granted regular admission to the program;
2. Filed an approved plan of study;
3. Completed at least 36 hours (including HESA 761, 781, and 782), of work applicable toward the degree, and at least 24 hours on the UNC or Lowry campus;
Maintained a grade average of at least 3.0 in the program;
4. Received a first and second satisfactory progress letter;
5. Had a doctoral committee appointed;
6. Discussed the comprehensive exam topic with their Research Advisor/Chair; and
7. Research Advisor/Chair approval of a topic and a start date must be obtained prior to submission of the forms to the HESAL program office.

Once students have fulfilled all the eligibility requirements to take the exam, the **written exam** is scheduled by the student in consultation with the Research Advisor/Chair. Students must complete the “Permit to Take Written Comprehensive Examination” form available online 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 completed. Decisions about beginning and ending dates are determined between students and their Research Advisor/Chair, in consultation with the Doctoral Committee.

The Research Advisor/Chair reports the results to the student and the Graduate School on the bottom portion of the Permit to Take Written Comprehensive Examination.

Scheduling and Eligibility for the Oral Portion of the Exam

Students must successfully pass the written portion of the exam prior to scheduling the oral 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 Research Advisor/Chair directs students to contact their Committee to arrange the date, time, and place of the oral exam. Students are responsible for the scheduling details. The oral exam is scheduled for two hours. After arrangements have been made, the Research Advisor/Chair 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 faculty members and fellow graduate students may attend. Time permitting, attending faculty members may ask questions.

COMPREHENSIVE WRITTEN EXAMINATION RECOMMENDED FORMAT

The written exam is completed in a take-home format and students have a maximum of six weeks to submit their paper. The written examination must be well organized, concise, and conform to American Psychological Association Publications Manual, 6th edition guidelines. Page numbers, running heads, proper use of headings, and appropriate citations are required. The written exam may not exceed **50 pages**, exclusive of references, title page, and attached figures.

The **written examination** consists of five congruent sections:

Part I. Identification of the topic or problem.

Clearly identify the topic or problem you will consider in your written examination. Discussion of the scope, relevance, and significance within higher education and student affairs must be included. Situate the topic or problem's significance within HESAL and contextualize it within broader trends or concerns.

Part II. An integrative literature review/discourse analysis

Review the appropriate HESAL literature or discourse by framing the identified topic or problem related to trends or issues, in the past, occurring presently, and anticipated in the future. Include related theories, concepts, and findings from research related to these problems, challenges, theories and concepts. At the conclusion of the analysis, the information presented should be connected to HESAL research and practice.

Part III. Recommendations and implications for practice and research

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

- Identify the stakeholders interested in the topic or problem. Discuss their interests in the topic or problem and, where appropriate, connect these interests to issues of equity, social justice, inclusion, and individual and collective well-being.
- Highlight the implications for stakeholders.
- Offer 3-5 recommendations based on the literature review themes or findings for improving HESAL research and practice.

Part IV. Agendas for research including research paradigm, epistemology, ontology, and methodology

- Identify and discuss **three research questions** worth empirically investigating based on the literature review. The answers to the questions might reasonably contribute to a better understanding of the topic or problem.

- Propose a research agenda **for each of the three questions**. Each research agenda must use a different paradigm, epistemology/ontological theoretical perspective, methodology, and data collection methods. Include possible settings, populations, and sample methods as appropriate, and criteria for rigor (e.g., reliability and validity, or trustworthiness and authenticity, as appropriate to the methodology).
- Explain why researchers might identify with and use each paradigm, epistemology, methodology and method.

Part V. A reflective positionality statement

Provide an overview of your preferred researcher positionality. Regardless of your epistemological beliefs about research, the positionality statement should identify preferred philosophical presuppositions and explain how this would affect your approach to conducting research on the identified topic or problem.

Assessment and Evaluation of the Written Examination

The **written examination** is read by all members of students' Doctoral Committee who evaluate the quality of the work. Members of the doctoral committee have two weeks, exclusive of University breaks and the summer term, to read the examination and report their evaluation to the Research Advisor/Chair. Committee members may consult with the Research Advisor/Chair if necessary to finalize their decision. Once the committee's evaluations are submitted the Research Advisor/Chair will communicate the decision to the student. The student should meet with their Research Advisor/Chair to review general feedback and begin preparing for the oral comprehensive examination.

Committee members are encouraged, but not required, to provide written feedback about the written exam to the student. The Research Advisor/Chair may request students meet with other committee members as needed.

The following evaluation results are possible for the written exam:

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

Fail--- The student has failed to respond in an acceptable manner to one or more of the required sections. Students are allowed one attempt at retaking the written comprehensive exam. The exam cannot be retaken in the same semester as the first attempt.

All but one of the Committee members must agree to a grade of *Pass* for a student to successfully complete the exam. The Research Advisor/Chair 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 Retake

Students who received a *Fail* on the written comprehensive exam are allowed one additional attempt. This will be scheduled in consultation with the Research Advisor/Chair of their Doctoral 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. The programs of students failing the retake examination are immediately terminated.

FORMAT, ASSESSMENT, AND EVALUATION OF THE ORAL EXAMINATION

The format for oral comprehensive exams includes an overview presentation of the written examination and addressing any specific concerns about it raised by committee members. The presentation is traditionally 15-30 minutes in length and is followed by questions and discussion with the committee.

In addition to the general criteria listed above, the responses to the ***oral examination*** will be evaluated by the following criteria:

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

Performance on the ***oral examination*** will be judged by the student's entire Doctoral Committee using the following evaluation system:

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

Fail – Students are allowed one attempt at retaking the oral comprehensive exam. The exam cannot be retaken in the same semester as the first attempt.

All but one of the Doctoral Committee members must agree to an evaluation of *Pass* for a student to successfully complete the exam. The Research Advisor/Chair 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.

Oral Examination Feedback System

At the conclusion of the exam, the committee assesses the student’s performance. When the committee has reached a decision, the student is informed of the results by the Research Advisor/Chair. Typically, students will meet again with their Research Advisor/Chair for further discussion of feedback.

Oral Examination Retake

Students who do not pass oral exams may be allowed one retake in a subsequent semester. The retake examination will be scheduled by the Research Advisor/Chair in accordance with Graduate School timelines.