Ph.D. Area Exam Papers

The CCC program requires that students complete two "Area Exam Papers" during their third year (5th and 6th semesters). Students will demonstrate their command of two areas of specialization across the fields of sociology, social work, and urban studies, and their preparation to undertake dissertation research. Each exam paper will be no longer than 16,000 words (about 50 pages) in length, excluding the bibliography and cover page. Each paper will be a broad assessment of a recognized area, starting with a conceptual mapping of the area that includes its foundational literature, theories, and relevant work.

Purpose and Goals

The purpose of each area exam paper is to demonstrate a student's ability to develop a command of the literature in particular areas and subareas and synthesize this knowledge into a coherent framework. That is, students are required to demonstrate considerable knowledge about the evolution and growth of ideas in the area as well as the issues that continue to engage scholars. Typically, coursework is a valuable starting point for exam paper preparation, but students will need to go beyond formal coursework to independently master the two areas. The composition of each student's area exam committee must reflect the student's “area” choices.

The area exam committees will evaluate the papers on their success in meeting the following four objectives. First, the exam papers should demonstrate that the student is familiar with the literature in the selected area of specialization and demonstrate both breadth and depth of scholarly knowledge. It is essential that the student cite and summarize the most influential publications in the field (both classic and recent publications). The student must be able to demonstrate and explain key ideas and apply key concepts.

Second, the exam papers must demonstrate that the student has not only read but can integrate the literature and identify the big questions that push the area forward. What are the most important conceptual issues? What are the new theoretical perspectives? What new lines of empirical research are most promising? Why? Students should be able to highlight the leading debates of their field throughout the entire exam paper, and explain why particular theoretical issues or empirical topics are on the cutting edge. In short, the exam paper must go beyond mere summary to offer integration and synthesis and essentially join the forefront of major debates in the field(s), identify gaps in the scholarly literature, and be able to engage with cutting edge questions and issues.

Third, the area exam paper must not only catalogue and rank the literature in terms of importance, centrality, and research generated, but also give voice to the writer. The student must be able to demonstrate that s/he has the ability to critically assess the field. They must

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also be able to distinguish their own views and evaluations from the ideas and criticisms of other scholars (properly cite sources of criticism).

Fourth, the exams should demonstrate the author's ability to write well and be able to express complex and challenging ideas and concepts in a clear, coherent, and succinct fashion. Overall, the area exam paper must demonstrate competency and expert command of the recognized specialty area and highlight the student’s specific interest in the area, especially pertaining to their dissertation. In short, the area exam paper is intended to help the student prepare to write the dissertation by establishing the student as an expert authority in a particular area of academic interest and by enhancing the student's ability to carry on a critical, scholarly dialog.

As such, the subject areas and scope of the area exams and the dissertation typically are related, but not isomorphic. The former are not intended as the theory and/or research literature chapters of the dissertation, but as treatments of two broader literatures that establish the student’s research and teaching expertise in particular sub-areas or subfields. These subfields, in turn, inform the more specific substantive, theoretical, and research focus of the dissertation. For example: Sociology or Urban Studies, stratification, social psychology, preservation, urban and community violence arguably would be too broad for an area exam. Disaster in New Orleans, the rebuilding of the WTC, the ghettoization of poverty in a (particular or several) American suburb(s), New Orleans and cinematic representation, Mardi Gras Indians, and so on would all be too narrow (though viable dissertation topics). Things like the political economy of the environment, the sociology of finance, cities and representation, the suburbanization of poverty, family change and public policy, domestic violence would carve out suitable middle-ground specialty areas.

Process and Procedures

By the end of beginning of their third year (August 1) in the CCC Ph.D. program, students must select a chair and establish a committee for their first area exam paper. It is assumed that the student will have spent the prior months in preparation for the paper; a process will include rigorous preparation and highly motivated study. Preparation will include diligent research to integrate and synthesize past course material and other scholarly information about the area. After securing the agreement of each person to serve on the committee, the student must notify the CCC Doctoral Program Director (DPD) in writing of the composition of the committee. The committee must be comprised of CCC core and affiliated faculty.

By September 1, students must submit to the CCC DPD a 3-5 page, single-spaced statement, signed by the student and all committee members outlining the area to be covered. This statement must include a references section to inform faculty of the major debates, substantive areas, theoretical and methodological issues the student plans to cover in the exam. Acceptance and approval of the area and committee lie with the CCC Steering Committee and must be transmitted to the student and proposed committee chair in writing within two weeks of receipt. Reasons for non-approval must be sufficiently detailed so as to provide clear direction with respect to needed revision and re-submission.
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Once the committee and area are established, the student develops the full bibliography in consultation with committee members. The final product of which will be a major paper akin to an *Annual Review of Sociology* article (typically on the order of 50 pages) that summarizes state of the area or subfield. The first area exam paper will be due December 1.

By February 1, CCC students must notify the DPD of the composition of their second area exam committee and submit to the CCC DPD a one-paragraph statement signed by the student and all committee members outlining the field to be covered. The composition of the second CAE committee can be the same as the first but is not required. The second area exam paper will be due May 1.

After completion of the each area exam paper, each committee member will meet in executive session to determine an overall grade for the paper. The grading options available to a faculty examination committee are as follows: (a) pass with distinction (ready to form a dissertation committee, “Distinction” will be recorded in the student’s record); (b) pass (ready to form a dissertation committee); (c) fail (noticeable deficiencies indicate that the student is not ready to form a dissertation committee).

If the examination committee determines that a graduate student has failed the first area exam paper, the student will be given the option of rewriting at the end of the third year. The student will be required to complete both papers by the end of the third year. If the student passes the first exam paper and fails the second exam paper, the student will be given the option of rewriting at the end of the summer. The area exam papers must be passed successfully by beginning of the fourth year in the program at the very latest. Failing grade for a second time is cause for withdrawal from the program. The CCC program recognizes that extraordinary circumstances -- e.g. illness, family responsibilities -- may necessitate exceptions to these rules. Students may petition the DPD for an exception, and all exceptions must be approved by the CCC Steering Committee.