Comprehensive Examinations

Comprehensive examinations have two components: A written examination on the core curriculum and an oral examination in the area of specialization.

Eligibility
Eligibility for the Written Comprehensive Examination is based upon meeting the following criteria:

• Admission to the PhD degree program
• Completion of the core curriculum of the PhD program (30 credits)
• An approved plan of study filed with the program director
• A grade point average of 3.0 in graduate course work
• Approval of the program director

Process for Written Examination
All PhD students are required to pass both parts of the comprehensive examinations in order to advance to candidacy. Offered in January and August, at least one week before the new semester begins, the written comprehensive examination is a five-day open-resources response to questions developed by the faculty as a whole. The students will be emailed the exam questions on Monday at 9 am and answers are emailed back to the Department Chair by 5pm on Friday. The written examination is composed of questions from two categories: theory and methodology; the rubric is applied independently to each category. Your total response to all questions may not exceed 15 pages. Students will be given a reading list to help guide studying and the students are encouraged to speak with faculty in advance of the comprehensive exam.

Evaluation
Each paper returned is read by two faculty members in a double-blind process; a third reader is brought in if there is a split decision. The written responses are evaluated using the rubric below. The responses will each be scored on five scales: concept, thesis, support, organization, and language. Maximum possible score is 20 points (from each reviewer for each question). Minimum passing score is 12 points (from each reviewer for each question) with no scale subscore lower than 2.

Students will be informed of the evaluation of their performance no later than the second week of the semester. Students who fail either the methods or theory components will be able to re-take the examination in that specific category. The examination may be scheduled to be taken again only with the permission of the academic advisor and approval of the graduate program director. Students who do not pass the examination on the second attempt on either component of the written examination will be dismissed from the program.
### Rubric for Scoring Written Comprehensive Examination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Thesis</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Responds insightfully to the question. Analysis is relevant, sophisticated and original</td>
<td>Controlling thesis is specific, arguable, and complex</td>
<td>Provides substantial, well-chosen evidence, chosen strategically. Apt definitions</td>
<td>Apt, well-organized. Appropriate and clear transitions across sentence and paragraphs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Responds well to the question. Analysis goes well beyond the obvious</td>
<td>Central thesis determines response’s structure</td>
<td>Provides sufficient and appropriate evidence in context</td>
<td>Distinct units of thought in paragraphs. Appropriately sequenced. Some transitions between paragraphs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Responds adequate to the question. May have some factual, interpretive or conceptual errors</td>
<td>Overall general thesis. Gives no organization to what follows</td>
<td>Provides some evidence but not always sufficient, appropriate or in context</td>
<td>Paragraphs weak, underdeveloped. Some transitions missing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>May confuse some concepts, including some concepts in the question</td>
<td>Vague or irrelevant thesis</td>
<td>Evidence is usually anecdotal, awkwardly or incorrectly incorporated</td>
<td>Repetitive, disconnected, or wandering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Misunderstands question or concepts</td>
<td>No thesis</td>
<td>Evidence simply listed or missing</td>
<td>Arbitrary or illogical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Process for Oral Examination in the Area of Specialization**

**Eligibility**

Eligibility for the Oral Examination in the Area of Specialization is based upon meeting the following criteria:

- Successful completion of both components of the written comprehensive examination
- Completion or credit reduction of at least 9 credits in the specialization
- A grade point average of 3.0 or above in graduate course work
- Approval of the academic adviser

**Process**

The student shall prepare a reading list approved by the academic advisor on topics identified in consultation with Department of Rehabilitation Science faculty in the area of specialization. As determined by the academic advisor, the student may need to consult with faculty outside the area of specialization in developing the reading list which will serve as the basis for the oral examination.

**Evaluation**

At a time scheduled with the approval of the academic advisor, the Department of Rehabilitation Science faculty in the area of specialization will examine the student. Questions must be limited to the topical areas within the reading list approved by the academic advisor.

Only faculty in the area of the specialization may participate in the evaluation but all faculty from the Department may observe. The oral examination will be evaluated with reference to the rubric for Criteria for Oral Examination in the Area of Specialization below.

Students who do not pass the oral examination in the area of specialization on the second attempt will be dismissed from the program.
## Criteria for Oral Presentation in the Area of Specialization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>5 Exemplary</th>
<th>4 Strong</th>
<th>3 Competent</th>
<th>2 Marginal</th>
<th>1 Unacceptable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scientific Knowledge</strong></td>
<td>Provides substantial, well-chosen evidence to support scientific concepts. Demonstrates high knowledge of concepts and terminology.</td>
<td>Provides sufficient and appropriate evidence to support scientific claims, and makes effort to place scientific findings in context.</td>
<td>Provides some evidence to support scientific claims, but not always relevant, sufficient, or integrated into the response.</td>
<td>Evidence to support scientific findings usually anecdotal, and is generally awkward or incorrectly incorporated. May have some factual, interpretive, or conceptual errors.</td>
<td>Little or no evidence cited to support scientific claims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Response to Questions</strong></td>
<td>Responds incisively and directly to the questions asked. Responses to questions are specific, defensible, and complex.</td>
<td>Most responses are direct and relevant to the questions asked. Responses to question are more general, but still accurate; analyses goes beyond the obvious.</td>
<td>Responds adequately to the questions asked; occasionally responds with unrelated information. Responses to questions are general.</td>
<td>Confuses some significant concepts in the questions asked. Responses to questions are vague or irrelevant. May have some factual, interpretive, or conceptual errors.</td>
<td>Does not understand questions and/or concepts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Criteria for Advancement to Candidacy
After successful completion of the written comprehensive examination and the oral examination in the area of specialization, the student will be advanced to candidacy and may seek approval of a dissertation proposal. A copy of the Dissertation Proposal form is located in the appendix of this document and is posted on the department website. Upon admission to candidacy, the student must enroll in at least one credit of RHBS 998 each semester until the dissertation is approved.

Dissertation Proposal Development and Approval
Students may begin development of the dissertation proposal in conjunction with preparation for the oral examination in the area of specialization with the approval of the academic advisor in consultation with the proposed chair of the dissertation committee if other than the academic advisor.

Preparation of the dissertation proposal is an iterative process between the doctoral candidate and the members of the dissertation committee involving meetings, discussions, and consensus.

Dissertation Committee
The student will form a dissertation committee in consultation with the chair of the dissertation committee comprised of at least three faculty members (students may choose to have more than three members) and approved by the chair of the department. At least two members must be from the Department of Rehabilitation Science. The student must also have at least one member from another department of the University and/or a member external to the University subject to the approval of the chair of the department.

The Department of Rehabilitation Science Doctoral Dissertation Committee Form must be completed and turned into the chair of the department so that it may be approved and added to the student’s file. The form is in the appendix of this document and is posted on the department’s website.

Dissertation
Draft Proposal
The dissertation proposal is a research plan to investigate the dissertation research question (maximum 12 pages, excluding references). Students are strongly encouraged to consult with all members of the committee as they are preparing the proposal. Following approval of the chair of the committee indicating that the student has been responsive to the members of the dissertation committee, the final proposal is sent to every member of the committee for approval. Committee approval is expected within two weeks of receipt of the proposal. In the event that a majority of the committee does not approve the proposal, the chair of the committee will call a meeting to resolve concerns.

The research proposal should include the following information:
- Abstract of proposed work
- General introduction to the research question
- Rationale for and importance of the research
- Statement of aims and objectives
- Research design, including proposed methods and hypotheses
- References
The research plan should include:

1. Subjects and setting. The characteristics of participants of the study, how they will be selected, and the setting of the study should be presented. Sample size estimates, when relevant to the research proposed, should be included.

2. Apparatus and instrumentation. Any tools or instruments that might be important for readers to understand (such as, assessment instruments, surveys, interview formats, observation protocols, and data collection devices) should be described. Actual copies of instruments or photographs of equipment can be included in appendices. (Be sure to obtain copyright permission if needed.)

3. Data collection procedures. The readers should be given a description of all the steps involved in data collection. Timelines are helpful, either in outline or graphical representation.

4. Data analysis. You should provide sufficient information for readers to determine the reasonableness of your analysis plan.

Therefore, the dissertation proposal provides a broad overview of the current literature, a precise research question, well-developed rationale for the question’s significance, a research design, and a data analysis plan.

Committee Evaluation

The evaluation of the dissertation proposal is the sole responsibility of the dissertation committee.

The chair of the dissertation committee is responsible for ensuring that any required revisions to the dissertation proposal are made as indicated by the dissertation committee and that all forms are completed and signed.

Dissertation Defense

There are two steps involved in approval of the dissertation:

Written Component

The final form of the dissertation includes at least one journal-length manuscript. In order to be acceptable, the committee must judge the manuscript(s) to be of publishable quality. The written recounting of the execution of the research plan in the approved dissertation proposal includes the following:

- A cover page with a “signature block” below the title and author. (Templates can be found at: http://thesis.gmu.edu/signaturesheets.html)
- All other sections of a dissertation (i.e., abstract, table of contents, list of tables, list of figures, references, etc.) required by the University. (Dissertation guide can be found at: http://thesis.gmu.edu/guides.html)
- The main text, which will be a self-contained “chapter” consisting of (a) journal-style manuscript(s) based on the student’s dissertation research. This will mirror (a) manuscript(s)
that one may submit for publication and so will include all of the parts required of such a manuscript

- An appendix that, at minimum, must include:
  - the proposal as approved by the dissertation committee
  - the background for and the statement of the research question, its theoretical framework or model derived from the literature, the purpose and importance of the study, the significance of the research for the discipline, definitions of key terms, conceptual basis of the study design, rationale for the methods, and the scope, assumptions, and limitations of the study
  - the in-depth review of the literature that supports the formulation of the problem, serves as the rationale for it theoretical framework or model, and justifies the the approach to all elements of the proposal
  - Additional materials associated with the research project such as supplementary analyses, tables, scales, etc. – as deemed necessary by the student and the dissertation committee

*Oral Component*

In order for the final oral defense of the dissertation to occur, the student must submit copies of the dissertation manuscript(s) to the members of the dissertation committee. The chair of the committee must approve the version before it is given to the rest of the committee. It is essential that doctoral committee members have sufficient time to read and evaluate dissertation drafts with care prior to the dissertation defense date. It is also essential that students have sufficient time after the defense to do final revisions, editing, and formatting. The University determines the deadlines for final library submission in order to graduate in any given semester. All defenses must be scheduled at least 30 days prior to this date and complete drafts of dissertations to be defended must be delivered to each member of the committee 30 days prior to the intended date of the defense. Committee members will review the work and provide feedback within 21 days of receipt. If the committee members agree that the defense may go forward, the chair of the dissertation will confirm scheduling of the defense at least one week prior to the intended defense date with the Department.

The dissertation is to be orally defended in public, with at least the whole committee present, including by telecommunication. A public announcement of the defense must be made, and all University faculty and the public are allowed to attend. This ensures that the University's standards are met, and offers an opportunity for all to hear the result of the work. All decisions regarding the dissertation and its defense are at the discretion of the committee using the dissertation defense rubric. Following a successful defense, the members of the Dissertation Committee sign the cover page and the student is responsible for delivering the appropriate copies to the appropriate sources. (Guidance for this process can be found at: [http://thesis.gmu.edu/submission.html](http://thesis.gmu.edu/submission.html))
Summary of Steps toward Award of the PhD

All of the following steps must be completed in sequence. Some steps may be done simultaneously at the discretion of the academic adviser.

1. Be admitted to the PhD program
2. Request credit reduction or transfer of credit before the first semester of study
3. Develop a plan of study approved by the academic adviser and file with the department
4. Pass both parts of the written comprehensive examination
5. Develop a reading list in preparation for the oral examination
6. Pass the oral examination in the area of specialization
7. Be admitted to candidacy
8. Develop a dissertation proposal
9. Seek approval of a dissertation committee from the chair of the department
10. Submit a written dissertation proposal to the dissertation committee
11. Obtain approval of the dissertation proposal
12. Execute research plan of the approved dissertation proposal
13. Seek approval of all parts of the written dissertation from the dissertation committee
14. Prepare an oral presentation and orally defend the dissertation
15. Submit dissertation and apply for graduation in accordance with all University policies
### Rubric for Dissertation Defense

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality of Presentation</th>
<th>Quality of response to questions</th>
<th>Overall Assessment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Well organized</td>
<td>- Responses are well developed</td>
<td>- Expectations Exceeded</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Excellent delivery</td>
<td>- Responses engage dialogue</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Outstanding nonverbal</td>
<td>- Responses are adequate</td>
<td>- Expectations Met</td>
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<tr>
<td>presence</td>
<td>- Responses are forthright</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Exceptional audiovisuals</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Expectations Unmet</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Adequate organization</td>
<td></td>
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<td>- Clear verbal presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Adequate nonverbal skills</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Appropriate audiovisuals</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Poor organization</td>
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<td>- Poor verbal</td>
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<tr>
<td>communication skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Poor nonverbal</td>
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<td>communication skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Weak audiovisuals</td>
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