Introduction

The First Exam consists of 4 components including Criminological Theory, Criminal Justice Process and Policy, Research Methods, and Statistics. Each of these components represent a year-long sequence of classes students take during their first year in the program. Students are expected to sit for the First Exam just prior to the start of their second year of study and are expected to be familiar with the assigned readings in courses, materials listed on reading lists, and relevant readings in the top journals in the field. The core faculty who taught the related classes write exam questions and exams are then graded by rotating subcommittees of faculty.

In 2011, the exam changed from an open book to closed book format and, beginning in 2013, grading rubrics were provided to faculty responsible for grading exams. In 2013, a core faculty mentor role was created. The faculty member in this role meets with students who did not pass the exam in an effort to understand the challenges faced and to provide support and encouragement for retaking the exam and successfully passing it.

Learning outcomes for the first exam were created in 2011. Stated goals indicate the first exam is intended to test students’ understanding of the enduring issues of the field of criminology and criminal justice, familiarity with current debates and developments, and students’ understanding and knowledge of research methods and statistics. Specific learning goals include the following:

(1) Criminology: Demonstrate knowledge of the key frameworks that explain the causes and correlates of the criminal justice system’s response to criminal behavior including how and why the police, courts and corrections systems function; and analyze the advantages and disadvantages of particular policies. Students will be able to read, discuss (orally and in writing) and critique the relevant literatures.

(2) Criminal Justice Process & Policy: Demonstrate the ability to identify the strengths and weaknesses of different research designs used in criminology and criminal justice, identify under what circumstances specific research designs are appropriate, and analyze and interpret empirical research.

(3) Statistics & Methods: Develop a scholarly specialization that provides a foundation for dissertation research. Explore a variety of subjects and methodologies that spark further and deeper inquiry.
Methods

A survey of faculty and students was conducted in spring 2015 to assess perceptions and attitudes related to preparation, process, timing, and grading of the exam. Faculty who had graded exams or taught core classes between 2011 and 2014 were surveyed along with students who had taken the exam between 2011 and 2014. A total of 26 faculty and 12 students responded. The response rates were 72% for faculty and 38% for students. In addition, the pass rate was calculated for each component between 2011 and 2014.

Results

Preparation
- Students feel prepared to take the exam and reported both the syllabi and reading lists helped them study. However, some noted that revisions to the reading lists to make them more concise and meaningful would be helpful.
- Few students sought faculty help as they prepared to take the exam, but almost all reported faculty were helpful during this time period.
- Students did not feel the professional development session was helpful and felt it would be more meaningful to have practice exams in class and more rigorous feedback from core faculty on assignments.
- While over half of the faculty reported being familiar with the learning outcomes, less than half were familiar with course syllabi or reading lists.
- While 90% of students reported being prepared for the exam, only 60% percent of faculty felt students were well prepared for the exam.

Process
- Just over half of the faculty agreed or strongly agreed that the exam helped prepare students to teach classes, write a dissertation proposal, and write a journal article. In contrast, less than half of the students agreed with these statements.
- Neither faculty nor students felt the exam reflects the readiness of students to engage in independent research.
- The majority of students agreed that the exam process helped them to gain a comprehensive knowledge of the topics and led them to read beyond what was required in classes.
- While 80% of the faculty felt the exam encouraged students to master the material covered in core classes, only 35% of faculty agreed or strongly agreed that the exam encouraged students to read beyond what was covered in classes.
- Over half of the faculty thought the exam questions and reading lists should be created by a comprehensive exam committee.
• Student responses indicated a preference for a qualifying paper or take-home exam rather than the current process. Faculty were neutral on the need to change the process and there was no clear majority for an alternative format.

**Timing**

• As noted, students are expected to take the exam in August just prior to their second year in the program. There has been discussion as to whether this is too early in the program for a comprehensive exam. Only 45% of the faculty agreed or strongly agreed that students should have a comprehensive knowledge of the topics after one year in the program and half though the exam should be considered a qualifying exam. The remaining half were neutral on the issue. No one disagreed with this item.

• In contrast, students agreed that they should have a comprehensive knowledge after one year with only 2 students disagreeing with this statement. When asked about delaying the exam to year 3, students were split with 5 student indicating disagreement and 4 indicating agreement.

• Only half of the faculty felt exam responses reflected a comprehensive knowledge of the topics.

**Grading**

• Students generally felt the grading was fair though only a slight majority indicated they understood the grading system.

• Over half of the students asked for feedback on the exam, but less than 20% reported the feedback was helpful.

• Related, 3 students\(^1\) reported having to retake part of the exam and only 1 of the 3 reported the feedback helped them prepare for the next exam. Interestingly, 65% of faculty indicated students who failed a section were provided with feedback needed to improve.

• Faculty agreed the current grading system reflects the priorities of the program and half agreed it met the expectations of students.

• Faculty disagreed that the grading system evenly distributes workload among faculty and 45% felt exams should be graded by a comprehensive exam committee.

• Given the workload issues, questions have been raised about whether it is appropriate for the EO and DEO to grade the exams. Sixty percent of faculty were in agreed the EO/DEO should be able to grade, 15% were neutral, and 25% disagreed with this item. Fifty-five percent of students disagreed with this item and 45% were neutral.

• While support for EO/DEO grading was somewhat mixed, support for core faculty being able to grade their topic was much stronger. Eighty percent of

\(^1\) It is important to note that 5 students declined to answer questions about retaking the exam.
faculty and 82% of students felt core faculty should be able to grade exams related to their topic.

Outcomes

- Although over half of the faculty agreed student answered demonstrated a working knowledge of the major concepts in criminal justice, less than half of the faculty agreed that student answers demonstrated sufficient depth or were of sufficient quality.

- A total of 36 students took the exam between 2011 and 2014. Among these, 9 failed one or more sections. All students retook the relevant section of the exam during the appropriate make-up exam scheduled for January of each year. Six students successfully passed the exam on their second attempt, while 3 students failed at least one part. Each of these students had extenuating circumstances that, in part, explain the second failure. One student appealed to the EC to retake the exam and successfully passed it on the third attempt. The two other students are appealing to the EC this spring.

- The overall pass rate is 75%. Pass rates by area are:
  - Criminology: 84%
  - Policy & Process: 91%
  - Statistics: 81%
  - Methods: 91%

- The pass rate for statistics dropped from a high of 100% in 2011 to a low of 63% in 2014.

Conclusions

A number of conclusions and recommendations can be drawn from the results:

1. The exam should be viewed as a qualifying exam rather than a comprehensive exam with the goal of restructuring the second exam as a comprehensive exam. This recommendation will be made to the Executive Committee for approval in the Spring 2015 session.

2. Future revisions to the exam are tied to the pending assessment of the second exam in the 2015-16 academic year. Changes tabled until that time include the following:
   a. Though identified in prior documents as consisting as 3 components, in practice the exam has 4 components: Criminology, Criminal Justice Policy and Practice, Statistics, and Methods. Depending on the decisions made next year, the exam should either remain a 4-part exam or be revised to combine methods and statistics.
   b. Given the lack of faculty consensus, the exam structure (closed-book) should stay the same pending the review of the second exam to be conducted in 2015-16. However, given student preferences and trends in criminal justice programs, the Curriculum and Exam committee should carefully consider a move to a publishable paper for one of the exams. The learning goals will be revised accordingly.
c. There is some faculty support for an Exam 1 committee that would be responsible for creating and grading the exams. The structure of this committee will be contingent on revisions made resulting from the Exam 2 assessment.

3. Greater continuity is needed in the exam process. To that end, the curriculum and exam committee should be responsible for managing the reading list with the assistance of the core faculty. The reading list should reflect key readings and concepts and should carry over across changes in core faculty. The reading list should be reviewed regularly, but individual faculty should not make changes to it without consulting the committee. The reading lists will be revised and distributed for the Fall 2016 exam.

4. Feedback from students will be solicited to make improvements to the professional development session for the comprehensive exam. This will be implemented for the Spring 2016 session.

5. Reading lists and syllabi should be distributed to faculty graders, along with a grading rubric.

6. Core faculty should grade exams for the topics they teach.

7. The EO and DEO should continue to grade exams as necessary though attempts will be made to limit their involvement in this regard.

8. Faculty will continue to be asked for meaningful feedback, particularly for students who do not pass the exam. Feedback forms will be returned to faculty who do not provide such feedback for editing. All feedback will be collapsed into a single document and provided to students who did not pass the exam. Feedback will be anonymous, though students will have the ability to know who graded their exam.

9. The decline in the pass rate for statistics is of concern. However, it is not clear if this is a function of student preparation, faculty approaches to grading, or the nature of the approach to the class. This pass rate will be monitored and steps will be taken to address it as warranted.

Except where noted, these changes will be implemented for the Fall 2015 comprehensive exam.