Assessment of Second Examination in EES

1. Goals of the Second Exam:

- To assess the student’s capacity for doctoral research and analysis;
- To assess the student’s familiarity with and understanding of the literature relevant to their proposed research;
- To assess the student’s ability to communicate effectively, both in written and oral format;
- To assess the preparedness of the student to conduct Ph.D. level research in his/her field using the theories, methods, and technologies appropriate to that field of inquiry.

2. The steps to accomplish these goals are as follows:

- Assessment is achieved through a two-part examination—the completion of a dissertation proposal, reviewed and evaluated by the student’s advisor and dissertation committee, and following their approval an oral defense, which consists of a detailed presentation of the proposed research followed by questioning by the committee.
- A main purpose of the oral portion of the exam is to enable the student to elaborate and reflect critically on their research ideas and proposed methodology, both to ensure that the doctoral research is sound and the student adequately prepared to carry it out and to agree upon the contours of the research and its expected outcomes.
- Key to the oral defense is the committee’s evaluation of the proposal and its presentation and their recommendations for any changes in the proposed research and analysis. All students receive an official letter from the program’s Executive Officer documenting the outcome of the Second Examination. Upon successfully completing the exam and 60 credits students will advance to Candidacy and Level III.

3. Self-review of the Second Examination:

As part of the current assessment exercise, members of the EES Curriculum Committee developed a survey for students who had taken the Second Exam in prior terms to gather opinions and feedback about the exam. Ten students responded; all of the respondents had taken their second exam in the past 4 years (2012 or later). This number, though small, represents over 25% of those who had taken the second exam during that period. All but one of the respondents indicated that the exam had been a positive experience (9 rating it 4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5), and one who had taken it in 2012 when there was less communication across EES and thus more confusion, gave it a rating of 3 because their advisor and committee members were unsure of the process*. All of the students indicated that the exam process was useful in clarifying their ideas and offering them constructive feedback. Seven of the ten students responding had written or were writing their dissertations, and 4 of them indicated that the exam helped prepare them for the process (rating it a 4 out of 5), while 3 had a more equivocal
response (rating it 3 out of 5) largely because the direction or scope of their research changed as they progressed. From the survey responses we can conclude:

- Students have a clear understanding of the point of the exam, how to prepare for it, and how it was evaluated.
- Our required Dissertation Proposal Workshop (EES 802) is helpful to students in the process of completing their proposals and preparing for the exam. They noted that the feedback they received from the instructor, peers, and the reviewers to whom each proposal draft was sent was useful, and that the class overall kept them on schedule and clarified what is entailed in crafting a research proposal whether for the dissertation or for funding.
- Most respondents indicated that they met with their advisors regularly in preparation for the exam, and also were assisted by consulting with their colleagues further along in the program.
- The survey asked about alternative exam formats with which students were familiar, and whether they advocated shifting to a different format. Two students mentioned that other Programs have field exams, and both mentioned that they thought this format might be a useful addition to the proposal defense (both of these respondents were from the Geography side of EES). One of them noted that restructuring the second exam this way would probably mean altering the nature of the first exam, or that altering the first exam might obviate restructuring the second exam. One student from the physical science side of the program noted that in some other science programs the second exam involves doing an independent project that is distinct from the dissertation research. While s/he noted that this format was constructive in strengthening students’ research capacities and familiarizing them with a broader literature in their field, it was also quite time consuming and would put too much pressure on students facing strict time-to-degree constraints.

* Last year we undertook a complete overhaul of our Handbook, which now clearly spells out the procedures for the First, Second, and Third Examinations. Referring faculty and students to this document should help to clarify what is involved in the Examinations and how best to prepare for them.

4. Proposed Changes:

It appears that the Second Examination as it stands is an effective instrument for achieving the goals set forth in Section 1 above. As a result we do not propose any changes at this time. However, given the mention of alternative formats, and our ongoing plans to revisit and possibly revise the First Exam, as indicated in a previous assessment exercise, we may consider altering the First Exam format and adding a field exam to the Second Examination for students in the Geography side of the Program. This idea will be brought up for discussion in the Curriculum Committee during the fall semester 2016-17, and any proposals for change that are made in that Committee will be brought to the Executive Committee and Program-wide consideration during the academic year.
5. The next steps that will be taken:

The results of the survey and this Assessment will be presented to the Curriculum Committee for discussion in early Fall 2016. If the Committee decides to make a proposal for revising the first or second exams, their proposal will be presented to the Executive Committee for discussion and then to the Program as a whole during the coming year.

Assessment of Third Examination in EES

1. Goals of the Third Examination (Dissertation Defense):
   - To assess the student’s doctoral research and analysis;
   - To assess the student’s ability to communicate effectively, both in written and oral format;
   - To share the results of the dissertation with a public audience, and to respond to questions regarding the research and its presentation by the dissertation committee and external reader.

2. The steps to accomplish these goals are as follows:

   - Assessment is achieved through a two-part examination—the completion of the dissertation, reviewed and evaluated by the student’s advisor and dissertation committee, and following their approval an oral defense, which consists of a detailed presentation of the research open to the public followed by questioning by the committee.
   - A main purpose of the oral portion of the exam is to enable the student to elaborate and reflect critically on their research and its contribution to the field.
   - Key to the oral defense is the committee’s evaluation of the dissertation and its presentation, and their recommendations for any revisions to the dissertation as submitted. Upon the completion of any revisions, and their acceptance by the advisor, and if mandated, the committee as a whole, the dissertation is prepared for electronic submission to the Graduate Center’s dissertation librarian together with a hard copy of the signature page signed by the Dissertation Advisor and the Program’s Executive Officer.

3. Self-review of the Third Examination:

While the survey drawn up and circulated by the Curriculum Committee included questions concerning the Third Examination, no responses were received from anybody who had defended their dissertation in recent years. In the previous academic year, however, the EO and DEO undertook a major revision of the Program’s Handbook, and addressed the format of
the Third Examination in consultation with the Executive Committee. The new Handbook was approved and went into effect in September 2014. As a result some confusion regarding the exam format was clarified, and the requirement that there be at least one external reader was instituted. The clarifications included that EES Dissertation Defenses were to take place at the Graduate Center (and not at a CUNY campus), that the Committee must consist of CUNY Doctoral Faculty and the Advisor must be a member of the EES Doctoral Faculty, that the oral presentation was not to exceed an hour, and that all defenses were open to the public. These changes began to be incorporated in defenses since 2014 although the requirement that there be an external reader will not be required of students who entered the Program prior to the fall of 2014.

4. Proposed Changes:

Given the recent changes made to the defense format and general agreement that the process works well as it stands, we are not proposing any changes to the Third Examination at this time, but we look forward to the regular inclusion of external readers in the process over the next few years.

Submitted by Cindi Katz, Executive Officer, Earth and Environmental Sciences Program
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