Ph.D. Program in History
First Exam Assessment Review

1) Statement of the learning goals for the assessment that you are reviewing.

The primary learning goals for the First Exam in the PhD Program in History is to allow the student to demonstrate proficiency in the history and historiography his or her major field of study.

Students fulfill the requirement for the First Examination by passing Final Examinations in each of the two required Literature survey courses in their Major field. The eight-hour take-home exams, in which students are required to answer two of four essay questions, are given during the semester’s examination week and test broad, general historical and historiographical knowledge for the period covered in the course. The second exam is similar in style to the first but includes one comprehensive question that overlaps both segments of the Literature survey. The exams must be taken at the end of each of the semesters of the two-part Literature Survey. The First Exams are written and graded by a three-person committee. Each committee member blind marks all parts of the exam. In fields with literature courses, the committee consists of the three faculty members who have most recently taught the courses. In the fields without literature courses, the EO appoints the exam committee. Decisions on the grade for each part are by majority vote. If a student fails one or both parts they must retake the entire exam. Students who fail the exam are given written comments by the committee members. They are asked to meet with the EO to discuss the exam and encouraged to meet with each of the members of the exam committee to develop a course of preparation for their reexamination. Students must pass the exam the second time they take it or they are asked to leave the program.

2) A description of what data or other information you are drawing on to conduct your review (e.g. students’ exam results, students’ job placements).

The First Exam has been a major device for identifying students with serious deficiencies. Nonetheless, the program expects that most students will pass the exam the first time they take it. When unusual patterns of exam results occur, the program tries to determine their cause and consider whether they stem from problems with the courses in which students were prepared for the exam or possibly with the exam itself and make appropriate adjustments. Two committees – one ad-hoc group primarily consisting of students, the other the formal Curriculum Committee, met during 2012-13 to discuss the possibility of changing the format and timing of the exam. As of Fall 2013, the exam was changed from a single four–hour timed exam in which the students wrote three responses in the August before their second year to its current format.

3) Your findings. Is the assessment (and preparation for it) effective?

Yes. 15 students took the exams in the 2013-14 year. One student failed the Fall portion of the exam two times. She was therefore asked to leave the program.
4) Proposed changes, if any, to the assessment, the learning goals for it, the curriculum/preparation leading up to it.

The new format is successful. No changes have been proposed.

5) The next steps that will be taken. (There should be a follow-up on these in the report for the next cycle.)

The program will survey the students to get feedback about every departmental milestone in Summer 2015.
Ph.D. Program in History  
Second Exam Assessment Review

1)  *Statement of the learning goals for the assessment that you are reviewing.*

The primary learning goals for the Second Exam in the PhD Program in History are to assess the mastery students have developed of history and historiography in their major and minor fields, as well as their "dissertation fields". The exam is oral; students are expected to demonstrate their ability to explain history and historiography in clear terms and respond appropriately to questions about them. Students are assessed on their mastery of historical structures, events, and developments and the ways historians have written about them. The examination is conducted by a four member committee, three faculty members in the student’s major field and one in his or her minor field. Prior to the examination, students develop reading lists in consultation with each of the four examiners. Each of the lists is broken down into three or four topics with roughly ten or fifteen books covering each topic, for a total of 40 books or a corresponding number of articles. For example, a student being examined in U.S. history might develop a list of forty books on such topics as “the colonial Atlantic world,” “slavery in the antebellum South,” or “foreign policy in the twentieth century.” A modern European history major might include topics such as “the age of revolution,” or “fascism,” or “the history of sexuality.” The topics must be approved by the individual examiners. The second exam assesses the ability of students to discuss these topics in more depth than is possible on the first (written) exam. Coursework provides the main preparation for the second examination. Reading or review of the books on the reading lists for the exam provides additional preparation, as do discussions with members of the examining committee prior to the exam.

The second examination is graded immediately upon its conclusion, by majority vote of the examining committee. The major and the minor field sections of the exam are graded separately as Pass, Pass with Distinction, or Fail.

2)  *A description of what data or other information you are drawing on to conduct your review (e.g. students’ exam results, students’ job placements).*

The Second Exam has been a major device for identifying students with serious deficiencies. Nonetheless, the program expects that most students will pass the exam the first time they take it. When unusual patterns of exam results occur, the program tries to determine their cause and consider whether they stem from problems with the courses in which students were prepared for the exam or possibly with the exam itself and make appropriate adjustments. For instance, the conditions and requirements for the oral exam were revised effective Fall 2013 in response to the concerns of faculty and students. This self-generated, internal review revealed that only one examiner in the minor field was truly needed. It was also determined that a second examiner in the minor field slowed the student down in his progress through the program unnecessarily. Instead an examiner in the students "dissertation fields" was introduced. Students who took the exam in the 2013-14 year were permitted to have either a four or five person committee; all subsequent students have four committee members.
3) Your findings. Is the assessment (and preparation for it) effective?

Yes. During the 2013-14 year, 22 students took the second examination. Two students failed the both the major and minor fields. Both retook the examination and passed it on the second attempt. Two students received a mark of distinction.

4) Proposed changes, if any, to the assessment, the learning goals for it, the curriculum/preparation leading up to it.

The new format is successful. No changes have been proposed.

5) The next steps that will be taken. (There should be a follow-up on these in the report for the next cycle.)

The program will survey the students to get feedback about every departmental milestone in Summer 2015.