A. The Learning Goals for the First and Second Examination

1. Learning goals for the First Examination:
   a) Test mastery of the core curriculum course material
   b) Provide an opportunity for the application of that knowledge and not simply regurgitation of the material.
   c) Provide an opportunity to evaluate student’s capacity to think critically in their areas of interest; demonstrate substantial mastery of the literature in the topic of interest; and to develop future questions that emerge from their prior work.
   d) Demonstrate a student’s ability to apply an integrative approach that incorporates social policy empirical research organizational theory related to the student’s area of interest
   e) Advance student’s professional development (i.e., lead to a proposal for a professional conference poster presentation)

2. Learning Goals the Second Examination
   a) Demonstrate student has mastery of a specialized area of interest
   b) Establish that a student has the capacity to produce a dissertation and conduct independent scholarly work
   c) Contribute to student professional development
   d) Demonstrate mastery of a form of scholarly production (proposal for a pilot research study; grant proposal; paper for submission for publication)

B. Data and Other Information Drawn on in Conducting the Review

We solicited examples of examination practices from doctoral programs in social welfare through the listserv of the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education (GADE). We received 10 responses from a possible 70 doctoral programs in the US and Canada.

In addition, we distributed an electronic survey to all students currently enrolled in the Social Welfare PhD Program about their experiences taking the First and Second Examinations. Forced choice Likert-type questions linked to the goals the faculty established for the two examinations and whether there were additional outcomes students would like the examinations to achieve. There were opportunities for open-ended responses following each set of nine forced-choice questions. Forty-two of a possible 70 students completed the survey.
The Executive Officer distributed the examination materials and practices from other social welfare doctoral programs and the results of the electronic survey to faculty members. These were the basis for two full faculty meetings to discuss the current goals, content, and format of the examinations. Following those meetings, faculty members submitted statements of the goals of the examinations and ideas for examination formats that would achieve those goals. Subsequently, an Ad Hoc Examination Committee met to synthesize the various sources of information collected during the review process—examination practices at other programs; results of the student survey; and faculty statements. All student committee representatives participated in full faculty meetings, and two students are members of the Ad Hoc committee.

C. Findings

Although there is consensus among faculty and students about the goals of the two examinations, which are generally consistent with the goals of other doctoral programs that provided material, the constituent groups are not satisfied that the format and content of the examinations in fact test whether students are meeting these goals. For example, the current First Examination is in three separate sections devoted to core curriculum areas (social policy, research, and organizational theory). In the current examination, faculty in each of these areas proposes questions, which do not require students to integrate content across the three areas. A criticism from both students in the survey and faculty members in discussions and statements is that the first examination is a “regurgitation of required readings that required very little critical thinking.” It did not broaden their knowledge of the content or demand application of conceptual material. Although one faculty member felt the first examination should enable students to “catch up on readings they did not have time for in the first year,” fewer than half the students who took the examination felt it achieved that. Eight-six percent of students endorsed that the First Examination should lead to a paper for publication or a grant application. However, the examination structure does not advance the professional development objectives stated in the Path to Degree on the program website.

Regarding the Second Examination, a prominent theme among both faculty members and students was that the current examination has “the same format as the dissertation proposal” and was therefore redundant. Again, both students and faculty members proposed an examination format that would advance the professional development of students through the production of a publishable paper, grant application, or pilot research project. Some students suggested that working on the examination with individual faculty mentors would improve the examination experience, while faculty members overall stressed that an examination should be written independent of faculty support.
The current First Examination is currently a written document, and the Second Examination has both a written and oral component. Although, both examinations require revision based on the assessment, there is consensus that the first should be a written examination and the second should have a written and oral component.

D. Proposed Changes

Based on a comprehensive assessment with considerable faculty and student participation, both examinations require revision. The changes to the First Examination require questions that span the content areas rather than segregating them. Changes to the Second Examination require students to demonstrate knowledge in a substantive area of interest and a format that will advance the professional development of students as well as demonstrate mastery in a specialized area of interest.

E. Next Steps

The Ad Hoc Committee will continue to meet throughout the Spring 2015 semester to develop examinations that operationalize proposed changes. The following questions will guide their deliberations:

First Examination Questions
1. What is the best time to have students take the examination?
2. What role, if any, should student mentors have in the examination process?
3. What should be the format of the examination?
4. What are examples of questions that both integrate the content of core curriculum courses and at the same time prepare students for submitting proposals for juried conference poster presentations or other professional development objective?

Second Examination Questions
1. What should be the role of faculty mentors, if any, in the preparation of the second examination?
2. What is the best time to have the student submit the examination?
3. How should the Dissertation Seminar change, if at all, to accommodate changes in the second examination?
4. How should the examination dovetail with the student’s professional development goals? Should this be an explicit requirement in selecting an examination option?
We anticipate that we will be able to pilot new examination protocols beginning in the 2015-16 academic year.