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Sociology PhD Program: First Exam Assessment

Until recently, the Program in Sociology divided the “first exam” into two components: an exam in “Classical Social Theory” and an exam in “Contemporary Social Theory.” Both exams were written and each lasted for six hours. Each component was offered twice a year and the two exams were generally not taken in the same semester. This process has recently been modified, as discussed further on, but the next three paragraphs describe the “historic” function of the two exams and provide useful background on the changes we have made more recently on the basis of our deliberations concerning the effectiveness of the two-part “first exam.”

The classical theory exam is intended to do several things for our students. Students are expected to demonstrate mastery of the history and boundaries of the discipline of sociology. They must demonstrate that they understand the basic schemas and concepts that sociologists have used since the inception of the discipline in understanding the world, especially the various senses of “social structure” that classical theorists used. Students also demonstrate an understanding the main lines of disagreement between the classical theoretical traditions. The classical theory exam – in addition to the writing for the “Classical Theory” course the main measure of achieving these objectives -- is meant to be taken early in a student’s career, so that these basic orientations toward the discipline can be enriched in other, more empirically oriented courses.

The contemporary theory exam assesses a student’s mastery of current controversies and unresolved issues in sociological theory, especially issues that might be resolved or clarified through empirical research. The student must grasp both the agreements and the disagreements in sociology as a discipline. The exam should also address students’ awareness of cross-national differences in the intellectual orientations of sociology, especially in a globalizing world where those differences should be the basis of fruitful dialogue.

Exams are graded by a committee of three faculty members. Students who fail one of the exams are provided comments to explain why.

After extensive discussion of the theory curriculum with students and faculty in our Curriculum Committee and beyond, the Program has decided henceforth to consolidate the two exams into one. We still seek to achieve the learning objectives outlined above, but it was thought that these goals would be better obtained if we were to bring the two parts of the theory curriculum into a single “frame,” allowing students to draw on “classical” and “contemporary” perspectives in answering a number of questions with a somewhat more “applied” character than has heretofore been the case. We believe that a consolidated first exam will allow students greater opportunities to demonstrate their mastery of the most influential perspectives in the discipline of sociology as well as to permit greater flexibility in the design of the exam. As we will be instituting this new procedure in the fall of 2013, we should have an excellent opportunity to observe the extent to which the expected outcomes actually materialize by the time of the next assessment period.