Assessments reviewed in the current cycle: First Examination, Second Examination

First Examination

The examination is an early measure of the student’s potential to complete the doctoral program. Students are required to write a paper describing a research project. This paper, to be graded by the advisor and two members of the doctoral faculty or relevant outside researchers, contains a journal-quality, critical and synthesized review of the literature; a journal format methods section; and an explanation of data reduction.

Learning goals: The goal of the first examination is to introduce students to research as early as possible. The current version of the first examination provides students and the program with an assessment of the research skills the students possess. The focus of the program is on research, so getting a measure of student performance as early as possible will enable the program to provide more effective advising and mentoring. The first examination provides the students with an opportunity to demonstrate mastery of the research literature, competence in research design, appropriate oral presentation skills, and basic professional writing skills.

This review is based on the following data: 1. Faculty questionnaire: 5 sections, 30 questions including 22 multiple choice items targeting faculty’s experience with the current format of the first examination; 7 central faculty filled it out. 2. Student survey: 20 questions targeting students’ experience and opinions; 14 students filled it out. 3. Department’s statistics of passing/failing rate on the first attempt and on the second attempt; withdrawal rate after failing the first examination for the period of 2005-2012.

Findings: 1. In overall, the faculty of the program is satisfied with the current format of the first examination. Information was based on faculty’s experience between 2007 and 2012. During this period, 35 students had taken the exam. No faculty member could think of anyone who did not pass the examination but would have made a good doctoral student. All faculty rated each aspect of the exam process as good/successful or very good/very successful on all measures except for one. The only question that received a “fair” response was the question about the oral presentation component of the exam. Faculty discussed whether the oral presentations provided a good tool to evaluate students’ research skills.
2. In overall, most students think that the first examination is a useful learning process. 86% of the students think that it helped them to develop their academic writing skills; 93 % of the students think that the exam helps (to a certain extent) developing their ability to design a study; 85 % of the students found the comments from their advisor on drafts of the first examination paper helpful. Similarly to the findings from the faculty questionnaire, the oral component of the exam did not seem to be very useful. Only 50 % of the students found the oral presentation component useful and 71 % of the students agreed that it would be more beneficial to present their pre-dissertation study’s research design than the first examination paper.

3. The total number of students taking the current version of the first examination is 35. The passing rate at the first attempt of the examination is 83 %. Half of the students who failed the first attempt withdrew from the program, the other half repeated the examination. There was only 1 student who failed the second attempt as well.

Proposed changes:
The procedures of the written part of the first examination do not require any changes at this time. The current form of oral presentations will be dropped as of the Spring, 2013 semester. Students will be required to give an oral presentation about their pre-dissertation projects once a year but it will not be part of the first examination.

Next steps:
We will follow up on the proposed changes and will continuously monitor whether any changes in the learning goals or in the first examination procedures are needed. Evaluations will involve students who had taken the exam previously.

Second Examination

The Second Examination is administered by the student’s advisory committee and is an oral examination of two hours duration based on the three areas of scholarship that have been approved by the student’s committee and reviewed by the Curriculum and Examination Committee.

Learning goals:
a. Students will demonstrate knowledge of both historic and current scholarship.
b. Students will demonstrate the ability to evaluate critically the relevant research literature.
c. Students will demonstrate familiarity with issues that intersect with related disciplines.
d. Students will demonstrate an understanding of the important areas for further research.
This review is based on the following data: 1. Faculty questionnaire: 3 sections, 23 questions including open ended questions and ratings using a 5-point Likert scale; 8 central faculty filled it out.
2. Student survey: 18 questions targeting students’ experience and opinions; 7 students filled it out.

Findings: 1. In overall, the faculty of the program is satisfied with the current format of the second examination. Differences in view are related to the structure of the exam: e.g., whether students can use a power point presentation to introduce their 3 topics or whether students are required to write a synthesis paper on each topic. The faculty survey and follow up discussion in the Curriculum and Examination committee revealed that faculty follow different practices. Even the same mentors may have somewhat different requirements depending on the given student’s strengths and weaknesses.
2. This was an initial survey that only included 7 out of 27 students who had taken the exam. The survey showed some mixed results. 88% of the students think that the procedures of the second examination helped them to design their dissertation project; 72 % of the students think it helped them to develop their academic writing skills; 100 % of the students think that the topics they have chosen for the second examination proved to be completely or at least somewhat relevant to their dissertation project; 72 % of the students think that the questions that they were asked during the exam were the ones they had expected. At least in part, this seems to be the result of their regular meetings with their advisor and other committee members. The number of hours the students spent with their advisors in preparation for the examination varied between 4-25, the average was 12 hours. In addition, the students met with the other committee members to discuss their readings for 2-18 hours, for an average of 8 hours.

Proposed changes: Based on students’ comments and in line with the Graduate Center’s efforts to decrease the time to graduation, we are considering the combination of our pre-dissertation research project requirement and the second examination.

Next steps:
We need to collect more data from the students who had taken the exam and we need to have further discussions among the members of the Curriculum and Examination Committee.

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