COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATIONS IN THE DOCTORAL PROGRAM
Department of Criminology, Law and Society
George Mason University

Approved by the Faculty December 2013
Updated September 2017

Purpose

To document the comprehensive exam process for doctoral students in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society (CLS) at George Mason University by:

- Identifying CLS courses and faculty associated with each of the three core exam areas;
- Addressing the timeline and eligibility requirements for taking the exams;
- Suggesting ways students might prepare for exams;
- Describing the administration of the exams; and
- Discussing expectations for performance, grading decisions, and appeals.

Faculty Affiliations and Courses

Crime and Crime Policy

Faculty: Dong, Koper, Lum, Weisburd

Required course: Crime and Crime Policy (760)

Elective CRIM courses: Politics of Crime Policy (761), Crime and Place (762), Sentencing (764), Corrections (744), related special topics courses (795)

Justice and Law

Faculty: Gallagher, Merola, Johnson, Willis

Required courses: Theories of Justice (700); Behavior of Law (720)

Elective CRIM courses: The Constitution, Criminal Procedure, and Security (721), Law and Social Control (723), Courts and Constitutional Law (730), related special topics courses (795)

Justice Organizations, Administration and Leadership

Faculty: Mastrofski, Rudes, Taxman, Yang

Required course: Justice Organization and Administration (740)

Elective CRIM courses: Justice Organizations and Processes (509), Policing in a Democratic Society (510), Conduct of Justice Organizations at the Street Level (741), Leadership in Justice

1 Please refer to the University Catalog or the PhD curriculum advising worksheet for a full list of courses (including courses taught by other departments) that qualify as electives in each substantive comprehensive exam area. Please refer to the Comprehensive Exam section of the CLS website for a list of CRIM 795 (special topics) courses that apply to each substantive exam area.
Exam Format and Schedule

Doctoral students take written examinations in two of three core areas: a) Crime and Crime Policy; b) Justice and Law; and/or c) Justice Organizations, Administration and Leadership. Exams in each area are offered twice a year, on the following schedule:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exam Area</th>
<th>Fall Semester</th>
<th>Spring Semester</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crime and Crime Policy</td>
<td>Mid September</td>
<td>Mid February</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice and Law</td>
<td>Early December</td>
<td>Mid April</td>
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<tr>
<td>JOAL</td>
<td>Mid October</td>
<td>Mid March</td>
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Exams will be offered as a take-home exam to be completed within a 96 hour time frame (4 days). Each four day exam will be offered Thursday-Sunday. The exact dates for the fall semester exams will be announced by the Graduate Director no later than May 15; the dates for the spring semester exams will be announced no later than September 15. Exam dates will be sent to all students via e-mail and posted on the department website.

Students taking an exam at the same time may collectively work with the Graduate Director to select a different four day schedule (to accommodate documented personal or professional obligations, religious holidays, etc.), but all students must take the exam during the same four day period. (For example: Rather than Thursday-Sunday, the group may select Monday-Thursday.)

Under exceptional circumstances, students may request to take an exam on a different monthly schedule. To do so, a student must submit a formal request to the Graduate Director and the chair of the relevant exam committee (who will confer with the other committee members). The decision to grant the student’s request is at the discretion of the committee.

Timeline and Eligibility

Full-time doctoral students are expected to complete and pass exams in two areas by the end of their third year. This means that full-time students should aim to finish all of their required coursework in the first two years of the CLS program. The exam schedule allows students to take more than one exam per semester, and students are strongly encouraged to take their exams in quick succession in order to move through the program at an appropriate pace. It is also recommended that students use their exam preparation as an opportunity to identify a research idea and begin to develop a dissertation prospectus/proposal.
Students will be eligible to take a comprehensive exam once they have completed the following coursework:

1. three of the four required analytical methods courses (with the exception of the analytical elective);
2. three of the four required substantive core courses (including the core course(s) in the exam area); and
3. two elective courses within the comprehensive exam area.

Additionally, students must be in good standing at the time of the exam, complying with all George Mason University guidelines (i.e., making satisfactory progress toward their degree as defined in the CLS section of the University Catalog).

Finally, students must file a notice of intent with the Graduate Director to sit for any exam eight weeks before they intend to take it. This will allow faculty adequate time to prepare the exam. Although such notice does not obligate students to take the exam, students may not take an exam unless the intent has been filed.

**Preparing for the Exam**

The purpose of the comprehensive exams is for students to demonstrate that they have a strong understanding of a particular research area and that they can exercise independence of thought. This requires an ability to recognize, recall, explain clearly and precisely, apply, and synthesize the major research concepts, findings, theories, methodologies, and debates within the field itself, including any assumptions and policy implications and/or consequences. This then forms a knowledge base for students to show that they have moved beyond describing and summarizing information and toward synthesizing information and thinking critically about it.

That is, students must show that they are able to:

- **Apply** – select, transfer, and use data and principles to complete a task or solve a problem in another familiar situation;
- **Analyze** – break down knowledge into parts to explore understandings and relationships; see how parts relate to each other and an overall structure/purpose;
- **Evaluate** – justify a decision or course of action through assessing and critiquing ideas and concepts using specific standards and criteria;
- **Create** – develop, integrate, and combine ideas into a new product, plan, or way of viewing things that is new to him or her.

In short, in the course of taking the comprehensive exams, students must show the faculty that they are developing the skills of an independent scholar – balancing breadth with depth of understanding and making thoughtful judgments about the material they are reading and discussing. Students should show independence of thought and the ability to develop their own place within existing scholarship in a way that advances scientific knowledge.

To prepare for exams, students should begin with the material covered in the required and elective graduate CRIM courses, which provides an important introduction to the relevant literature in an area. Taking courses with faculty associated with a core exam area will give students valuable insights into some of the salient issues associated with that area. Consequently, all students are encouraged to take

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2 This is taken from Bloom’s Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain, available at: [http://ctfe.gmu.edu/teaching/blooms-taxonomy/](http://ctfe.gmu.edu/teaching/blooms-taxonomy/)
classes with faculty who teach in the areas covered by the exams they plan to take. Faculty will not lead directed reading courses (CRIM 796) for comprehensive exam preparation. Outside of class, students are responsible for reading beyond the material covered in courses and are encouraged to meet with committee members in order to identify additional relevant scholarship within the field.

Frequent and meaningful discussions between students and faculty are crucial to successful preparation for the comprehensive exams. The forms these take will vary across committees, as there is no single path to fulfilling the exam goals listed above. For example, some committee members may encourage students to submit a limited number of practice questions, which are then used to provide helpful feedback on the student’s progress toward the goals discussed above. Others may help arrange informal reading groups. Students are strongly encouraged to attend departmental workshops that focus on the comprehensive exams, as these will provide students with information about exam content, relevant literature and issues in the field, available preparation assistance, faculty expectations, etc. In addition, students are encouraged to attend talks, presentations and other events to learn more about scholarship and new ideas in the field.

Exam Administration

- Comprehensive exams will be administered as a take-home exam over a four-day (96 hour) period.

- Students in each exam area will be provided with a list of questions to answer. The format and content of these questions will be determined by the committee for each core area. Exams may include multiple questions of which students have a choice to answer, required questions that students must answer, or a combination of both types of questions. Students should refer to past comprehensive examinations for examples of previous test formats, although test formats may change from sitting to sitting.

- Students will receive the exam questions from the Graduate Director via their Mason e-mail account. Students will submit their completed exams **electronically via e-mail and in hard copy** to the Graduate Director within 96 hours (e.g. if a student receives their exam questions at 9am Thursday, they must submit their completed exam by 9am the following Monday).

- Once a student has received their exam questions and until they submit their completed exam, the student must not discuss or share the questions or their answers with anyone, either in person or electronically. (Exception: students may request clarification on questions from members of the comprehensive exam committee.) The work students submit should be their own; it should not be edited by anyone. Students are strongly cautioned to avoid even the suspicion of plagiarism.

- Students must sign a document confirming that they completed the exam independently, did not discuss or share the questions or their answers with anyone in or outside of Mason (either in person or electronically), and complied with the Mason Honor Code: [http://oai.gmu.edu/the-mason-honor-code-2/](http://oai.gmu.edu/the-mason-honor-code-2/). Violating these rules will result in a failing grade on the exam and likely termination from the doctoral program. Students suspected of violating the Mason Honor Code will be referred to the Honor Committee; students found to have violated the Honor Code will be dismissed from the doctoral program.

- Completed exams should be approximately 8000 words, but no more than 10,000 words. Students must include a reference list for all citations (not included in the word count).
Once completed exams have been submitted, the Graduate Director will assign each exam an anonymous number, and will forward all exams to the comprehensive exam committee for grading.

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see the Graduate Director and contact the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at 993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through ODS: http://ods.gmu.edu

Students who experience a medical or family emergency during the four-day exam period that may affect their ability to complete the exam must contact the Graduate Director immediately. The student will be required to provide appropriate documentation of the emergency.

Grading Decisions and Appeals

Each comprehensive examination will be graded by a minimum of three faculty members affiliated with the particular core area. When necessary, a CLS faculty member not affiliated with the core area, but with relevant expertise, may be assigned to grade an exam. Exams will be graded in a timely manner, and results will be provided via email to each student no later than three weeks after the date of the examination.

Grading Criteria: Answers will be evaluated in terms of accuracy, breadth, critical evaluation, synthesis, reconciliation of conflicting information, and the ability to merge across disciplinary boundaries. To pass, students must demonstrate their capacity to be independent scholars. This means that answers must go beyond simply reviewing and summarizing the literature. The committee will be looking for answers that weave together a well organized and compelling response supported by logic, theory, and research evidence.

Grading Decisions: Each faculty member will grade each exam holistically and will assign each exam either a Pass or a Fail grade. The faculty committee may meet to review and discuss grading decisions and student exams.

To pass a comprehensive exam, a majority of the graders must assign a passing grade. At the discretion of each committee, examinations may be passed with honors. In the event a student does not pass an exam, the committee will provide the student with detailed feedback on their examination. Graded examinations will not be returned to students.

Students will receive only a single opportunity to repeat a failed comprehensive exam across two exam areas. A student receiving a cumulative of two failed exams within or across the two core exam areas will be dismissed from the program.

Grade Appeals: Within two weeks of notification of an exam failure, students may appeal their failure in writing to the Chair of the Department. Students may appeal their grade based on one or more of the following: (a) the exam itself; (b) the grading of the exam; or (c) extenuating circumstances that affected their performance on the exam. The Department Chair will make a decision as to whether the appeal has merit, and will decide upon the procedures for reviewing the appeal.