

Department of Political Science

Protocol for the Administration and Evaluation of Comprehensive Examinations

Administration of Comprehensive Examinations

Which type of comprehensive examination is required for successful completion of the master's degree program: oral, written, or both?

Students may choose either a non-thesis option or a thesis option for the M.A. degree. Students who select the non-thesis option are required to take both written and oral examinations in three fields; the "Core" and two specific substantive fields selected by the student and the department's Graduate Coordinator. Students may choose from the fields of *American Government & Politics*, *Political Theory*, *International Relations*, or *Comparative Politics*. Students participating in the dual JD/MA program may have one field in *Law*. Students may take an exam in a field if they have taken at least three courses in that field, and students may combine courses in Comparative and IR into one field or select them as separate examination fields.

Does the program allow a thesis or master's project defense in lieu of the comprehensive examination?

The oral defense of the thesis counts as both a thesis defense and as a comprehensive examination for students who select the thesis option. During the defense, students are asked broad questions covering the breadth of coursework as well as the thesis content.

When are comprehensive examinations scheduled and who schedules them?

Comprehensive examinations are given once in the fall semester and once in the spring semester. Students taking the exams must be in their last semester of coursework. The department's Graduate Coordinator schedules the exams. Students must notify the Graduate Coordinator of their intent to take the exams by the fifth week of the semester.

What is the format of the comprehensive examination?

Comprehensive examinations will include both a take-home written exam and an oral exam. Students are given the questions by the Graduate Coordinator and have one week to complete and return their responses on the written portion. Students will answer two questions on each of the three sections of the exam (for a total of 6 questions). Responses are typically 6 – 10 typewritten pages in response to each question. Strong written answers are coherent essays that demonstrate an understanding of – and ability to synthesize – the relevant literature. The reading list for your comprehensive exams is drawn from the syllabi from your coursework. Because courses are redesigned each time they are offered, exam questions also are redesigned each semester.

Evaluation of Comprehensive Examinations

Who evaluates the comprehensive examination?

A departmental Comprehensive Examination Committee writes and evaluates the comprehensive examination. The Committee includes one expert reviewer per subject area (i.e., a professor of

statistics evaluates all comprehensive exam questions related to statistics, a theory expert evaluates all questions related to theory, etc.) The Graduate Coordinator selects the student's Oral Examination Committee based upon the questions chosen and answered. The Oral Examination Committee includes at least one representative for each examination field. Students may receive "Pass with Distinction," "Pass," or "Fail."

How is the comprehensive examination evaluated?

The student's overall performance on the written and oral components of the exam must be acceptable to the Comprehensive Examination Committee. A favorable vote by a majority of the Committee is needed for the student to pass the examination.

The written component of the exam is administered roughly two weeks before the oral component. If the student fails any portion of the written exam, the student will have the opportunity to re-take that exam field the following semester. A student must pass all written exams prior to taking the oral exam.

How are the results communicated to the Graduate School?

Since the thesis defense serves as both a thesis defense and a comprehensive exam, both the Thesis Defense Results form and the Comprehensive Examination Results form will be submitted to the Graduate School for students who take the thesis option. The Comprehensive Examination Results form is the only form submitted for students who select the non-thesis option. It is the student's responsibility to bring the comprehensive results page to the oral exam (available through the links on the graduate program section of the department's web page), get the form signed by faculty, deliver a copy to the Department's secretary, and file the form with the Graduate School.