SOCI OCIOLOGY COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION:
The “Comp Exam” as terminal MA experience

Policy statement and what to expect from the exam

The comprehensive examination is an alternative to the thesis or project culminating experience for the Sociology MA. A comprehensive examination is an assessment of the student’s ability to integrate the knowledge of sociology, to show critical and independent thinking, and to demonstrate mastery of sociological subject matter. The following is important information for students preparing for and planning to take the comprehensive exam:

a) The comprehensive exams will typically be administered during the last two weekends of the semester and prior to final exam week. Students will have access from the beginning of the semester to bibliographies and sample questions in the three areas of the exam – theory, methods/stats, and a substantive area – to aid the student’s preparation for the exam. Questions will be written by the faculty who are assessing the comprehensive exam. During the two weekends when the student takes the exam, the first weekend will focus on theory and methods/stats, and the second weekend will focus on the substantive area. By Friday at 10 am of the weekend of the exam, the student will receive through email the comprehensive exam packet, which will include the exam questions and directions. The student is required to write up their responses in a word document and to turn in their document through an email attachment by the following Monday morning by 10 am.

b) The format of the exam is written; it requires that the student spends the assigned weekends writing up survey and analytical-style answers in a written document that fully and critically answers the posed comprehensive exam questions in three areas – theory, methods/stats, and a substantive area.

c) The general topical emphases that define the content of the exam are “theory”, “methods/statistics,” and a substantive area of specialization within Sociology (ex. “Race”, “Gender”, “Criminology & Deviancy”) chosen by the student in conjunction with the faculty adviser from a list of available topics. Students should have taken at least one graduate seminar in the substantive area of specialization or completed a related independent study.

d) The student’s exam responses are assessed by full time faculty in Sociology. A total of three full time sociology faculty members will review the student’s exam responses. Exams are rates on a pass/fail basis with the following categories: fail, low pass, pass, high pass. Any of the three passing grades is considered a pass. The final assessment of pass/fail is determined by what the majority faculty (at or above 2 out of 3) determine as the essays’ warranted grade.

e) The student has the option to retake up to all three portions of the exam if she/he fails any portion of the exam – for example, the student can retake only the methods/stats portion of the exam if she/he did not pass this portion. The student must retake these portions the following semester. The student can retake these portions one time only.

Study preparation

- Start early so you can review, read, and take preparatory notes on the books and articles listed in the bibliographies. You will use these articles and books and cite them correctly in your answers.
- Meet with the faculty members who will be grading your responses and seek guidance if you feel stuck.
• Review the courses that relate to the comprehensive exams (581, 502A, 502B, and 501T electives); review relevant books, articles, papers, and notes. We require these courses to prepare you for your terminal experiences.

• When reading and note-taking, think in terms of broad strokes:
  ✓ What are the main arguments in the field, and how can you communicate them in answering the question?
  ✓ What do these arguments say about the subject matter of sociology?
  ✓ Think in terms of areas of thought; offer a critical exploration of these areas of thought within your answers.

• Review the sample questions; practice writing out answers to these questions and seek feedback on these answers from faculty and fellow grads.
  ✓ Look at the structure of the question by exploring what these questions are getting you to answer about these areas of thought.
  ✓ *Answer all parts of the question.* Read up on and work out the parts of the question you are having a hard time answering.

• Participate in a writing/study group for comp exams; organize one among your fellow graduate students. Meet with other grads and discuss the resources on your bibliography and the sample questions. Write up sample answers and share your work. Give one another feedback and seek out and share what you learn from faculty.

**Strong answers**

• Your answers will be like developed essay answers where you build/construct your argument over several pages with the goal of **answering the question directly and critically engaging and citing as many pertinent sources as possible**. You work at home and with your notes, books, and articles around you so it is like writing a paper. You must develop an analytical answer that answers the question and cites your sources. A strong essay should:
  ✓ Demonstrate holistic knowledge of core arguments, concepts, and areas of inquiry within the sociological area of theory, methods/stats, and a substantive area.
  ✓ Answer the exam question that is posed; make sure that you answer all parts of the question. (Do not answer a question that you think we are asking; make sure you answer the exact questions posed).
  ✓ Demonstrate your study and knowledge of sociology that you have acquired over the two years in the program and through your intensive study over the semester. Do this by drawing from the bibliography of sources you’ve read to prepare for the exam. Highlight core arguments of authors; show how these authors offer the arguments that answer your question.
  ✓ Cite the sources you draw from correctly and widely. Show your engagement with the assigned bibliography. You must correctly cite all sources so if you bring in other resources, be sure that you have the full citation of those sources on hand if you end up citing them in your exam answers.