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## STUDYING FOR THE QUALIFYING EXAM

The subtitle of this article could be, "Or what does the faculty want you to know?" You can spend months (and some do) devising intricate strategies for second-guessing what you will be asked on your exam, planning for trick questions, and never feeling that you know enough. Or you can make a planned attack, making the best use of your time and abilities.

In the last issue of this newsletter, we discussed the importance of dismantling the big chore of writing a dissertation by breaking it into many smaller, less intimidating tasks. Similarly, the qualifying exam needs demystifying to make it manageable. Fear of the unknown, fueled by the inevitable rumors that float around the department about someone who failed, can reduce you to unfocused, frantic studying right up to the last minute.

To get a handle on the task of studying and passing the qualifying exam, you must 1) find out everything you can about what to expect during the exam, and 2) organize accordingly.

**What Are They Looking For?** As a Ph.D., you will be an expert and a scholar, and a task of an expert is to communicate knowledge, whether it is in the classroom or at a professional meeting.

"You've got to be able to convince people that you really know what you're talking about," says former Associate Graduate Dean Daniel Melia. "It's not just a question of what you know, it's a question of being able to impart what you know. This is one of the reasons the Graduate Council insists upon an oral examination. It's because this is something that you are going to have to do in your real life as a Ph.D."

Part of your task, then, is to be convincing in your arguments, as well as accurate. The exam is not a test of how

many facts you can memorize about three broad areas, but how you've organized those facts and how you can use them to bolster your arguments. Many questions will have no "right" answer. Intelligent, informed conjecture is acceptable in many cases. "Synthesize, not memorize," is a key phrase.

"We're trying to see students' ability to cope with questions, to reason on their feet," says one professor. "We're not trying to see how much they can memorize."

Departments vary in their requirements for the qualifying exam. Some have a written as well as an oral component; some require that students present a talk about their research. Whatever the format, the following tips from students who recently passed their exams may help.

**Talk to other students.** Nearly every student we talked to said it was very helpful to talk to students who had recently passed their exams, especially to those students with committee members in common. Ask other students about the format of their exams. Did the exam begin with a short summary of the candidate's academic career by either the chairperson or the candidate? Were there breaks? If your department includes a talk as part of the exam, how long was it? Did faculty members interrupt the talk with questions?

"I think the best thing I did was to talk to other people who had done it," said one student. "That was the key factor in knowing it is possible to pass."

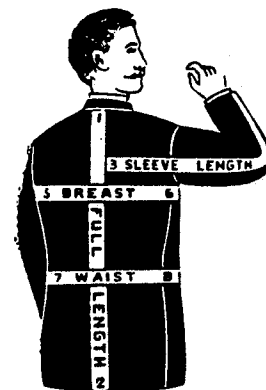
**Talk to your committee.** As obvious as it seems, many students neglect this all-important resource, even though much of the intimidating mystery of the exam lies in what these faculty members will ask.

"Graduate students don't communicate with their committees, and they are

afraid about the extent or the depth of what they know," observed one student.

Talk to your committee members. Find out what you need to know. They can help you plan (read: contain) your studying. See the related article on page 2 for suggestions on approaching your committee before the exam.

**Tailor the exam to your interests.** You may have more power than you realize when it comes to deciding what you will be asked. Ask your committee and/or other faculty members to help you delineate the areas on which you will be examined.



"It's very difficult to construct areas when you don't know how the academic field itself is structured. If you could structure your areas, you could probably pass your exam," said one student who recently passed his exam "with distinction." "I talked about the areas I was interested in, and my adviser and another faculty member helped me find academic labels for them."

**Prepare a brief outline of what you know about the three areas.** The outline structures what you know; you can plug facts into this framework to illustrate your ideas. It also shifts your study emphasis from amassing facts to reviewing and developing concepts. Take this outline with you when you talk to members of your committee. Ask them what else you need to know. It's a good way of organizing your studying.

**Present a bibliography to your committee members.** If the outline approach isn't appropriate, present a bibliography for a particular area to your committee members and ask what other sources you should study. Aim to contain your studying. Ask which publications the professor would read to review a certain area quickly and effectively.

"You have to be aggressive in your meetings with faculty members on your committee," one student advised. "Lay your cards on the table. Ask them, 'If you had three days to read to learn all of the material in one area, which one book would you read?'"

**Spend no more than three or four months studying for your exam.**

Among the graduate students we talked to, three or four months of studying was average—the shortest was an extremely well-organized three weeks. One obvious drawback to studying too long is that you can't review it all and remember what you read at the beginning.

"My biggest problem was that, although I studied a lot, I would forget everything I studied three weeks before," commented one student.

Avoid having to review the review.

**Begin studying early enough to permit time for rehearsing.** Rehearsing for your exam is vital, especially if you've never taken an oral exam. See the article on this page for advice on mock orals. Rehearsing, according to all we talked to, is more important than rushing to the library to read one more article or book, "just in case."

## THE QUALIFYING EXAM: CLEARING THE HURDLE

If the thought of taking your qualifying exam incites a *crise de nerfs*, you are not alone.

Twenty years later, Professor X recalls a sense of the conference table and himself sinking into the floor at the onset of the exam. Professor Y remembers the exact wording of a question that he couldn't answer. Both professors passed their exams; both are now tenured professors at Berkeley and regularly serve as committee members on qualifying exams.

The lesson: No one is perfect, not even the people examining you. And they don't expect you to be perfect, either.

Most people admit that there are two challenges to the qualifying exam: learning the material and cultivating the poise and confidence to communicate what you have learned. Many maintain that the first is easier than the second.

"The thing that hurts most students is not their preparation, but the psychological shock of the exam," says former Associate Graduate Dean Daniel Melia. "For most people, this is the first oral examination they've ever had."

We talked with Dr. Robert Mixson, counseling psychologist at the Counseling Center, about common fears and how students can prepare themselves psychologically for this rite of passage.

**What are you telling yourself?** If you're preparing for your qualifying exam, some of the following may sound familiar.

- The faculty knows much more than I do and will trip me up with tricky questions.
- I must be able to answer every question I am asked.
- I must review everything. I don't have enough time to review it all, but if I don't, I won't pass.
- I will go blank and not be able to answer anything.
- If I fail the exam, my husband (wife, parents, adviser, etc.) will never speak to me again.
- Not many people have failed in my department, but there is always the odd case. I will be that case.

All these suppositions give rise to anxiety and with good reason. It is

intimidating to feel you have to know everything about a given topic and to perform well under pressure.

Try the following strategies, gleaned from conversations with Mixson and several graduate students, to help you minimize your anxiety and maximize your effectiveness before and during the exam.



### BEFORE THE EXAM

**Face the Facts About Failing.** Very few students fail their qualifying exams—since 1975, only 6% of Berkeley graduate students have failed their first exams. While many students say they realize that most people pass, the following is a typical comment.

"I had heard that everybody passes," remarked one student who recently passed her exam, "but I went in feeling that I had a 50-50 chance."

The fact is that chances are excellent that you will pass.

**Recognize that your committee wants you to pass.** The professors on your committee have a great interest in seeing you do well. They selected you for graduate study and trained you in courses. You will represent their department when you leave the University.

"I didn't get any question that was in any way unfair," said one student.

"The professors were really cordial and tried to put me at ease," said another. "They weren't trying to intimidate me at all."

"It was not a grill atmosphere," said a third. "It was an attempt to give me

every opportunity to show what I knew."

Several students mentioned that committee members went so far as to re-state questions of other committee members so that the student would understand.

"They'd start giving me hints, leading me in the right direction, restating the question," said one student. "And when I came back in after the second break, they were smiling and seemed genuinely happy that the exam was successful."

**Don't fly blind—find out what to expect.** As we said on page 1, a major obstacle of the qualifying exam is that most students have never had such an exam and therefore don't know what to expect. Finding out all you can about what to expect is a sound strategy for calming your nerves and preparing for a successful exam.

Talk to students who have passed their exams, especially those who have at least one committee member in common with you. Inquire about the typical format of an exam in your department. Find out what you are expected to know so that you can focus your studying.

**Stop studying and start practicing.** Be sure to give yourself time to rehearse. Nearly every student we talked to reported that practicing for the exam was very helpful.

Besides giving you a chance to review what you know about the subject matter, a mock exam gives you the experience of answering questions before a group and makes you feel more confident in that setting.

"It is much more important to practice in an oral setting than it is to pick up a few more facts," Mixson says. "One of the common sources of failure when it does happen is that people procrastinate so long about studying that they never get rehearsal time."

Initially, suggests Mixson, you may want to practice alone, using a tape recorder. Rehearse answering questions you are fairly certain you will be asked. If there is a question you dread being asked because you've never fully understood the issue, prepare an answer.

"The things I had problems with on the exam were the things I'd had problems with before conceptually and never followed up on," said one student.

If you have an oral presentation as part of the exam, practice it several times, using a blackboard if you will do so during the real exam. As one stu-

dent says in the accompanying column, committee members often interrupt students during their presentations. If your talk is well-practiced, you'll have no problem in picking up where you left off.

Often major advisers as well as other students and postdocs are glad to give you a mock exam. Some students begin with a mock oral with other students and then move to one with postdocs and faculty.

**Prepare for the occasional mistake.** Imagining a perfect exam, in which you know every answer and are consistently brilliant for two or three hours, is simply not realistic.

"You shouldn't even imagine a perfect exam," says Mixson. "You should imagine that you are going to make a mistake and plan on how you are going to handle it."

Rehearse saying that you don't know. And plan what you will say in case you draw a blank. Mixson suggests that you gain time by saying, "Let me take some time to consider that question." Your committee will understand and wait for you to recover.

**Imagine your options if you don't pass your exam.** If you're going to worry, you might as well go a step beyond and figure out what you are going to do if you fail. Mixson suggests developing a practical plan, just in case. What course could you follow? What job might you be interested in? What re-training would be helpful? How could you juggle your finances?

**Reaffirm that you chose to be in graduate school and that this is what you really want to do.** The qualifying exam is a milestone on the way to your goal.

"I started asking myself hard questions about whether or not this was what I really wanted to do," said one student. "And I realized that what I'm doing is what I really want to do."

Reaffirming your choice gets you out of the victim/inquisitor model, says Mixson.

#### DURING THE EXAM

**Approach the exam in the style of a peer.** Your committee is judging your ability to reason, synthesize, and communicate. But in many ways you are a peer in knowledge, particularly in your specialty areas. You may find that committee members are stimulated by your

answers and talk among themselves.

"I was really surprised during my exam that someone would ask a question, and someone else would respond with another question," reported one student. "I felt I was giving them information they didn't have and valuable insights."

**If you are nervous, say so.** If you're nervous and not thinking too clearly when asked a question, say so. Keep in mind that the committee members are instructed by the Graduate Division to "try to humanize an inherently difficult examination" and that the chair should "do all in his or her power to put the student at ease."

"Saying, 'I'm a little nervous right now; I'll have to get myself organized' is fine," says Mixson. And it will give you time to think.

**Take control of your exam as much as possible.** Although you cannot know the questions you will be asked, if you have talked to your committee and other students, you should have a good idea of what to expect. In some cases, you may be asked your preference as to the order of topics. And if you have prepared answers to questions you are fairly certain you will be asked, you will have well-organized responses with no unfortunate tangents that may lead to questions you can't answer.

**Take your time in answering questions.** Listen to the questions and give yourself time to think about them. Although the silence can be unnerving while you think about an answer, rushing in with a disorganized response is worse.

If you feel awkward about the time it takes to think, try one student's technique: She imitated the thoughtful manner of one of her committee members, who always said, "Well, let's see," when asked a question. This gives you time to think.

**If you can't answer a question, say so.** Don't pretend that you know the answer. Going off on a tangent is a transparent attempt to avoid the question. Most committees will simply restate the question. Say you don't know.

**If you can't answer a question or feel you have given a poor or incorrect answer, don't dwell on it.** Remember that no one expects you to know all the answers. Most likely the very people who are examining you didn't know all the answers on *their*

qualifying exams.

"You can't worry about what's going to happen as a consequence of doing badly," says Mixson. "That's the thing that gets people the most anxious and impairs their concentration."

Concentrate on the next question, the one you will field with confidence.

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