Introduction

The comprehensive exam process is designed as a means to assess the depth of a student’s content knowledge and ability to communicate, synthesize, and critique the relevant research literature related to a topic chosen by the student. The Ph.D. program in Higher Education requires students to complete three interrelated literature reviews that serve as a foundation for understanding relevant dimensions of an overarching research question chosen by the student in the field of higher education.

Eligibility and Course Registration. Students may undertake the comprehensive exam once they complete academic coursework or are missing no more than two classes. All required courses in the Higher Education core (ELPS 419, 427, 430, 431, and 459) and at least six hours from the required research core must be completed prior to participating in the comprehensive exam process. At a minimum, students must have completed both RMTD 420 Educational Research I (Qualitative) and RMTD 421 Educational Research II (Quantitative) prior to undertaking the comprehensive exam process. If no credit courses are being taken during the fall or spring terms in which a student is taking the comprehensive exam, the student should enroll in ELPS 610 Doctoral Study (a fee-based, non-credit course). This course meets the continuous enrollment requirement for all graduate students.

All doctoral students must successfully pass comprehensive exams to move forward with their proposal and dissertation. It is expected that students will approach the exam in a professional and serious manner reflective of the implications associated with it. Students must meet deadlines outlined in this document and extensions will not be provided except in circumstances such as a family death or serious illness. Additionally, students will be provided only one additional attempt to successfully complete the comprehensive exam process should they not complete it or fail the exam during the first attempt.

The comprehensive exam has two clearly delineated elements, each of which is described below:

Element 1: Prospectus

A written prospectus that clearly outlines the topic to be explored is required and must be approved by the Higher Education faculty before a student may move forward with writing the comprehensive exam. This narrative, which should not exceed seven double-spaced pages in length (the three required bibliographies are not included in the seven pages), should be organized around and respond to each of the following:

- In your introduction to the prospectus, you are specifically asked to identify the overarching research question to be explored in the integrative literature reviews and three specific focus areas within the literature that will be addressed. Importantly, for each review area, identify a key question that will guide each review. In your introduction describe how each separate review area relates to the broader question chosen for the comprehensive exam. Your narrative should describe and cite key research that will be critiqued in the full exam once you receive authorization to proceed.
- Why is it important to investigate these particular questions? Provide a rationale to justify the significance of your topic.
How does the literature proposed for review relate to the research and other literature examined in higher education courses you completed in the program? Offer a brief description for how the literature in these courses may, in part, inform the writing of each review (knowing, of course, that the review will not only include literature within the domain of these courses, but also literature that extends beyond the actual literature read within the class), and why these courses may help frame your reviews.

Include as part of the prospectus a preliminary bibliography of at least 10 to 15 sources in appropriate APA format for each of the three sub-areas that will be reviewed (e.g., provide a separate bibliography for each sub-area to be reviewed). Students are strongly recommended to place priority on finding empirically-based publications in peer-reviewed journals. Additional research that is described in other publications (i.e., books, book chapters, monographs) is acceptable. When feasible, students should avoid relying on secondary sources when citing key research studies. Sources selected should relate directly to the subject matter focus within each of the three proposed review areas.

Following the prospectus review by faculty, program faculty will schedule a face-to-face meeting between the student and two faculty members to provide feedback. The goal of this meeting is to offer suggestions to students regarding the three sub-areas and the literature being proposed for review. Appendix A provides a copy of the evaluative rubric used to assess the prospectus. Depending on the strength of the prospectus, the student will be asked to either:

1) Move forward with the exam as prescribed by the prospectus;
2) Move forward with the exam, but integrating specific feedback provided by the faculty;
3) Integrate faculty feedback and re-submit the prospectus prior to starting the exam; or
4) Integrate feedback and re-submit prospectus during the next exam cycle.

It is important to understand that the topic approved in the prospectus may not be changed while completing the actual work of the written reviews. Consequently, students are asked to take great care in selecting a topic and questions and to consider carefully their desire to follow through on the completion of the final product before asking faculty to read and approve a prospectus. Additionally, it is assumed that the student has completed significant advance work as part of the prospectus to ensure sufficient literature to inform each of the three literature reviews.

The prospectus should be submitted electronically as a Word document to the Program Chair and Program Coordinator along with the formal application, which can be found at: http://www.luc.edu/media/lucedu/education/forms/comps/comps_hied-phd_appl.pdf

Element 2: Integrative Literature Review

Once the prospectus has been formally approved by faculty, students may immediately begin the exam process. The exam should be formatted as follows: a) an introduction to the exam that includes a clear and concise purpose for the review, identification of the key questions that will be addressed and their significance, and how the exam is organized (one or two pages at most), b) the three literature reviews (15 pages each, excluding references), and c) a final section detailing conclusions that you have reached as result of your literature reviews including relevant areas not adequately addressed in the literature and additional research questions that may arise from your review.

The exam should include 1 inch margins on all sides, 12-point Times New Roman font, and double spacing between lines. The exam should adhere to APA 6th edition standards. Any exam with significant APA issues will not be evaluated and the exam attempt will be considered a fail and returned to the
student. References/bibliographies should be submitted with each individual review as opposed to one list at the end of the document.

When drafting each review, students would do well to select literature that enhances one’s understanding of the topic chosen, focusing on (1) directly relevant research and (2) widely-cited essays, theories, or empirical studies that are germane to the topic. It is expected that the quality of academic sources will be high and students will avoid the use of secondary sources. Students should strive to construct three synthetic reviews of the literature, culling out key themes and the research that supports them, rather than listing one study after another in an exhaustive attempt to “cover” the field. Remember, this is not a “book report,” but a complex analysis and interpretation of existing literature on the topic.

Exam submission. When students complete their reviews, they are to submit the full exam to the Program Chair *electronically* on or before the due date. Generally speaking, students will have approximately 10 weeks to complete this assignment and faculty will provide results to students within about two months. Faculty will evaluate the reviews and record a grade of “Pass,” “Conditional Pass,” or “No Pass.” Appendix B contains a copy of the evaluative rubric used to assess the submitted exam. Should students receive a conditional pass, they may be required to resubmit a portion of the exam to be re-evaluated prior to determination of a final outcome. Students who pass this element of the comprehensive examination will be approved to move forward with their dissertation proposal.

**Deadlines & Timeframe**

Key deadlines are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FALL 2015</th>
<th>Spring 2016</th>
<th>Summer 2016</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 1, 2015</td>
<td>Prospectus Due Electronically to Program Director</td>
<td>Prospectus Due Electronically to Program Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week of Sept. 14th</td>
<td>Meeting with Faculty for Evaluation</td>
<td>Week of Apr. 11th</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 28, 2015</td>
<td>Exam begins</td>
<td>May 2, 2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 7, 2015</td>
<td>Exam Due Electronically to Program Director</td>
<td>April 18, 2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 18, 2016</td>
<td>Notification of Exam Results</td>
<td>May 23, 2016</td>
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<td>September 5, 2016</td>
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Frequently Asked Questions

Q. Will my comprehensive exam serve as my chapter two for my dissertation proposal?

A. If your comprehensive exam topic relates to what you would like to do with your dissertation, your final product may serve as an early draft of chapter two. Your final proposal and chapter two will need to reflect the more narrow questions posed for your dissertation as well as go deeper into the literature in that area. Therefore, the structure of the exam will assist you in beginning that process, but should not be considered a final product.

Q. Do I have to use the same topic for my comprehensive exam as I intend to use for my dissertation? What if I am unsure of the topical area for my dissertation?

A. You do not have to mirror topics for your comprehensive exam and dissertation. However, if you can use a similar topical area it will assist in moving you forward with your dissertation research as well.

Q. If my prospectus is approved, and I begin the exam process, but realize I will need more time to complete the literature reviews, can I request an extension?

A. Extensions will rarely be given for the comprehensive exam process. Remember, this is a formal examination of your knowledge and ability to communicate it. As such, failure to meet the deadlines will result in a failed attempt. It is important that you carefully consider when you intend to take the exam to ensure that you have sufficient time to dedicate to the process.

Q. What happens if I fail my exam?

A. First, it is important to note that the process is set-up to assist you through substantive faculty feedback on your prospectus. Faculty will not authorize you to move forward unless they are certain you have a manageable topic. Second, most issues arise in the comprehensive exam process because students either: a) do not do sufficient ground work in the literature when preparing the prospectus and remain relatively unfamiliar with the literature as they begin the exam, or b) wait until close to the deadline to begin writing and cannot complete the exam in the shortened timeframe. These are both avoidable problems. Should you be unsuccessful during your first attempt at the exam, you may go through the process one additional time. You will be asked to complete the entire process over beginning with the prospectus.
### Appendix A
**Comprehensive Exam: Prospectus Evaluative Rubric**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERIA</th>
<th>EXCEPTIONAL</th>
<th>ACCEPTABLE</th>
<th>UNACCEPTABLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description of Topic</td>
<td>Work provides complex description of topic of interest clearly defining core concepts; demonstrates nature of relationships among and between each literature review</td>
<td>Work adequately describes topic, provides definitions for core concepts, and addresses relationship between three sections to the overarching topic</td>
<td>Work does not describe the topic in full, core concepts are vague or undefined, insufficient attention paid to linking three sections to one another and the broader topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification of Topic</td>
<td>Work provides complex and comprehensive justification of topic; justification is grounded in the higher education literature; justification and citations are timely and apply to higher education</td>
<td>Work provides adequate justification of topic and sufficient support from existing literature</td>
<td>Work does not articulate an adequate rationale for exploration of topic or does not situate justification in pertinent existing literature; topic does not relate to higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounding of Topic in Course Work</td>
<td>Work provides evidence that proposed topic relates to higher education course work; draws sophisticated connections among and between topics and courses; provides ample evidence of how literature from course and related to course content inform project</td>
<td>Work provides sufficient evidence of how course work will inform proposed topic; paper demonstrates at minimum evidence of how course readings may influence each literature review</td>
<td>Work does not provide evidence of how course content connects to proposed literature reviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary Bibliography</td>
<td>Prospectus provides at minimum 10 – 15 references for each literature review drawing from both course content and external materials; clear indication of which references pertain to which literature review; references reflect central resources for each literature review</td>
<td>Prospectus provides 10 – 15 references for each literature review, but they are drawn primarily from course content or are missing several central resources relating to the topic.</td>
<td>Prospectus does not provide between 10 – 15 references per proposed literature review; references do not reflect proposed topics; organization of references makes it unclear to which topic they fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate Structure, APA Style, and Grammar</td>
<td>The final product is well organized, structured in way that builds on the argument or central thesis, and is free of errors related to grammar or APA style</td>
<td>The final product is well organized and clearly structured with only minimal grammatical and APA style errors</td>
<td>The final product suffers from problems associated with organization and structure and/or grammatical and APA style errors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations:**
- Move forward with the exam as prescribed by the prospectus;
- Move forward with the exam, but integrating specific feedback provided by the faculty;
- Integrate faculty feedback and re-submit the prospectus prior to starting the exam; or
- Integrate feedback and re-submit prospectus during the next exam cycle.

**Further Notes:**
## Appendix B
Comprehensive Exam: Evaluative Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVALUATIVE DIMENSION</th>
<th>PASS</th>
<th>CONDITIONAL PASS</th>
<th>NO PASS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrated Understanding of Content</td>
<td>Exceptional ability to both synthesize content and identify similarities and differences between and among content areas</td>
<td>Demonstrates varying degrees of understanding of content with some accurately explained and others missing key points</td>
<td>Does not demonstrate accurate or full understanding of content; major gaps in material covered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depth of Critical Analysis</td>
<td>Depth of analysis is significant offering areas of both strength and limitation, connecting multiple dimensions of content, articulating substantive evidence-based arguments, and offering justifiable interpretations and implications</td>
<td>Depth of analysis varies greatly and lacks consistent representation of strengths and weaknesses, connections between multiple dimensions of content, arguments based on evidence, and/or meaningful interpretations</td>
<td>Depth of critical analysis is not consistent with requirements of graduate-level work and the purposes of this exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate Structure, APA Style, and Grammar</td>
<td>The final product is well organized, structured in way that builds on the argument or central thesis, and errors related to grammar or APA style are limited</td>
<td>The final product suffers from problems associated with organization and structure and/or grammatical and APA style errors</td>
<td>Final product is poorly organized, structured, and/or posses significant grammatical and/or APA style errors that diminish the overall content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Recommendations:

- [ ] Pass
- [ ] Condition Pass
- [ ] Fail

Further Notes: