



The SNRE Graduate Student Council Qualifying Exam Panel (10/16/13) Notes:

Student Experiences:

General Notes: Communication with professors is incredibly key for a good qualifying exams experience. It is also very apparent that your experience will vary quite a lot in format and focus based on the composition of your committee. Your major advisor should be the one to work with you and your committee to pin these details down and make sure everyone is on the same page.

- Kelly Monaghan – suggests being proactive and asking a lot of questions along the way. Her quals are being done in a time delimited fashion with a start time of 8 in the morning and wrapping up by five in the afternoon. She is also taking a day in between some of the questions for a rest, which while not the typical format, has been agreed upon with her advisor and committee.

Kelly met with her advisor regularly and has worked through example qual questions in preparation. This has helped her solidify expectations and ask clarifying questions.

- Nancy – Her committee was structured so members tended to support specific chapters of her dissertation. For her quals she sometimes had freedom to choose what type of question format, but often professors already have some ideas regarding how they'd like to structure the exam. Her professors stressed communication and she was able to check in before quals to make sure she understood what the professors were asking, and to clarify expectations.

She, along with other students, suggested avoiding taking classes the same semester as completing your qualifying exams. However, it was noted this is not always an option for some students.

- Betty – Her oral exam date was set 5 months ahead. In her experience that committee members may have challenging schedules and it can be hard to work around this. Their reason for selecting the beginning of her third year was so Betty could arrange to have no coursework that semester which gave her a completely independent time to deal with exams.

She was handed a reading list to provide a sense of what the questions might be. Questions were intended to be related to her specific research proposal; also there was a mixture of formats for

her questions. Betty personally found non-time limited questions more challenging as there's no set end point or sense of when to stop working on something. The open versus closed book option can also change how the professor may grade or analyze your response. She found the exams helped her think about her own research and could use the process in the future.

Faculty Recommendations:

General Notes: A thought towards your time frame is important. Qualls are not given with a mind to have you fail. Remember, you are in grad school for a reason, and faculty trust that you are skilled and smart. Few students fail them; however there are some instances where students may retake certain components of them in order to address gaps that may have been identified during the first iteration of the exams. This is one of the reasons taking them early without delay may be a more prudent choice, as there will be plenty of time to retake the exams or focus on issues if they do arise.

Students should drive the process, as the qualifying exams will ultimately benefit and affect them. Be proactive about communication with your committee.

Also, professors and other professionals serving as committee members often times have a lot of administrative duties, meetings, and other activities taking up their time. They really enjoy the opportunity qualifying exams give them to engage in meaningful conversation about science and research.

- Brian Child – indicated faculty often look for subject breadth and for some indication of you know how to do a research project. In the case of the geography department, this may mean a long lit review and a research proposal. The subject areas come from your classes, your design, and who you chose for your committee. Your committee has generally been selected to fill the niche of certain skills you are using in your work anyway. The intention is to focus not on what you don't know, but what you do.

He also suggests developing a timeline that starts early. Quite a lot of prep is needed to get to this stage. Semester 1 you generally want to identify and start setting your committee. During semester 2, perhaps identify set of skills you want from them. Your second year is a good time to get reading and topic list and you can even work with your committee to set the questions.

- Bill Lindberg - Qualifying exams is an integral part, NOT a stand-alone, in preparing you to complete your program and graduate and to determine whether you are ready to take on your dissertation work. Approaching the qualifying exams as something more may be stressful.

Google Steven Sterns at Yale University – his modest advice for graduate students has been around for a long time. Key point is your whole degree program is your responsibility, as is quals. Don't approach them passively; take responsibility for your success, as well as your ability to express yourself in writing and in-depth.

Faculty criticisms of exam responses often may be due to how superficial some written answers are, so be cognizant of this during the written portion. For the oral part, perhaps practice engaging in intellectual debate, think of your committee members as your peers. Create opportunities to engage in debate on substantive issues in your field and get involved in the give and take and become accustomed to having good discussions. The best responses in oral exams give reasoned answers. "Based on what I've read, here's what I can assert..." "Based on what I don't know, let me think about this with you out loud..." Students often think they need yes or no answers, or correct answers, but often the only definite thing is the

content. Professors want to look at your thinking skills, your skill sets, how you think around your topic.

Q & A

- How important is the lit review? :
Not everyone gets a written proposal approved by their committee before doing quals, but doing it beforehand can provide you with some practice, and helps committees understand where you're going. Not everybody will approach your research project from the same angle you take, try to understand their thinking and approaches.

Also, you need to figure out how to really synthesize the lit review, not 80 pages, but 20. This ability shows you may really understand what portion of all that information you need.

- There seems to be a lot of variety to the format and what quals look like. Can you clarify this?
While there may be some standard expectations according to your department or program (for example more quantitative departments may require proofs, etc), committee members and your

chair/major advisor may have different philosophies regarding qualifying exams, their format, and purpose. It comes down to student to seek the clarity regarding the process. Wrangle your committee and be pro-active. Format is just means, but not what dictates if you move forward or not.

- What is that week like for you? How do you set the stage?
Students described varied approaches to preparing. Some find quiet spaces on campus to study and gather their thoughts. Some chose to limit the amount of time they prepared the work before in order to have some respite before starting the exams.

Your chair will help you decide what your best preparation process. Take this as an opportunity to REALLY think about your science, and your research. View as a fun process.

- Can you get questions from left field?
Questions may sometimes seem to be from left field; however reasons for asking it may still be related. Also whoever asked the question may be pushing you to think beyond your topic.

Quals are not about what you know but how you're thinking. Often with the kinds of questions you're asked, there are no right answers.

Rather, your committee is interested in how you think through them to develop an answer. You still need some mastery of information but use them to help you figure out how to extend past them.

- What happens after orals?

You leave the room after answering your questions, and your committee members talk about things. It's generally a same day process for hearing back from your committee.

Some people don't pass on first try. Take it earlier, so they can identify the deficiency. The second time around is focused on those things in question, rather than the full blown process.

- No one talks about people who fail quals. Do people actually fail, why doesn't it come up?

People do on occasion fail, but it is not a regular, routine thing. You can recover from that. It is also better to figure out earlier than later if someone is not well-suited to doctoral degree - is there an investment that will give a return.

Your chair won't let you take the qualifying exam if you're not ready. Brian Child has had 1 out of 50 that didn't pass, mostly due to

psychological fear. Often they would do great 3 months later after adjusting to the idea of the process.

The written exam is a way to get you ready for your oral exam, a way to help ramp up the process. You can talk to committee members between the written and oral components of the exam. Take the initiative to do this. Have them share insights (if willing) about what they liked about the written responses, in order to allow you to process and continue preparing for the orals.

Also, a lot of this hinges on who you choose for your committee. Remember, if a committee member doesn't suit you, change them. You have the power to do so. Maintain regular communication. Have a full committee meeting at least 1x a year to let everyone know where you're at. Try to meet with individual committee members at least 30 min a semester, if not more.

Peer mentoring and feedback can be really important. Ask your peers about characteristics of faculty or professionals you're considering involving in your dissertation work. Also, ask them to describe their experiences and advice for taking qualifying exams.

Final Thoughts from Tom Frazer, Interim Director of SNRE

1) It's your degree program - if you're worried, interact and set the rules. Also you can guide process and make it easier for yourself

2) Often times people are afraid to take them and will delay in setting a date. Remember you're all smart people, and there's a reason you all are here. Don't worry quite so much. If you take the exam early enough, it can be a diagnostic tool.

3) Take initiative early on to engage faculty members in what they like to talk about. They want to see you succeed, and want to be part of a fair process.