

Hazing in the Discipline: The Comprehensive Examination in Political Science
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Tentative efforts lead to tentative outcomes. Therefore, give yourself fully to your endeavors. Decide to construct your character through excellent actions and determine to pay the price of a worthy goal. The trials you encounter will introduce you to your strengths. Remain steadfast...and one day you will build something that endures, something worthy of your potential. -- Epictetus

There is no order in the world around us, we must adapt ourselves to the requirements of chaos instead. -- Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*

Every year, hundreds of doctoral students move beyond their institutions into the job market, seeking positions that would ideally reflect their research interests and career goals; in times of a booming national economy, this search is often fruitful, and in times of economic downturn, positions are hard to come by. However, their freedom to actively engage this job market is directly affected by the procedural and sociological requirements of their respective graduate programs. Graduate programs have shaped their curricula based on discipline, university, and department standards, and these standards serve as both a professional hindrance and potential strength for the up-and-coming professional student. No structural component is more disputed and debated than the preliminary/comprehensive examination, in all its various incarnations, in terms of preparing/assessing/teaching political science graduate students for their future careers. However, very little has actually been written in political science about *why* the comprehensive examination is utilized, as it is often vilified but rarely analyzed outside of faculty meetings.

In the following discussion, we attempt to characterize the graduate program utilization of the preliminary/comprehensive exam by looking at different graduate program requirements. As recent test-takers ourselves, we are interested in how exams differ throughout the discipline,

or even beyond the political science field, to get a better, holistic sense of how comprehensive examinations can be structured. We argue that the decisions departments make about the structural format of their comprehensive exams can be thought of nomothetically, in that they may structure their exams according to several objectives (but not limited to): (1) to conform to perceived discipline-wide standards of written exams, (2) to establish a benchmark to assess their own graduate students, or (3) to perpetuate faculty experiences as “normal” practice for graduate students. By looking at forty-two different graduate program comprehensive exam requirements nationwide, we aim to gain insight into how the exams have been shaped at various departments.¹ The following discussion first reviews the origins of the preliminary/comprehensive examination in academia. Second, we examine the aforementioned typology, highlighted by case examples drawn from a sampling of forty-two graduate programs across the United States. Last, we review the strengths and weaknesses of the exam process, and suggest two alternatives to the exam process, using literature and experiences from outside political science where relevant.

Origins of Graduate Programs and the Comprehensive Exam

With the inception of the graduate programs in the United States at Johns Hopkins University in 1876, the American experience with institutionalized graduate degrees became a standard feature of the American education system.² However, as seen in the European experience with college training, graduate studies for a long time was primarily an option for financially wealthy families with strong inter-personal connections to university administration (which some might argue still exists today; we are unsure). Universities were generally

¹ A table is provided in Appendix 1.

² However, the first Doctor of Philosophy degree in the United States was given by Yale University in 1860. See Walters (1965) and Anderson et als. (1984).

expensive, and the pursuit of graduate degrees (primarily the doctorate) was time-intensive, in an era of no financial aid. Thus, at least in the American example, the average American was generally limited to undergraduate-level training, suitable for the time, but thus primarily reserving faculty positions for those able to afford graduate training. Combined with the small demand for university-educated labor by the end of the 19th century, universities were not overtaxed with large faculties or large graduate student populations. From 1876 to the 1930s, enrollment in graduate programs steadily increased, driven primarily by a growing demand for university educated employees, combined with considerably improved popular literacy and the explosion of the American middle class. These economic conditions led to the growth of graduate programs, meant to capitalize on the demand for future faculty. Furthermore, within this timeframe disciplines fragmented into the more familiar distinctions we know today, generating a greater market for university faculty, as new departments and disciplines permitted an expansion of the American academic community. Political science, as a distinct discipline, emerged during this time, although historically it had been a remnant of other disciplines, such as sociology, history, law, economics, anthropology, and modern languages.³ As such, political science was initially a very inter-disciplinary, specialized subfield of general social science. But with the advent of the American Political Science Association (1904), and the publication of the *American Political Science Review*, political science faculties began to establish the parameters of what it meant to do political research.

With a growing demarcation between disciplines, and the increased push for graduate training tailored to newly-defined disciplinary standards, graduate departments began to establish professionalized programs meant to cultivate graduate students suitable for their participation in the academic market. The rise of the “professional student” meant that departments developed

³ Ricci, David. 1984. *The Tragedy of Political Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 61.

actual academic programs meant to instill the core literature and knowledge to a successive generation of scholars, and consequently developed series of benchmarks to assess student understanding. Early on, especially in the European tradition, the usage of an oral examination (particularly at the dissertation stage) was instrumental in testing the breadth and depth of student knowledge, and upon passage of the oral examination and subsequent dissertation, these professional students would enter into the professional job market. However, given the growing burdens on graduate programs and departments with the explosion of undergraduate enrollments following World War II, departments were growing limited in their ability to chair these types of oral examinations; this gave rise to the written comprehensive exam, in its various forms and functions. In the most functionalist sense, the decision to institute a comprehensive examination was a logical outgrowth of historical forces and trends within academia; however, we would like to understand why departments continue to utilize written comprehensive exams. Stage two of this project would involve a questionnaire to gauge departments' perceptions of their own graduate programs, to understand the guiding philosophy of their graduate faculty and their attitude towards structural components of their graduate programs, most notably the usage (or lack thereof) of a preliminary/comprehensive examination.

A Basic Typology of Comprehensive Exams:

(1) Usage of the Examination to Meet Disciplinary "Standards"

Part of our discussion is based on supposition, given that very little has been written in political science that examines the underlying causes and justifications for the type of graduate examination employed to graduate students. However, like any professional discipline, there is a strong force of socialization that works to affect how the discipline is conducted, generally

shaped around the perceptions of a particular disciplinary “norm.” In the case of political science graduate training, there is a strong norm and tradition for the written comprehensive examination, generally accompanied by an oral exam that is designed to act as a failsafe for graduate faculty to investigate the written answers more fully, to determine whether the student can dialogue with faculty over their substantive answers. We looked at forty-two graduate programs of political science to determine what types of trends existed regarding their format of comprehensive exams. Thirty-six departments use a comprehensive written exam, and at least eighteen of these departments also use an oral exam, the latter dependent upon passing the written form. Does this necessarily reflect a desire for departments to harmonize their graduate programs to a socially accepted “norm?” We believe that it may, but not because of normative forces, but because it creates a standardized way to assess potential future faculty in a rigorous and generally scientific way.

It has been made repeatedly clear that the United States political science community has been drastically affected by the behavioral revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, as the preference for scientific investigation of political phenomena shaped the discipline forever. However, in an academic marketplace, having a reliable indicator of the quality of graduate students that you produce would be an asset for any newly-formed or well-established graduate program, regardless of departmental attitudes towards standardized assessment. Thus, if departments could structure their graduate program along the lines of parsing weaker students to retain “quality” graduate students, with a series of thresholds and intermediate stages, departments can improve the marketability of their respective programs to a new recruiting class. Given the strong prevalence of the usage of “peer institutions” as a way to determine how departments gauge other competitive departments, in terms of resources, programs, and faculty publication, the

widespread usage of the comprehensive exam is not surprising. The actual design of the comprehensive exam in this model of graduate program format is irrelevant, as long as there is a similarly structured written examination meant to assess student performance. Within our study, numerous wrinkles exist in exam format, whether the exam is issued as a take-home or in-class assignment, with various time limits and scheduling issues, but there is nonetheless a basic criterion for a given department's graduate students.

(2) Benchmark for Their Own Students

This type of justification of a comprehensive exam correlates to departmental requirements for admission into their graduate programs, particularly the standards set by the Graduate Records Examination, the standardized graduate student exam meant to demonstrate prospective student capability to perform at the graduate level. Ideally, departments seek to create a relatively homogenous body of knowledge for their students, such that they can make reliable inferences into department curriculum, faculty teaching performance, and provide successful sequences of courses (most notably in methodology), as well as student comprehension. Thus, to get a reliable indicator of where their graduate students stand in relation to their desired subfields, departments may employ comprehensive exams meant to uniformly identify holes in student understanding, or conversely, identify student strengths in understanding of their respective research areas. This allows faculty to identify student excellence, or depending on the program's guiding philosophy, isolate weaker students to either dismiss them for their failure on the exams, or push them in particular areas to improve toward their re-take (should it be available).

However, not all programs use a standardized test like the written comprehensive exam. In the case of UCLA, Stanford, Harvard, Yale, etc., they might use an oral exam or some combination of research papers and oral exams to determine if students' level of comprehension is suitable for continuing their graduate studies. It is worthy of serious pedagogical debate whether the written or oral exam is a qualitatively "better" option for interpreting student comprehension, but they serve the same function. Faculty have the opportunity to judge student interpretation and comprehension of established literature, in order to permit their further work on their dissertation, in a fashion relative to the departments' curricula and faculty. However, the chief difference in the oral and written exam is that it is not likely that oral exam committees will pose the same questions to all test-takers, as the process is far more reflexive than the written exam. For instance, in some departments, the written exam (necessary for passage to the oral stage) is to be taken without consultation with faculty; thus, students are perhaps as tested on their ability (or inability) to interpret faculty questions about the literature, as much as their own ability to succinctly convey their knowledge.

If a department's goal for a written examination is to provide a benchmark for assessing test-takers in relation to one another, these written exams are perhaps more susceptible to test-taking irregularities, rather than substantive understanding. The perils of the standardized test-taking experience have been well documented, as the psychological and emotional burdens on test-takers may generally constrain exam performance. This is perhaps a limitation in a department's preference to assess their graduate students through a comprehensive, single-format written exam. However, there are limited alternatives (which we address later), other than an oral exam that some departments have moved toward. Several schools, including University of California-Irvine, have instituted a series of "qualifying papers" that allows graduate students the

chance to tailor research papers in anticipation of moving toward candidacy, papers that demonstrate depth and (perhaps) breadth in their understanding of established literature. The written comprehensive exam is generally geared towards a broad understanding of the discipline, but the qualifying papers would allow for more depth into the students' areas of specialization. Additionally, this would reduce or eliminate unpredictable variables of individuals' psychological and emotional conditions, and allows departments to still retain some sense of where their graduate students' level of comprehension stands in relation to others.

(3) Faculty Experience with the Comprehensive Exam

The most common, prevalent stereotype of the comprehensive examination (regardless of format) from both graduate students and outsiders (other than upset family members) to the academic market is that departments use the exam as a form of “hazing,” by which faculty hold their graduate students feet to the fire, in a manner similar to what they themselves may have experienced. Anxieties and fears about their pending comprehensive exams tend to breed student fear and suspicion of faculty, especially when life-changing decisions await those faculty assessments, such as a pending lecturer position or field work project, or just continuation in the program. The prevalent thought is: “my faculty went through this kind of torture, preparing for their exams, surely they are punishing me.” Whereas these types of fears and anxieties may exist throughout graduate schools nationwide,⁴ the more likely faculty position on the imposition of either written or oral exams may be based on “embedded traditions” or the “professional socialization” of graduate studies.

In the prior instance, embedded traditions are those practices and norms of conduct that linger in large institutions like university departments and offices; these types of institutional

⁴ Of which at least one author of this paper is not immune, at least not completely.

effects include bureaucratic malaise, issues of standard operating procedure, institutional slippage, or out-and-out apathy.⁵ Generally speaking, if the “system ain’t broke, don’t fix it” may be a governing factor in many departments. Without any clear driving purpose to restructure or foment change, departments are most inclined to continue long-standing traditions, and given the long-standing utilization of the comprehensive written exam, it is fiscally and practically most effective to continue established practices. Long-tenured faculty who have been instrumental in the success of departments are perhaps the least likely to embrace an overhaul of the graduate program, of which any attempt to move away from the comprehensive exam, certainly in political science, would require as departments have shaped resources, coursework, and timelines around the exam. Recent faculty hires are generally removed from any discussion of changes to graduate education, although these new faculty are the most apt to bring new perspectives into a tradition-dominated institutional culture.

Ann Austin (2002) has recently characterized the graduate student experience in terms of academic socialization, which she defines as “process through which an individual becomes part of a group, organization, or community. The socialization process involves learning about the culture of the group, including its values, attitudes and expectations.”⁶ Entrance into graduate programs provides a critical first step in shaping and orienting incoming graduate students into future faculty. Thus, graduate programs are required to socialize graduate students into the discipline’s canon, academic life, as well as the identity of the “graduate student.” In so doing, the socialization process suggests that students must develop a shared understanding of graduate

⁵ Estrem, Heidi and Brad Lucas. 2003. “Embedded Traditions, Uneven Reform: The Place of the Comprehensive Exam in Composition and Rhetoric PhD Programs.” *Rhetoric Review*, 22:4, 396-416.

⁶ Austin, Ann. 2003. “Preparing the Next Generation of Faculty,” *The Journal of Higher Education*, (Jan-Feb) 73:1, 96.

work with faculty to further their social inclusion, as faculty have been through it all before.⁷ However, the comprehensive examination can be a significant pressure point in the socialization process, as David Mechanic (1978) illustrates. Mechanic chronicles the experiences of graduate students, and their reactions to the pressure and stress of the comprehensive examinations, highlighting the psychological and emotional attitudes of respondents both before and after the exam. His account of one student's reaction to his failure in his exam tells of the breakdown of the socialization process: "[Student C] is blaming others than himself for his failure to get through. ... Apparently he feels that he didn't fail to pass because of knowledge but because of personal factors. ... He has been quite bitter toward the University and the department in particular."⁸ Whereas the faculty may have been very reasonable and fair in their assessment of the student's exam, this example reveals one of the difficult aspects of the socialization of graduate students into the academic profession. New graduate faculty may be recent test-takers themselves, and may channel their expectations and stresses from their own experiences into how they assess graduate student work. Long-tenured faculty may have expectations for the exam based on their own experiences in an era where exam processes may have been more (or less) rigid. Ultimately, all graduate faculty brings in experiences from varying institutional backgrounds, and with unique insights into how exams should be conducted. Yet, in any socialization process, participants must have a well-established rapport and open dialogue about their experiences and what these experiences will mean for new inductees. For those political science departments, which can self-identify a barrier between the cooperation of their graduate students with faculty, students likely may suffer such a breakdown in the socialization process.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Mechanic, David. 1978. *Students Under Stress: A Study in the Social Psychology of Adaptation*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 189.

From either perspective, from the embedded tradition argument or the concept of professional socialization, graduate students are subject to stresses and pressures of faculty assessment. How each will respond to the pressures of preparing for an integral step into the academic profession is generally up to the student. However, the utilization of the comprehensive exam can be an important step in the socialization process if both students and faculty understand and embrace the exam as a stage in the evolution from doctoral student to doctoral candidate, rather than an obstruction. We agree that departments should be engaged in leading their graduate students along familiar, trodden paths towards their graduate degrees, but we are skeptical that pressure filled, 8-, 24-, or 36-hour exams are the answer.

The Exam and Its Alternatives: Discussion

Written comprehensive exams may introduce intervening variables that may interfere in the true expression of student knowledge, such as test anxiety, stress reactions, or depression. These types of exams are limited in their utility to understand the depth of student knowledge, as they are generally time-constrained and can often be restricted to sources and citations from coursework, often a “snapshot” of a particular subset of literature within the far greater discipline. Does this mean that particular questions students choose to answer are instrumental in understanding that particular subfield? It can be a dubious claim, but nonetheless a viable choice for students who might otherwise be at a loss to answer other questions. Written exams are often given under the pretense that they may serve as a readily available way to explore the full limits of political science, because in preparation for the exam, you explore the full range of journals, books, and data sources that may assist them in writing their exam answers. However, the Iowa State Ad Hoc Prelim Revision Committee determined that “while the written exam did assess

important knowledge such as command of subject matter and awareness of current issues in the field, it only *indirectly* assessed what the faculty actually desired, namely that students would be able *to use* this knowledge in a real-world professional context.”⁹ In preparation for the comprehensive examination (written and oral), students do a great deal of reviewing the state of the discipline and important works in the literature, but it is ultimately questionable how much of this material is retained following the exam process. As scholarship of undergraduate education attests, students (often regardless of age) who cram a lot of material in their head, fail to retain much of it, following the completion of their program. The time spent working on the dissertation, often in research areas not covered in the standard examination process, obfuscates the short-term knowledge accrued during the exam process by graduate students in the United States. Ultimately, as is the theme of this paper, what the faculty want to gain by a comprehensive exam depends on their perspective.

Alternatively, the comprehensive exam (despite whatever conclusions we have reached so far) does provide a number of effective and necessary functions in the modern political science discipline. These exams are extremely effective in standardizing a means to judge future faculty members, as well as having been time tested in helping staff university departments with socially accepted, discipline-tested faculty. By passing the examination phase in an accredited graduate program, students have proven themselves versed in broad subfields, and are likely capable of relaying that knowledge to ever-present undergraduate enrollment. In an era of decreased university funding, the risks taken to hire new doctorates may be great, and if they have not passed through sufficiently rigid Ph.D. programs that require an examination stage makes the hiring process a little easier, at least in departments’ ability to dismiss candidates that

⁹ Huba, Mary, John Schuh, and Mack Shelley. 2006. “Recasting Doctoral Education in an Outcomes-Based Framework.” In Peggy Maki and Nancy Borkowski, eds. *The Assessment of Doctoral Education*. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 243.

may not meet department expectations. Additionally, the larger graduate programs become in lieu of broader economic conditions, the more likely that students and faculty will grow disjointed, as faculty will not be able to fully respond to the needs of the burgeoning graduate student population. Conversely, standardized exams offer faculty a chance to gauge student performance without trying to meet with every student individually to assess their competency with the literature.

Conclusion: Two Possible Alternatives

We cannot ignore the pragmatic and logistical interests department have in the deployment of a comprehensive examination, because between the establishment of a discipline norm and the dilemmas of professional socialization, the checkpoint that the exams provide makes a good way to employ quality control. However, we find two alternative models of graduate assessment more effective in getting a reliable understanding of graduate student knowledge and capability, and minimizing the emotional, psychological, and physical damage that the preparation process may engender. First, and perhaps the most widely employed alternative to the comprehensive exam in disciplines outside of political science, political science graduate programs could consider the portfolio system. In her July 11, 2008 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Paula Wasley examines the University of Kansas' Department of History, and its decision to use a portfolio of materials that tracks student performance. She reports that "where the students once spent the first years of their graduate work dreading the comprehensive exams, [KU history graduate students] now amass a large portfolio of materials that include a dissertation prospectus and a 20-page professional essay that lays out how the

candidate's major and minor fields of study relate to each other."¹⁰ A significant asset of the portfolio that is perhaps most strategically important, compared to the comprehensive exam, especially if professional socialization is a goal, is that that "portfolios promote greater student-faculty interaction and give students a more accurate sense of the profession than do traditional exams."¹¹ We highlight a history department's usage of the portfolio, in that (along with sociology) the disciplines of history and political science often share literature and research goals, to understand historical events in appropriate context.¹²

Portfolios can retain the type of mechanism necessary to calculate student comprehension and their mastery of the literature, but it allows students more creative control over how well their level of understanding is demonstrated to their graduate studies committee, rather than a stress-filled exam that may actually "prove" students to be unprepared. If students are allowed to contribute a series of papers that have been developed through their existing coursework, ideally meant to be publishable pending critique from faculty, over three-four years, we believe this would serve the same function as the comprehensive exam. As for being able to converse with faculty over a given material, oral exams could still be employed to create a dialogue between students and faculty that is less confrontational, and more collegial, as many graduate programs teach their students that they are colleagues, and not adversaries. However, the written exam process that focuses on pressure-filled months and days to assess a careers worth of knowledge and understanding creates confrontation, whether or not it is intentional. As David Mechanic explained, the relationship between faculty and students is strained by the comprehensive exam

¹⁰ Wasley, Paula. July 11, 2008. "Portfolios are Replacing Qualifying Exams as a Step on the Road to Dissertations." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Available: <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v54/i44/44a00801.htm>.

¹¹ Ibid, citing Joseph Heathcott, formerly graduate director at Saint Louis University's Urban Studies program.

¹² In addition to history departments, English, Educational Leadership, and Psychology have all instituted programs based on the portfolio, with generally favorable results. See Robert Meadows, et als. 1998. "Preparing Educational Leaders Through the Use of Portfolio Assessment: An Alternative Comprehensive Examination" *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, June (25:2), 94-99.

process, and we believe it necessary to offer a more cooperative relationship between student and professor.

Another alternative, similar to both the portfolio and utilizing an oral exam is the use of qualifying papers, a series of papers done in conjunction with course requirements or done independently, that are submitted to subsection committees for review. These papers have been developed with an intention to publish, and focus on graduate students' main research subjects, rather than by randomly-generated questions on a written exam that may factor little into the students' own research interests. In the case of UCLA, their Department of Political Science uses qualifying papers, without the stipulation of publishability, but each qualifying paper topic (of two) has to be approved by the field chair and/or faculty mentor.¹³ The goal here is for students to provide faculty with an honest exploration of research topics in their research areas, while giving students ample time (typically a quarter/semester) to produce a quality research paper that may be helpful in the development of their own research agenda. Now, at this juncture, departments could use an oral exam that reviews and challenges students responses in a familiar format, to gauge their responses and defend their research results.¹⁴ For those departments that are interested in preserving student quality, limiting faculty time burdens, and considerably reducing student stress levels and workloads, this option seems a very beneficial option. Additionally, for those faculty and departments that are not inclined to reshape their graduate programs along the lines of a portfolio system, what the qualifying papers give you is essentially a research paper that is submitted outside the normal course structure, but instead involves more than one faculty member.

¹³ UCLA Department of Political Science. *Graduate Handbook 2007-2008*, 4.

¹⁴ Harvard uses a similar format, in that they have a seminar paper that v

In either instance, students and faculty can be more cooperative in the graduate teaching experience, and not limited by historical precedent or perceptions of the discipline's own history with the written comprehensive exam. If graduate study is intended to be a collaboration into the development of future faculty that will teach alongside their peers, and provide valuable research insights to future political scientists, it seems only natural to socialize students in a different direction. Very few graduate students and faculty, regardless of discipline or age, believe that the comprehensive examination requirement is a rewarding experience that students will appreciate in retrospect. We agree, and hence we have provided several alternatives to consider, and encourage interested faculty and students to pose these questions to their own departments, and maybe we can find a common ground.