

**THE THIRD QUALIFYING  
EXAMINATION**

**PREPARATION OF DISSERTATION  
PROPOSAL**

**2007-2008**

**NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE**

## THE THIRD EXAMINATION

The third comprehensive examination has been designed to serve as a bridge between coursework/written comprehensive examination phase and the dissertation phase of the student's work in the doctoral program.

In the first two written examinations, the student demonstrates that she has mastered the foundational knowledge required of all those seeking a doctorate in criminology and justice policy. During the third comprehensive exam, the student demonstrates that she has mastered a specialization within the field and has successfully identified a viable dissertation topic within that specialization.

The third comprehensive is a two-part oral examination in which the student (1) demonstrates mastery of the literature in the area from which her dissertation will be drawn and (2) defends a fully developed dissertation proposal. The examination is taken in two parts, with part one occurring no more than **one week prior** to part two.

The subject of the exam will depend upon the area of specialization and is decided in consultation with the student's advisory committee. Examples of potential areas of specialization include, but are not limited to, Juvenile Delinquency, Policing, Ecology of Crime, Race and Crime, Punishment and Corrections, etc. A student interested in writing a dissertation on some aspect of racial profiling might choose to specialize in policing or in race and crime but would, of course, include literature from both areas in both the bibliography and the proposal. It is essential that the student consult with her advisory committee when making these decisions.

Successful completion of the third examination requires that the student demonstrate mastery of the literature in the area of specialization and develop/defend a viable dissertation proposal from within this area. It is likely that the student will discover a dissertation topic in the course of mastering the literature in the area of specialization.

### THE EXAMINATION COMMITTEE

The examination committee for the third comprehensive exam is made up of the faculty members that will ultimately serve as the dissertation committee and, as such, the committee members are selected by the student. The committee should include a minimum of THREE tenured or tenure-track faculty or full time terminally prepared research faculty – two of whom MUST be faculty from within the College of Criminal Justice. A student may opt to have a 4th committee member who is not tenured or tenure track faculty and who may come from outside of the college/university. All students must file an Examination/Dissertation committee approval form signed by all committee members and the Graduate Director with the Graduate office as soon as the committee has been selected. Any changes in the make-up of the committee must result in a new form being approved and filed in the Graduate office. No third exams or proposal defenses may be scheduled without a current Examination/Dissertation form being on file in the Graduate office.

### SCHEDULING THE EXAMINATION

The third examination will be scheduled by the Chair of the committee once the student has a fully developed bibliography and dissertation proposal. Only the chair of the committee can initiate the scheduling of the third exam. Although taken up to one week apart, both parts of the examination must be scheduled at the same time.

It is expected that each part of the exam will last between one and two hours; therefore, two hours will be set aside for each part of the examination. Only the committee may attend part one of the examination; part two – the proposal defense - is open to the broader community (faculty and doctoral students). It is further expected that students will take the third examination within one year of completion of the written comprehensive examinations.

**IMPORTANT:** All doctoral students must obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (or an exemption) for their proposed dissertation research. Successfully defending a dissertation proposal that might fail to receive IRB approval/exemption is futile. It is recommended that all students obtained IRB approval PRIOR to the scheduling of the third examination. If this is not possible, all students must meet with the Director of Northeastern's Division of Research Integrity and file all required forms prior to scheduling the defense.

### **PART ONE: MASTERY OF THE LITERATURE**

Part one of the examination involves an assessment of the student's mastery of the literature within the specialization. This is a rigorous test of the student's knowledge of the scholarship in the area of proposed study.

With the input of her committee, the student develops a bibliography for this part of the examination. The bibliography within the area of specialization will be far more extensive, and will draw upon a broader base of literature, than the dissertation proposal will include. The bibliography should cover all important classic and contemporary theoretical, empirical, and policy based publications relevant to the area of specialization and must be approved by all members of the examination committee prior to the examination. The student should prepare the first draft of the bibliography and then give each member of her committee the opportunity to review the list and make additions well in advance of the examination.

The first part of the examination is an oral examination to assess the student's mastery of the literature. The committee members are each given an opportunity to ask the student questions designed to assess the student's ability to recall and synthesize the literature in the area of specialization.

At the end of the first part of the examination, the student leaves the room so that the committee may discuss the student's performance in part one of the examination. Once a consensus has been reached, the student will be invited to rejoin the committee and hear her results.

There are **two** potential outcomes for Part One of the Second Examination:

**Pass:** A student who demonstrates comprehensive mastery of the literature will pass the examination. Suggestions for further reading may be included in the advice given to the student at the end of the examination.

**Fail:** If the student fails to demonstrate satisfactory mastery of the literature, the committee notifies the student, identifies the deficiencies, and the second part of the examination does not go forward.

*If the candidate successfully completes the first part of the examination, the second part (scheduled for the following week) goes forward. Failure to demonstrate mastery of the literature will result in the cancellation of the second part of the examination until such time as the candidate can demonstrate sufficient mastery of the literature. In other words, part two of the examination (the proposal defense) only takes place once the candidate successfully completed part one. In no instance will part two precede part one.*

## PART TWO: PROPOSAL DEFENSE

The second part of this examination considers the specific study the student wishes to pursue in her dissertation. The dissertation proposal is developed in consultation with the dissertation committee. To ensure that all examiners have the same version of the proposal, copies of the final proposal must be submitted at least one week prior to the scheduled examination. *Failure to distribute copies of the proposal to all committee members and the graduate program office on or before the date of part one of the examination will result in the cancellation of part two.*

Students should prepare a 10-15 minute presentation to be given at the start of the second half of the exam. During this presentation, the student will concisely present the purpose, methodology, and analytic strategy for their study to the committee. During the remainder of the exam, the student orally defends the proposal addressing any question or concern that a member of the examining committee or the audience may raise.

At the conclusion of the second examination, the student and all non-committee participants leave the room and the examination committee discusses the student's proposal and oral presentation. Once a consensus has been reached, the student is invited back into the room to hear her results. Where deficiencies are identified, the committee will summarize those deficiencies – and the steps required to remedy them – in written feedback to the student. The written feedback is the responsibility of the chair of the committee.

There are **three** potential outcomes for the second part of the exam. After deliberation, the committee can vote to:

**Pass:** If the committee decides that the proposal needs no revision (or only minor revisions), the student works with the Chair of the committee to complete those revisions prior to proceeding. The Chair of the committee must certify that the revisions are complete and the final proposal must be deposited before the student is advanced to candidacy.

**Pass with Revisions:** if the committee concludes that the revisions needed are fairly substantial, the student must complete the revisions and the entire committee must certify that the revisions are satisfactory before any data collection can begin. The candidate will only be advanced to candidacy once the final approved proposal signed by all the committee members has been filed in the graduate program office.

**Fail:** the committee can vote to fail the proposal when the revisions needed are so substantial that the student will need to rethink or restructure the proposal.

A student is "Advanced to Candidacy" once all coursework is complete, the first, second, and third examinations are completed and the final IRB and committee approved proposal has been submitted to the graduate program office. (A student is considered to have passed the second examination upon completion of any required proposal revisions, and therefore, the student will not be advanced to candidacy until the final approved proposal has been submitted to the graduate program office). A copy of the IRB approval must be filed with the proposal.

## Preparing the Dissertation Proposal

The first part of the third examination assesses the student's mastery of the literature in the area of specialization and, therefore, *a comprehensive literature review is not necessary in the dissertation proposal* itself. The literature review in the proposal should be designed to justify the importance of (and need for) the proposed study and it therefore will be quite narrow and tailored to a discussion of the problem at hand.

The proposal which must be developed in conjunction with the student's chair should have the following components:

- An "**introduction**" or section that introduces the topic, thoroughly describes the theoretical orientation, and identifies the problem or issue to be addressed in the proposed dissertation. The proposal should introduce a problem and explain why it is a problem worthy of research attention
- A concise "**literature review**" section that reviews the previous research that is directly relevant to the proposed study (the literature review in the final dissertation will be much more comprehensive than is necessary at the proposal stage). It should then review the relevant literature in a concise and useful fashion i.e., the literature that is most directly relevant to the problem should be reviewed. One does not review all the literature on crime if one is studying the ecology of crime in a small city. If the paper involves theory or hypothesis testing, these should be stated and the operational and conceptual matters outlined. Relevant definitions should be critically reviewed and evaluated as to their utility in the research

At the end of the literature review, you should identify the knowledge gap that will be filled by the proposed study.

- A section that concisely presents the specific "**research questions**" and the way in which they will be addressed.
- A "**data, methodology, and analytic strategy**" section will likely be the most substantial section of the proposal. The data and methodology should be described in enough detail that the committee fully understands exactly what it is that you propose to do in your own research. At a minimum, the data and methodology should include a detailed description of your:
  - Population and sample
  - Sampling/Subject selection criteria
  - Independent and dependent variables or variables of interest
  - Measures/Instruments
  - Methodology
  - Analytic Strategy

This section must include a discussion of how the data will be gathered, their adequacy and limitations and why these methods of collection are superior to others should be included. Data analysis should describe what means will be used to analyze the data, available software, analytic coding, philosophical-critical analysis, statistics to be used and the format for presentation of findings should be outlined.

How will the author decide if the findings are evidence or not of the arguments addressed- statistical significance, logical persuasive argument, etc. should be addressed directly and concretely.

- A concluding section that discusses how your study will make a significant and new "**contribution to theoretical and methodological knowledge**" You should have established the need for the proposed study and explicitly describe the contribution the study will make to existing knowledge.

The length of the dissertation proposal will vary based on a number of factors. That said, a long proposal is not necessarily better than a shorter one. It is expected that proposals will likely range from 25 – 50 double-spaced pages in length. A succinct, well argued document is preferable

As you work on your dissertation proposal, you should seek regular feedback from your mentor. Although your mentor will serve as the primary source of feedback in the proposal development stage, prior to scheduling the third examination, you should make sure that you have received feedback from each of the members of your committee.

Your proposal defense will be scheduled by the chair of your committee.