

Specialization Area Exam Policy

Purpose: The Specialization Area Exam in SCA is designed to transition doctoral students from coursework to dissertation research. Although the exam has both formative and summative functions, we view this assessment more as formative, preparing for dissertation research, rather than summative, considering whether the student should stay in the program or not.

Students usually take the exam upon completion of their coursework and when they have developed ideas for their dissertation topic. We encourage but do not require students to enroll in a 3 credit Independent Study with their advisor in the semester when they will undertake the exam. Along with their advisor, the student will select the members of the specialization area exam committee. The committee will consist of three faculty members, including the student's advisor and one additional faculty member from the SCA specialization area. The committee members may also serve on the student's dissertation committee, but it is not required.

The exam includes these three parts:

Procedures/Format:

1. **Personal Research Statement:** The students should prepare a brief statement articulating their research interests, why these interests are important for the student and how they are grounded in the student's personal background, history, and deeply felt concerns. The purpose of this statement is to assist the faculty committee in guiding the student into something that the student wants to do in his/her dissertation rather than a topic that might be interesting only to the committee and/or only to the field. The student will meet with the committee to discuss the personal research statement and decide on the topic that will be explored in the critical literature review portion of the specialty exam. Five to six double spaced pages is an appropriate length for the statement.

2a) **Option A: Critical Literature Review:** Once the topic is selected, the student will create and share (with the committee) an initial reading list. The list can include new material for the students as well as literature that they are familiar with from their coursework and prior independent reading. The committee can assist the student in making a list that is comprehensive but not too broad or too narrow. The student should take critical notes while reading from their list. The student will prepare a cohesive narrative that describes and analyzes the tensions in their chosen area and their analysis of those tensions. The literature review should include conclusions and implications for future research in the field. We encourage students to be creative in the format and style of the literature review in ways that will best capture their emerging academic voice. The critical literature review for the specialization exam is different from the dissertation literature review in that its purpose is to provide an overview of the fields related to the dissertation literature review. In contrast, the dissertation review focuses on the particular dissertation research questions and findings. The completed review does not need to include analysis of all the items on the reading list (20 to 30 double-spaced pages, excluding references, is an approximate length).

2b) **Option B: Mini-research project study.** Mini-research project study is intended to provide an early experience in conducting research. It can be a valuable learning opportunity prior to planning and conducting the student's dissertation research. It might serve as a pilot study for the student's dissertation, or it might lead the student to select another area of research for the student's interest. As with any University of Delaware research, students must follow the appropriate IRB guidelines when necessary. The student will consult regularly with the committee as she or he plans and conducts the mini-research project study, but the student will be the principal investigator. The research report (20-40 double-spaced pages, excluding references, is an approximate length) should include the research questions, the rationale for these questions, including a review of the literature in which the questions are situated, and the methods that will be used to investigate the questions, the analyses that have been conducted, the (at least tentative) results, the claims the student is making supported by these results, and the contributions the study makes to the literature.

- 3) The oral part of the exam will involve committee members reading the critical literature review or mini-research project and meeting with the student to discuss their review/project. The student will make an oral presentation of their work (approximately 15 minutes) that will be followed by questions from the committee.

Suggested timeline

In a typical 15 week semester, finish the first part by the third week. Devote the next 8 to 10 weeks to part 2, and then, after allowing two weeks for the committee to read the paper, schedule part 3 for the last week of the semester.

Evaluation: Criteria for evaluating Specialty Exam:

1. The student has a clear research focus that is grounded in the student's background, importance for the academic field, and importance for educational practice;
2. The student has developed broad and critical expertise in research and practice issues relevant to their research focus;
3. The student demonstrates scholarly writing and oral skills.

Based on the student's written and oral work, the SAE Exam will result in one of two ratings:

- **Pass:** For a student to pass the SAE, 2 of the 3 faculty members must agree that students have met all three of the criteria listed above. This is deemed "Passing the Specialization Area Examination," students will receive a congratulatory letter with a copy sent to the Director's Office. Students may proceed with working on the dissertation research proposal.
- **Revise and resubmit:** If two of three faculty members do not agree that the student has met all three criteria, the SAE Exam is graded as "Revise and Resubmit". In this case, the student is verbally informed of the decision within two days of the oral defense, and the SAE committee members will provide written feedback to students within 10 days of the oral defense. The student then have four weeks to address the concerns that were raised by the faculty. The feedback provided by the faculty will specify which section(s) of the written exam must resubmitted, and whether the oral defense must be repeated. A letter confirming the status of the student's exam outcome is sent to the student with a copy sent to the Director's Office.

When students resubmit their written exam and/or repeat the oral defense, the SAE committee will have 10 days to make a determination of the outcome. Two ratings are possible:

- **Pass:** If two out of three faculty members agree that the student has successfully satisfied the criteria listed above, this is deemed "Passing the Specialization Area Examination", and the student and the Director's Office will be notified by letter from the student's faculty advisor.
- **Fail:** If the above criteria are not met, the student is judged to have "Failed the Specialization Area Examination." A failure means that the student has failed the specialization area examination and will be withdrawn