

**RSE's Policy  
for its  
Written and Oral Ph.D. Comprehensive Exam**

Department of Rehabilitation and Special Education  
College of Education  
Auburn University

RSE's Comprehensive Examination policy for its Ph.D. students has three components, which are (a) a qualifying paper, (b) a written exam, and (c) an oral exam. The purpose of this paper is to present the model employed for these two components. The first evaluation strategy, a qualifying paper, is discussed elsewhere.

**RSE's Written Examination**

The written comprehensive examination for doctoral students serves as one of the major tools for evaluating their professional competencies and skills. As such, there is a need for a systematic set of procedures which serves to appraise the student's performance. The procedures for assessing their performance in this manner are presented below, including (a) multiple criteria, (b) a performance scale, c) a grading system, and (d) final performance outcome.

**Multiple Criteria**

The evaluator's general global expression regarding the student's level of performance can be attributed to a number of factors such as literature familiarity, adequate coverage of the topic, integration of information, and the like. In other words, the evaluator's has a number of reasons for deciding how adequate (or inadequate) a student performs. Therefore, decision-making regarding the “*satisfactoriness-unsatisfactoriness*” of performance should be based on a set of criteria that represent needed competencies for adequately addressing the exam question(s).

There are at least three major advantage for employing multiple criteria. These advantages are:

1. Multiple criteria provide a “standard” set of criteria for decision-making. This appears particularly useful when two or more evaluators are engaged in the assessment of the same person on the same exam question.
2. Multiple criteria allow for a comprehensive appraisal of one's performance, which is particularly important for students who performance is either marginal or inadequate. In other words, the issue here is not only that the student's performance may have been inadequate, but it was judged to be inadequate for the reasons of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Multiple criteria provide the students with a set of guidelines for preparation.

The following criteria are used by RSE's Graduate Faculty for evaluating how well the doctoral student answered the comprehensive exam question(s).

<b>MULTIPLE CRITERIA for ASSESSMENT</b>	
Criterion	Meaning
<b>Comprehensive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How <u>thoroughly</u> did the student answer the question?</li> <li>● Did student adequately <u>cover</u> the major considerations suggested in the question?</li> <li>● Was the literature, controversial issues, and current trends adequately <u>represented</u>?</li> </ul>
<b>Organization</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Was the answer presented in a <u>logically organized</u> manner?</li> <li>● Was the material presented in a <u>chronological</u> vs. random fashion?</li> <li>● Did student take an <u>inductive</u> or <u>deductive</u> approach in treating the question?</li> </ul>
<b>Integration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Was the question answered in a piece-meal or integrated and <u>unified</u> fashion?</li> <li>● Did student <u>relate</u> and <u>pull together</u> a body of knowledge, variety of resources, and experiences?</li> <li>● Did student <u>divergently</u> and/or <u>convergently</u> handle the material?</li> </ul>
<b>Substantiation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How well was the answer <u>documented</u>?</li> <li>● Did student's answer reflect a <u>familiarity</u> with what others have done and said in the field?</li> <li>● Did student provide <u>evidence</u> that reflected competency in the area?</li> </ul>
<b>Origination</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Did student's answer reflect <u>innovation</u>?</li> <li>● Did student present any <u>unique</u> information which represented self-opinions, ideas, and position?</li> <li>● Did student's answer to the question reflect any <u>creative</u> thinking?</li> </ul>
<b>Other</b>	The examiner is encouraged to include any additional criteria for assessing the student's performance.
<b>Summation</b>	<p>This criterion is offset from the above in that it represents an overall summary of the student's performance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <u>In general</u>, how satisfactorily did the student perform?</li> <li>● <u>In summary</u>, how adequately was the question answered?</li> </ul>

**Considerations**

1. In evaluating the student's performance using the above criteria, the evaluator needs to consider the circumstances under which the student is operating. For example, the extent to which a student comprehensively treats a question will vary with the time allowed to address it.
2. The appropriateness of the above criteria may vary with the nature of the question. For example, some questions may be designed primarily to ascertain what the student thinks (*origination*), whereas others may be intended to tape the student's knowledge of a given topic (*comprehensive and substantiation*). Of course, the student should not be penalized for not doing something which the question did not call for in the first place. Thus, the evaluator must use her/his own judgment in deciding which criteria are most appropriate for which question(s).
3. Finally, the criteria are intended to serve as a set of guidelines for analyzing the student's performance in a more comprehensive and diagnostic manner.

### Performance Scale

A scale is needed for the evaluator(s) to quantify the student's performance on the above criteria. In order to keep the assessment task from being complex, RSE employs a simple quantitative procedure.

Value	Anchor Point
-	inadequate/unsatisfactory
0	marginal/questionable
+	adequate/satisfactory

### Considerations

1. It is important to include the dimension of *marginal* performance. This represents the typical gray area for which decision-makers are sometimes faced. Using RSE's scale, a "0" value does not signify pass or fail. Rather, it indicates that the adequacy of the student's performance is questionable. This may suggest that the Exam Committee needs additional evidence (e.g., orals, take-home), in order to make decision regarding the student's level of competencies and skills. In essence, the marginal category takes the evaluator "off the hook" of having to make a clear-cut, either pass-fail decision when the information does not warrant such action; in addition, it may be to the student's advantage. In other words, the evaluator's forced pass-fail decision might have been "fail" without this category.
2. An increased number of categories for determining level of performance is not necessary. For example, the major question is whether or not the student *passed*, instead of whether that student performed *somewhat* satisfactorily, *very* satisfactorily, or *extremely* satisfactorily. In addition, the way the -'s, 0's, and +'s stacked up would be indicative of performance quality. A student who received all +'s on each criterion for each question, for example, would have performed extremely well. In fact, the quality of that student's performance would have been superior to a student who had a sufficient number of +'s to pass, but also had some scatter -'s and 0's. The point here is that they both passed!

- Some different consideration might be given to the lower end of the scale. For example, even though two students with different +, 0, and - profiles might have failed, the student who had all -'s on each criterion for each question versus the student who had enough -'s to fail, but also had some scattered 0's and +'s, might warrant different action on the part of the committee.

**Example #1: Adequate (Passing) Performance on a Single Exam Question**

<u>Criteria</u>	<u>Evaluators</u>		
	1	2	3
<b>Comprehensive</b>	+	+	<b>0</b>
<b>Organization</b>	+	+	+
<b>Integration</b>	+	+	+
<b>Substantiation</b>	+	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Origination</b>			
	+	+	+
<b>Summation</b>	+	+	+

**Example #2: Marginal (No pass-No fail) Performance on a Single Exam Question**

<u>Criteria</u>	<u>Evaluators</u>		
	1	2	3
<b>Comprehensive</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	-
<b>Organization</b>	-	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Integration</b>	<b>0</b>	-	<b>0</b>
<b>Substantiation</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	-
<b>Origination</b>			
	<b>0</b>	+	+
<b>Summation</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

### Example #3: Inadequate (Fail) Performance on a Single Exam Question

<u>Criteria</u>	<u>Evaluators</u>		
	1	2	3
<b>Comprehensive</b>	-	-	-
<b>Organization</b>	-	<b>0</b>	+
<b>Integration</b>	-	-	-
<b>Substantiation</b>	-	-	-
<b>Origination</b>	<b>0</b>	-	<b>0</b>
<b>Summation</b>	<b>0</b>	-	-

#### Grading System

1. RSE uses three (3 Graduate Faculty members for evaluating each exam question.
2. The multiple criteria are used by each evaluator for each exam question. Again, the criteria are: **comprehensive, organization, integration, substantiation, and origination.**
3. Each criterion for each question is appraised by each evaluator as being either: **inadequate** or **unsatisfactory, marginal** or **questionable**, or **adequate** or **satisfactory.**
4. In order to satisfactorily pass the question for each evaluator, the student must obtain at least three (3) **adequate** or **satisfactory** checks on the five (5) criteria (e.g., comprehensive, organization). In addition, the student can obtain no more than one (1) **inadequate/unsatisfactory** check out of the five criteria. Thus, the following possibilities exist:

go to next page

### PASS/FAIL PROFILE POSSIBILITIES

– Inadequate/ Unsatisfactory	0 Marginal/ Questionable	+ Adequate/ Satisfactory	Status
0	0	5*	Pass
0	1	4	Pass
0	2	3	Pass
1	1	3	Pass
2	0	3	Fail
0	3	2	Fail
1	2	2	Fail
2	3	1	Fail
2	3	0	Fail
3	2	0	Fail
4	1	0	Fail
5	0	0	Fail

\* An evaluator gave this student a check of adequate/satisfactory on each of the five (5) criteria (i.e., *comprehensive, organization, integration, substantiation, and origination*)

#### Final Outcome across Four Exam Question

One of three (3) final outcomes for each student is possible when all assessments are made by the three evaluators. These outcomes are: (a) **unconditional pass**, (b) **conditional pass**, and (c) **unconditional fail**. The following outcomes are considered if there are four (4) final exam questions:

1. **Unconditional Pass:** A student who obtains an *adequate/satisfactory* performance on three (3) or more questions (written and oral combined) will automatically be ready to be advanced to candidacy.
2. **Conditional Pass:** A student who obtains *inadequate/unsatisfactory* performance on one (1) or two (2) questions (written and orals combined) will be required to prepare a scholarly paper on the question(s). The paper(s) must be no less than 25 pages typed double-spaced and approved by the reviewers for the original written question(s) before they can be advanced to candidacy. There are no time restrictions for this conditional performance to be completed. However, it is in the best interest of every one that it be done as soon as possible.
3. **Unconditioned fail:** A student who obtains *inadequate/unsatisfactory* performance on three (3) or four (4) questions (written and orals combined) will be required to take and pass both the written and orals exam as a later date before they can be advanced to candidacy.

#### Evaluation Sheets

**Evaluation Sheet for  
Comprehensive Examination**

Questions\*

Inadequate/  
Unsatisfactory      Marginal/  
Questionable      Adequate/  
Satisfactory

# \_\_\_\_

Comprehensive  
Organization  
Integration  
Substantiation  
Origination  
Other  
Summation

EVALUATORS		
1	2	3

Additional  
Comments

Questions\*

Inadequate/  
Unsatisfactory      Marginal/  
Questionable      Adequate/  
Satisfactory

# \_\_\_\_

Comprehensive  
Organization  
Integration  
Substantiation  
Origination  
Other  
Summation

EVALUATORS		
1	2	3

\*Reader must indicate in the left-hand margin which exam question(s) is being evaluated.

**RSE's Oral Examination**

The primary purpose of the Oral Comprehensive Exam is to give both the students and the evaluators an extended opportunity to further explore the Written Exam performance. If the student being examined passed all questions by all reviewers, the experience for everyone should be enjoyable. On the other hand, if there is some question about the student's performance on one or more question by one or more evaluator, such will be the primary focus of the orals. In essence, the evaluators in doubt will have an opportunity to finalize their decision(s) after orals. In summary, the orals component provides each student an additional opportunity to demonstrate her/his performance primarily around the four (4) written exam questions. Also, it provides each evaluator an additional opportunity to assess student performance.

The purpose of the orals is not to learn of the student's attitudes of the exam experience, or his/her appraisal of the requirement (e.g., "What did you think of the exam questions?"; "I thought they were too broad-based and general"; "Not enough time", etc.). There will be plenty of other occasions, both formal and informal, to interact on this type of student feedback. Rather, the focus of the orals is to interact on the written performance. Thus, the students will be able to verbally fill in, correct, and expand upon their written responses. Also, reviewers will have the opportunity to further probe the written responses, seek clarification, elaboration, justification, and the like.

RSE faculty will not exam the students in their minor area. In other words, it is up to the minor professor regarding what he/she considers necessary for one to satisfactorily complete their minor. The faculty will require, however, that each student provide their major advisor with a signed letter from their minor advisor to officially acknowledge that all minor area requirements are met. In summary,

- ▶ the orals will be held soon after the written exam;
- ▶ the orals will be linked to the written exam;
- ▶ the length of the orals will be approximately one hour, unless reviews advise otherwise;
- ▶ the orals will be conducted individually with each student;
- ▶ the orals will be conducted in the presence of all RSE Graduate Faculty members.