



GROUP FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF
DOCTORAL EDUCATION IN SOCIAL WORK

GADE Comprehensive and Qualifying Exam Committee

Report on Findings from the 2018 GADE Survey on Doctoral Program Exams

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Background and Impetus for the Survey

The successful completion of a comprehensive or qualifying exam prior to candidacy is an important milestone for students enrolled in most academic programs leading to the PhD. However, despite the importance of these exams in terms of their gatekeeping role and relevance for the formation of emerging scholars, few national-level discussions have taken place among graduate educators on the purpose, format, and content of these exams in graduate education. Cassuto (2012) has argued that these exams serve an important role in the assessment of knowledge and competency in specific academic fields. However, he further notes that the exams may serve different purposes, described in terms of ‘looking backward’ (assessing knowledge of the field based on coursework) or ‘looking forward’ (assessing competency to advance through the dissertation). Giordano (2012), in a discussion of comprehensive exams in psychology, further emphasizes diversity in the format and purpose of these exams, noting that wide variation can occur by program as well as by mentors within programs. Although some texts (e.g., Rossman, 2002) discuss comprehensive exams as part of a broader effort to advise graduate students on strategies for doctoral program success, relatively little attention has been paid to critical review and discussion of the larger role of these exams in graduate education. The Group to Advance Doctoral Education (GADE) has a mission focused on promoting academic excellence, advancing the quality of doctoral student research in social work, and providing guidance and direction to new and emerging doctoral-level social work programs (Lightfoot & Beltram, 2016). Given this mission, and a limited focus on exam issues in doctoral social work education to date, further assessment (or exploration) is clearly needed on the purpose and content of the comprehensive and qualifying exams in PhD social work programs in order to enhance GADE member programs and student outcomes.¹

As a first step in addressing this gap, Nancy Hooyman conducted a pilot survey among a nonrandom sample of 14 social work doctoral programs in March 2018. The preliminary data obtained found wide variation in the name, format, content, timing, and grading and retake options. From the responses and subsequent discussions, it was readily apparent that a number of GADE members were not satisfied with their current exam structures, and were eager to learn about the experience of other programs as a means of enhancing exam quality and relevance. Further informal discussions of these issues took place at the 2018 GADE Annual Meeting, and several GADE members indicated that they were interested in participating in a working group related to qualifying and comprehensive exams. These members, who represent a range of social work PhD programs across the United States, met by conference call in May 2018 for an initial discussion of issues and questions concerning doctoral program comprehensive and preliminary exams. The conversation was continued during another conference call in July 2018. These discussions revealed wide variation across exams in terms of

¹ This report focuses primarily on research-based programs, especially that grant a PhD. The report does not consider the role of exams in DSW programs. It is recognized that this would be an important topic for future study.

purpose and content. In a similar way to the arguments advanced by Cassuto (2012), one of the committee members identified a useful distinction between exams focused backward with an eye toward assessing competency, and those focused forward with the aim of securing specialized knowledge that will facilitate progress toward the development of a dissertation. Group members related that there were a range of exam goals and formats in their doctoral programs. Some members also expressed frustration and dissatisfaction about the effectiveness of their exams in attaining pedagogical goals. In addition, some members were interested in making modifications to their exam formats, but uncertain about how to proceed and what changes would be most helpful for students. The group made the decision to survey the doctoral directors from GADE member programs to collect systematic information about the exam purpose, structure, and content, as well as director perceptions of what works and does not work in terms of exam structure and processes. A subgroup of members – Julia Henly, Nancy Hooyman, Faith Hopp, Cassandra Simmel and Anne Williford – developed an online survey to assess these domains. This report summarizes the results of that survey.

Sample and Procedures

The survey was distributed to all programs represented on the GADE Listserve in September 2018 through an on-line Qualtrics platform. After being contacted three times to encourage directors to complete the survey, 50 did so.² Not all respondents answered all questions, so the response rate varies slightly across items. The vast majority of programs represented in the survey are full time (81%) or have both full and part time programs (13%). Most of the programs were judged by the respondent to be “research intensive” (69% strongly agree; 27% somewhat agree).³

The survey instrument consisted of both quantitative and qualitative components (see Appendix for complete instrument). It included 26 general questions (some with several sub-items) that addressed topics related to exam type(s); purpose and goals; administration; evaluation of effectiveness; and desire for exam modification.⁴ For open-ended questions, respondents were asked to provide written comments to four questions regarding the exams’ purposes, consequences of poor student performance, how students incorporate feedback from the exam, and anything else that the respondent wished to add. The majority of the respondents (41) included written comments.

Results

Exam Type

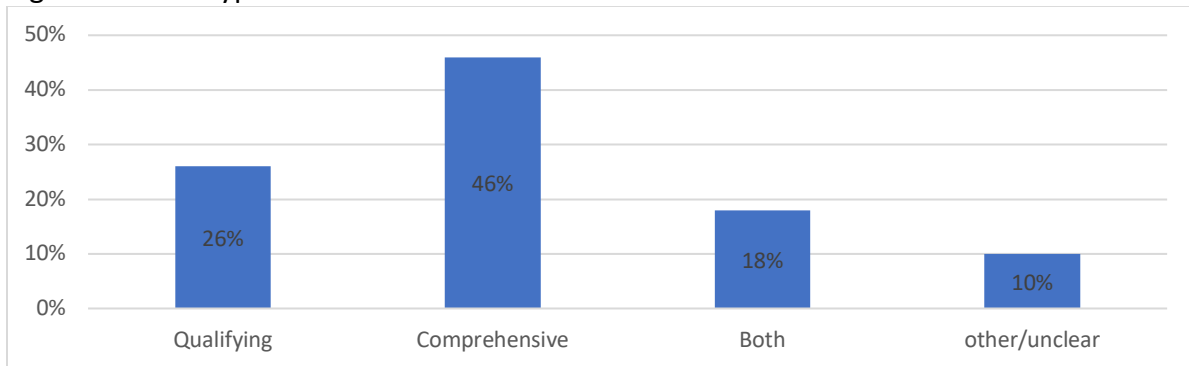
² 54 individuals responded to the Qualtrics survey by clicking the link; however, in four cases there were no data recorded suggesting that the respondent chose not to complete the survey after opening it. In November 2018 there were 89 members of GADE, 79 PhD programs and 10 DSW programs. This suggests a 56% - 63% response rate (depending on whether DSW programs are considered part of the study population.)

³ Unfortunately, a question regarding whether the program was a DSW or PhD program was not included. However, all but one program reported to be research intensive.

⁴ The instrument accommodated programs that require students to take more than one exam. In these cases (n=9), the respondents answered the relevant questions separately for each type of exam.

The survey asked respondents to indicate if their program required doctoral students to take a “qualifying,” “comprehensive,” “both,” or “other” type of exam (see Figure 1). Overall, 13 programs (26%) reported having a qualifying exam only, 23 programs reported a comprehensive exam only (46%), and nine programs reported both a qualifying and a comprehensive exam (18%). The remaining programs reported that they have another type of exam, such as a paper, or that the classification is unclear or not meaningful. Importantly, although most programs were able to classify their exam type in response to the survey item, we found that these names do not necessarily distinguish distinctive exam types, an issue that was raised by respondents in open-ended comments.⁵ Moreover, some respondents who reported their program as having one of the two exams did not consistently respond to subsequent survey items according to the classification. This lack of distinction between exam types has implications for how we present the data. In particular, for most of the items, we did not analyze the data separately by exam type and report overall statistics instead.

Figure 1. Exam Type



Note: n=50.

Pedagogical Intentions of Exams

A series of 11 questions were asked about exam purpose, with the following lead-in text: *In consideration of the primary pedagogical intentions of your doctoral program's exam(s), how important are each of the following?*

Nine of these 11 items addressed three key areas related to knowledge, critical thinking, and impact:

1. **Knowledge of basic competencies.** Three items related to broad knowledge of the social work discipline and in specialization areas, as well as preparation for the dissertation process.

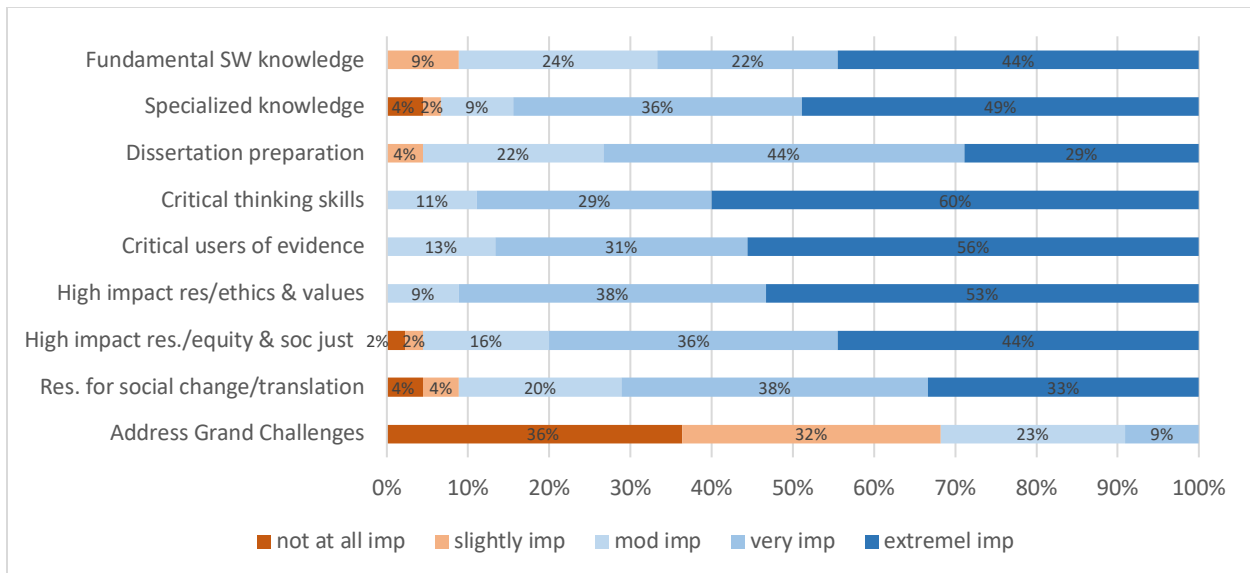
⁵ For example, one respondent noted that “comprehensive” exams typically cover three major areas of program content and thus have the purpose of checking that students are sufficiently well-versed across the program curriculum. At the same time, the exams are “qualifying” in that students are required to pass all three exam components in order to qualify for continuation in the doctoral program.

2. **Competencies in critical analysis.** Two items address critical thinking skills and competency in critical use of scientific evidence in order to assess cross-cutting competencies that may indicate student ability to think analytically.
3. **Competencies to conduct research that has impact and is actionable.** These four questions assess whether the exams are meant to prepare students to conduct high impact research that matters (e.g., is consistent with ethics and values of social work; advances social work's equity and social justice aims; and to use research for the purpose of social change and translation to policy, practice, and/or community impact). The fourth item asked about the extent to which the exams are explicitly designed to address the Social Work Grand Challenges, which are themselves aspirational in their change mission.

Overall, the vast majority of respondents thought all but the Grand Challenges question represented important pedagogical intentions of their exams (see Figure 2). The exams are meant to assess competencies in basic social work knowledge (foundational and specialized); over 80% of respondents rated these items to be moderately to extremely important. There is even more agreement that the exams intend to assess competencies in critical analysis – no one felt these were unimportant aspects of the exam. Regarding competencies for impact and action – once again, there was wide agreement of the importance of these, especially to assess doctoral students' competencies to conduct high impact research that is consistent with social work ethics and values, but also for the more change-focused items, such as the equity and social justice mission, social change, and translational research.

As noted above, only the question related to the Social Work Grand Challenges is ranked as not particularly important as a pedagogical intent of the exam. This does not mean that the profession's grand challenges are judged to be unimportant by doctoral programs or that the exams do not ultimately help prepare students to do work that contributes in important ways to one of the grand challenges. Rather, the finding suggests that for the most part our doctoral exams are not intended to directly teach (or gauge mastery of content related to) the profession's grand challenges.

Figure 2. Pedagogical Intentions of Exams



Note: n=45.

Competencies Assessed by Exams

A series of 10 questions asked about the kinds of competencies that the exam aimed to assess. These items on assessing competencies followed this lead-in text: ***Please indicate if your doctoral program's exam(s) evaluates the following competencies.***

- evidence-based interventions to address social problems
- specific substantive area of social work (e.g., child welfare, mental health, etc.)
- social science theory/theories
- research skills to advance social work's equity and justice mission
- ethical issues/values in social work research
- history of social work profession
- team-based science
- quantitative methods
- qualitative methods
- mixed methods

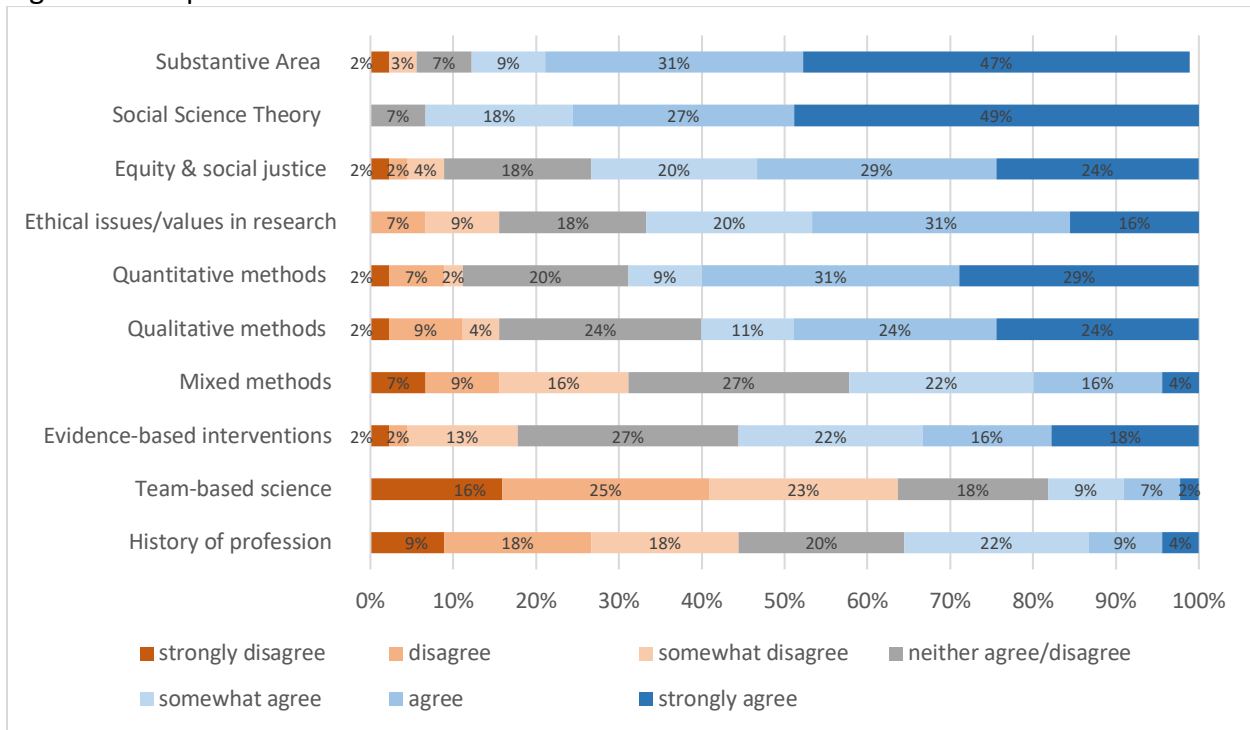
There was strong agreement for the most part across the items, although these items resulted in somewhat greater heterogeneity in responses than the pedagogical intentions items discussed above. These items used a 7-point agreement response scale (rather than the 5-point importance response scale used to measure pedagogical intent).

As is illustrated in Figure 3, of the 10 items, the majority of respondents reported at least some agreement that the exam aimed to assess competency in 7 of 10 of the items queried. The greatest agreement was in regard to competence in social science theories and specific substantive areas of social work or social welfare; there was over 80% agreement on both and over 45% of respondents reported strong agreement.

The majority of the sample agreed that the exam aimed to assess competencies in ethical issues and values related to conducting social work research and competencies in research skills related to social work's equity and social justice mission. In neither case was the agreement as strongly held as for the first two items.

Regarding methods training, the majority of the sample agreed that the exam aimed to evaluate competencies in quantitative methods, qualitative methods and evidence-based interventions. On the other hand, competency in mixed-methods research was less commonly evaluated, although 42% of respondents did report this was a competency assessed by the exam. The most disagreement was related to team-based science, where 64% of respondents disagreed that this was a competency that was evaluated by the exam. Finally, 45% of respondents disagreed that their exam aims to assess competencies related to the history of the social work profession.

Figure 3. Competencies evaluated with exams



Note: n=45.

The qualitative data gathered from open-ended responses deepen understanding and provide nuance to respondents' answers to the above questions regarding pedagogical intentions and competencies. Most frequently noted was the exam's intention to assess students' basic or foundation knowledge or basic mastery of required curriculum content, as reflected in the comments below. These suggest that the content of Years 1 and 2 may drive most exams.

Our exam aims to assess students mastery/synthesis of foundation or core (minimal level of) theoretical and research content (may or may not be in students' substantive area) in order to advance to next year of program.

The purpose of the exam is to be certain that all students are sufficiently knowledgeable on an agreed-upon minimum level in order to continue in the program.

I view the comprehensive exam as an opportunity for students to demonstrate their breadth of knowledge, by applying each area of their coursework to a substantive topic of their choosing. This demonstration, in turn, has at least two functions: first, to assure them, as well as their faculty, of their preparation for dissertation work, teaching, and scholarship; and, second, to provide a structure within which they engage in the process of a truly comprehensive review of what is known in the substantive area they have chosen for their dissertation research. We position the comprehensive exam as a product that emerges from a lengthy process of engagement.

Closely related were comments about the use of the exam to determine students' readiness for their dissertation or as a "spring board for the dissertation proposal," although this often referred to a mastery of more specialized than foundational content.

For our qualifying exam, the purpose is to assess student ability to integrate and apply content from the core curriculum, and specifically to do so in ways that demonstrate that they are prepared for and capable of formulating and conducting a dissertation research project.

The focus of inquiry for the exam must align with the dissertation, thus contributing to theory, method or substantive area associated with the planned work. This shows that the student is ready to develop a proposal.

Our exam is designed to be a synthesis and evaluation of research in the student's main area of focus.

The purpose of the exam is to demonstrate that one can use the knowledge and skills during doctoral preparation to synthesize prior research, ask a focused research question, and utilize appropriate methods to examine that question.

Our exams also help students also push students to dive deeply into the literature/theory related to their own field, in preparation for their dissertation and research career. Their specialized paper is usually incorporated into their final dissertation, and is often a stand-alone publication.

The open-ended responses also indicated strong support for competencies for critical analysis.

At this time, our qualifying exam is intended to allow students to demonstrate their analytic and critical reasoning skills and their ability to articulate and present an original piece of writing in an area of emerging expertise.

Students are to demonstrate an engagement with intellectual thought and ability to articulate that engagement through writing, oral presentation and discussion.

Our program is interested in having students be scholars, not just scientists. We are staying away from a totally specialized approach to ensure that our students aren't just narrowly focused on advanced methods/topics/etc. We want them to have a broad knowledge of history, origins of science, epistemology.

Numerous program directors in their written comments identified a closely related competency of the ability to conduct independent (but mentored) research.

For one program students are to demonstrate a testable research questions. We aim to prepare independent researchers/scholars with strong knowledge and skills in

conceptual framework, methodology, and analysis. Students are to demonstrate sufficient mastery of the theoretical and empirical content in their area to suggest preparation to advance work as an independent scholar.

I also think that with the competitive nature of the job market and time needed to complete three paper dissertation option, it is necessary now, more than ever, to ensure that the qualifying exam both demonstrates student readiness to do independent research and leads them closer to a publication or dissertation prospectus.

The exam must be completed largely independently, so this is a demonstration of independent capacity to conceptualize, write, and present one's thinking and work. It also has the intended benefit of providing students with the opportunity to develop another first-authored publication.

It is striking that there is no mention in any open-ended responses of exam goals related to the achievement of competencies regarding equity, social justice, translational science or impact. Overall, there appears to be a disconnect between the quantitative responses and the open-ended responses in these equity- and action-driven areas.

Exam Format, Process, and Feedback

In 66% of the programs, the exam is individualized to reflect each student's specialized area of interest, whereas in the remaining programs, all students take the same exam (e.g., a common methods exam) or subsets of students take common exams in their specialized areas (e.g., all students interested in intervention science take the same intervention science exam; all students interested in public policy take a common policy exam). In programs that have more than one exam, it is possible to have a mix of both common and specialized exams. The development of exams with an individualized format may include input from both the student and one or more faculty members. When an exam is not individualized, a common question may still require students to apply concepts from their specialized area of research. In some programs, students choose particular fields that match their area of interest and respond to common questions from within those specialized subject areas.

Exams are usually taken in the second year or in the summer between Year 1 and Year 2, with some variation across programs; programs that require more than one exam often administer them at key points in the first three years (i.e., end of year 1 and beginning of year 3). Exams also vary in terms of their duration, with fewer than 20% of programs reporting the exam is taken within a day, 28% within one week, and the remainder within one semester or summer break, or in an otherwise untimed period.⁶

Almost all programs' exams have a written component (84%); exactly half of the programs include an oral component; and 44% require students to prepare a paper or manuscript. (These

⁶ Results based on n=40.

categories are not mutually exclusive.)⁷ For the majority of programs, students are provided some written feedback (72%) and 44% receive some oral feedback. However, 24% of respondents reported that their students are provided basic feedback about the outcome (pass/not pass) without substantive information about the quality of their responses.⁸ Moreover, only two-thirds (68%) of students' faculty mentors or dissertation advisors are informed by the program of the student's results on the exam.⁹

The open-ended responses provide more detail about the feedback process and suggest that there are a variety of ways in which feedback on exam performance is given and utilized. Students are often required to address feedback on their written exam during a subsequent oral exam. Most frequently it is discussed one-on-one, such as with the Director or an advisor during in-person annual reviews, or with the review committee. In many instances, the feedback provides scaffolding for dissertation research or is incorporated into their dissertation, such as in the development of a dissertation proposal and the research agenda/questions to be addressed. Qualitative comments included some specific examples of how feedback is provided.

Each student is encouraged to meet with the three members of the committee that evaluated the comprehensive exam to discuss the feedback for consideration as they develop their dissertation ideas and refine their research agendas.

Students receive limited written feedback (after the written portion of the exam), but extensive feedback during the oral portion. Since the examining committee includes their major advisor, who generally goes on to serve as dissertation chair, this feedback often shapes a student's next steps in working toward development of their dissertation proposal. For instance, feedback may identify an additional area of theory or advanced method in which the student then takes elective courses or an independent study.

The prelim at our school is typically viewed as a stepping-stone into the dissertation research, particularly since students choose the topic of their prelim (with guidance from committee to narrow and refine scope).

In some instances, exam feedback is a springboard for generating publications and/or conference presentations.

Students typically convert at least one of their comps essays into publications (and feedback from committee members is meant to facilitate this).

The qualifying exam process allows them to have a very real, in-person experience of what it is like to receive feedback on thinking about an independently developed paper,

⁷ Results based on n=50.

⁸ Results based on n=50.

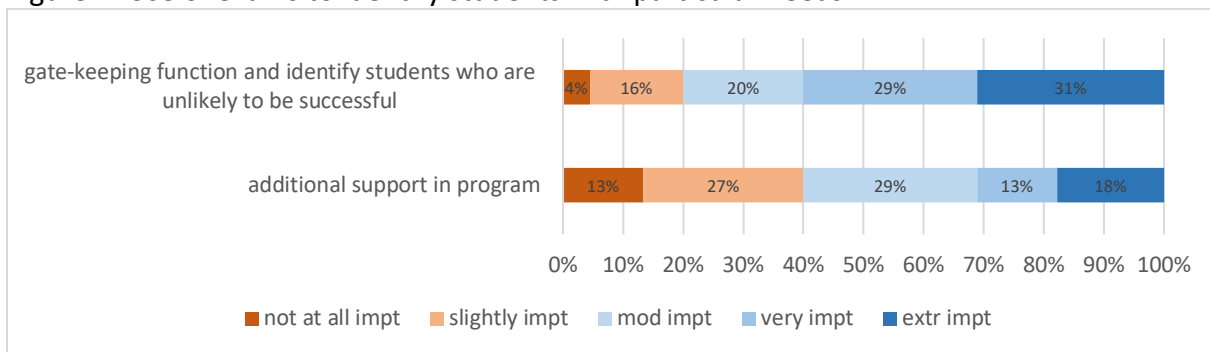
⁹ Results based on n=47.

from a committee that has reviewed it. This is relevant substantively, but procedurally it is also relevant to thinking about preparing for the dissertation and/or for other kinds of written products that will be evaluated, such as other papers or grant proposals.

Consequences for Failing or Doing Poorly on an Exam

In addition, two items assessed whether the exam aimed to identify students who may need additional support in the program and serve as a gate-keeping function and identify students who are unlikely to be successful in the program (see Figure 4). The results indicate that programs do view the exam as useful in identifying students who need extra support or who may not be successful.

Figure 4. Use of exams to identify students with particular needs



Note: n=45.

Respondents to the open-ended questions all noted that they have policies and procedures regarding failing or performing marginally on the exam. Many programs give the students a second or even third chance. A few programs acknowledged that it is normative for students to have to rewrite parts of the exam.

It is fairly typical for students to have to rewrite segments of their prelim exam, but very uncommon for students to fail a revised prelim. If they fail a revised prelim, they are not permitted to try again.

Quality control purposes are closely related to assessing mastery of foundation content, but less frequently mentioned as an exam objective.

We use our exam ensure “quality control”/be able to track or monitor students’ performance (“gatekeeper function”), although exams are rarely used to remove someone from the program

Several programs referred to the expectations of their University’s Graduate School related to ensuring the quality of graduates from the institution.

Our exam is an important milestone. If a student is not developing competence, we do a disservice by allowing her/him to progress through the program. At the university level, we are required to monitor progress and propose program improvement. Such exams serve a critical role in our ability to monitor/track student learning and their ability to translate learning beyond the confines of individual classes.

The quantitative data indicate that almost all programs (87%) allow at least one retake should a student fail the exam.¹⁰ But a small number dismiss a student immediately under certain conditions related to performance.

Failing all three parts of the exam leads to immediate separation from the program. If a student fails two parts, a leave is required with subsequent successful retaking of the two parts in order for a student to remain in the program. If a student fails one of the parts of the exam, they must retake that part of the exam several months later and pass it in order to remain in the program.

If they fail outright, they are dismissed. If they are asked to revise, they have 1 month.

There are four possible outcomes to our written exam: pass with high standard, pass, pass with revision, or not passing. In the case of the third option - pass with revision - the student is given an opportunity to revise their submission over the course of two weeks, in response to substantive feedback from their three-person review committee. In the case of a not passing decision, the student can be given the option to repeat the exam the following year. Only one repeat option is allowed.

The open-ended responses suggest that many programs allow two to three retakes, with some programs allowing up to one year for the student to meet exam expectations. In some instances, there is a more flexible and protracted process of providing additional feedback and mentoring or “counseling out” a student. These processes may vary with whether the product is a paper to be published or a more traditional exam format.

For the comprehensive exam, student with marginal pass may be "counseled out." For the qualifying exam, because it is paper format suitable for publication, student will be asked to keep reworking it until it meets committee expectations/standards. In rare instances, students may realize that they no longer want to pursue a doctorate.

Most programs acknowledge that it is highly unusual for a student to be dismissed because of poor performance and suggest that high admission standards mean that dismissal should be rare.

I think if the exams serving a gatekeeping function, that this is an indication that something is not right about our program. We either admitted students who were not

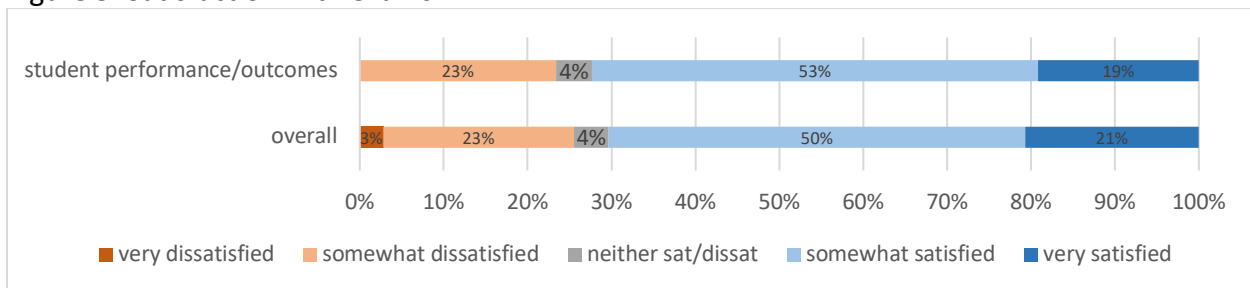
¹⁰ Results based on n=47.

prepared for doctoral work or there were unexpected personal issues that got in the way for the student, and we were not able to do anything to help the student get the resources to overcome these issues. If all goes as it should, students should be well prepared for exams and pass them on the first try. We had some problems several years ago with admissions and are working to rectify our processes.

Evaluation of Exam Effectiveness

As noted above, an impetus for the survey was a sense of some frustration and dissatisfaction among GADE members about how well their exam served its intended purposes. Two questions about respondent satisfaction were asked:¹¹ one to gauge overall satisfaction and one to assess satisfaction with student performance on the exam. As illustrated on Figure 5, the majority of respondents were satisfied with the exam based on responses to both questions; however, about 25% of the sample reported overall dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction with student performance and outcomes on the exam.

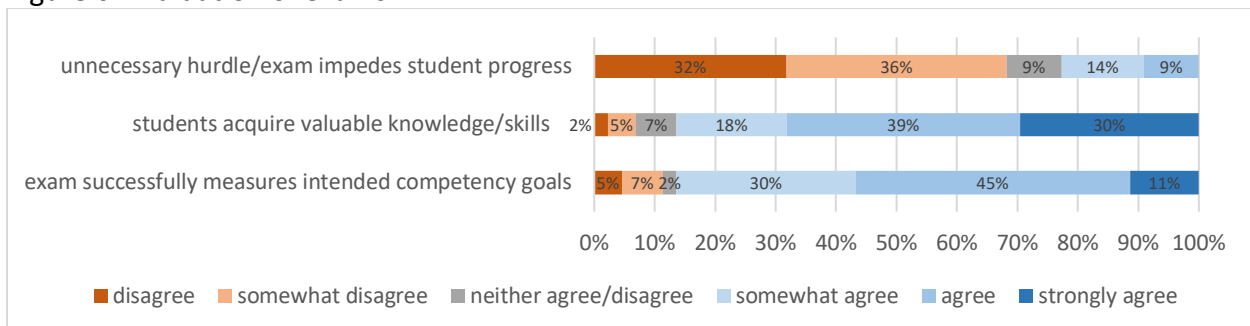
Figure 5. Satisfaction with exams



Note: n=48.

Moreover, as illustrated in Figure 6, the majority of respondents agreed that the exam successfully measures the intended competency goals and that students acquire valuable knowledge and skills as a result of exam preparation. The minority (23%) of respondents perceived the exam as an unnecessary hurdle that may impede student progress.¹²

Figure 6. Evaluation of exams



Note: n=44.

¹¹ Results based on n=48.

¹² Results based on n=44.

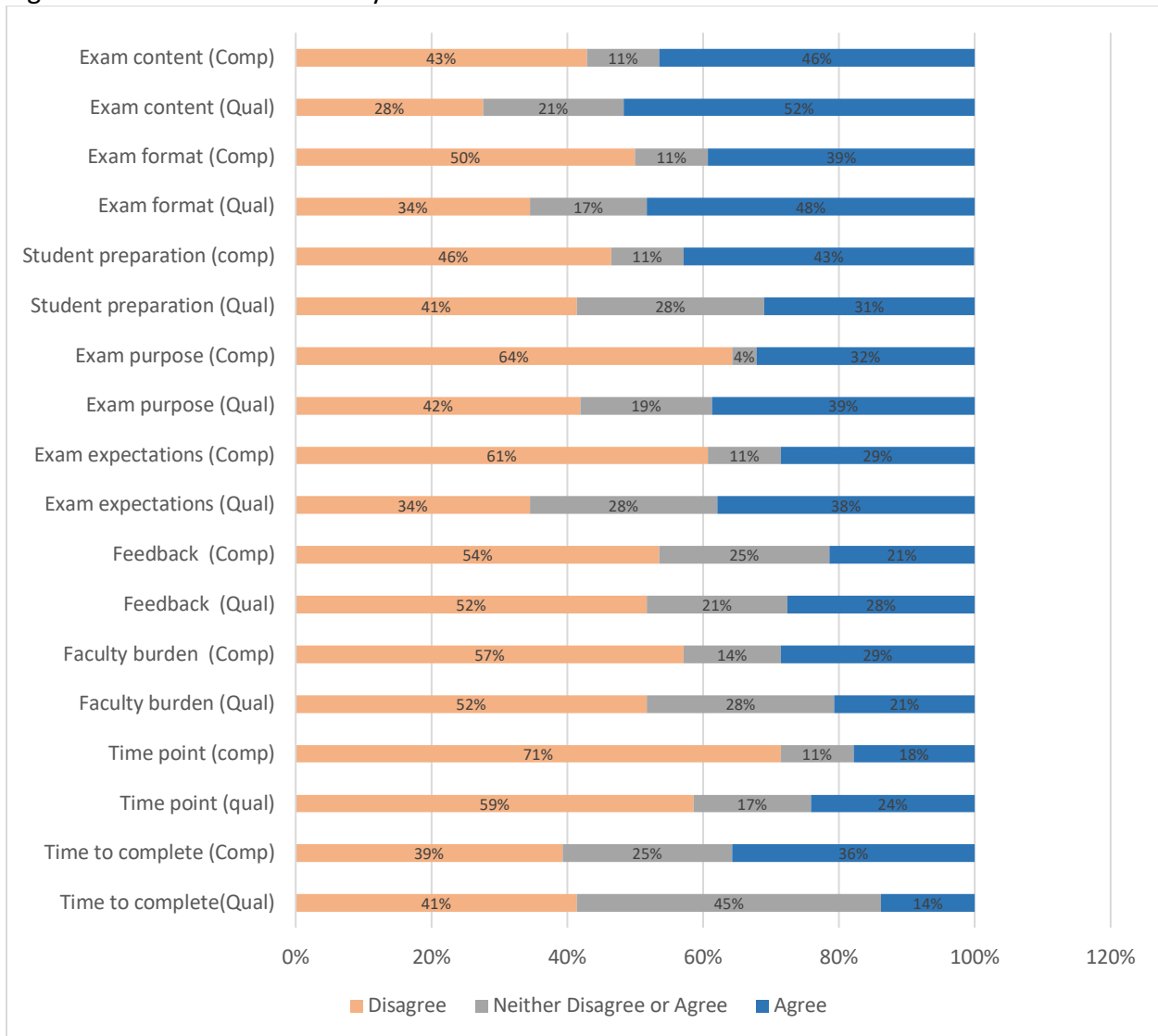
Exam Modifications

Finally, respondents were asked about several aspects of the exam that they would like to modify if they had the opportunity to do so. Nine areas were queried in the closed-ended survey items¹³ and each allowed for an open-ended explanation. In figure 7 these are presented separately for qualifying and comprehensive exams. Respondents from programs that have more than one type of exam were allowed to respond in each of the nine areas for both exam types.

- Exam content and format. 46% of respondents with a comprehensive exam and 52% of respondents with a qualifying exam reported that they were interested in modifying the content of the exam if given the opportunity and 39% and 49% respectively of respondents with a comprehensive and qualifying exam would like to modify the format of the exam.
- Student preparation. 43% of respondents with a comprehensive exam and 31% of respondents with a qualifying exam would like to modify the process by which students prepare for the exam.
- Exam purpose. 32% of respondents with a comprehensive exam and 39% of respondents with a qualifying exam would like to modify the purpose of the exam.
- Exam expectations. 29% of respondents with a comprehensive exam and 38% of respondents with a qualifying exam would like to modify their exam's expectations.
- At least 25% of the sample reported that they would like to modify their exams in at least one of the other areas queried (e.g., feedback, faculty burden), with two exceptions: Only 18% of respondents with a comprehensive exam were interested in modifying the time point in which the exam is taken and only 14% of respondents with a qualifying exam were interested in modifying the amount of time students are given to complete the exam.

¹³For ease of interpretation, we collapsed strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, and disagree together, and strongly agree, somewhat agree, and agree together into one category each.

Figure 7. Preferences to modify exams



Note: n=29 for qualifying exam; n=28 for comprehensive exam.

Responses to the open-ended questions indicated that several programs were changing their exam goals and structure or questioning the effectiveness of their current format.

It seems every 5 years or so there is a prompt to re-evaluate and change what we do in this regard. We've had comprehensive exams, qualifying papers and integrative/comprehensive exam.

We made major revisions to the exam a few years ago on grading, which reduced burden on our faculty enormously. Our biggest hurdles is that we'd like to have students take them during summer after 2nd year, but we can't because the university would require them to be enrolled, yet their funding doesn't cover summer tuition. So they go

from May until October just studying for exams (while doing other things). But it can put students who are making great progress somewhat back.

We changed the timing and process of our exam in the past few years. The former exams were individualized and were given when a student completed an "integrative paper." Many students took well over a year after finishing course work to complete the paper, and more than two years after completing course work to take the exams. Exam quality and grading standards varied by student. We got rid of the paper. We now give exams two times per year and most students take it in December of Year 3. Exam quality is more easily monitored and has improved. All students receive the same exam questions, but most questions ask students to apply concepts to their own research areas, so exam responses vary. So far, we are happy with our new exam process.

An issue is that we have many guidelines and expectations for the exam, and we have these in writing in our student handbook--but some students and advisors don't read the handbook, and advisors have often assumed we conduct exams as in their own doctoral studies. In one instance, social work content was not incorporated at all and the student had to re-do the exam. I recently offered a seminar for students/faculty to better review expectations and strategies, and plan to offer this again in the future.

Overall most respondents appear to be generally satisfied with their exam goals and structure, but may nevertheless seek ways to improve it.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this survey is the first to assess the structure, process, and perceived strengths and weaknesses of the comprehensive exams in social work doctoral programs. Given the important role of GADE in promoting and supporting academic excellence, supporting new and emerging programs, and in providing relevant and comprehensive education for the next generation of social work scholars and educators, the information from this survey is likely to be of relevance to GADE members and others interested in social work doctoral education.

The results indicate that social work doctoral exams have a wide range of formats and structures, and feedback mechanisms operate in diverse ways across programs. Commonly applied labels ('comprehensive exam' and 'preliminary exam') are not terms used the same way by all programs. Thus, these terms may not be useful ways to categorize program exam types nor do they meaningfully differentiate the exams that programs require of their doctoral students. Despite these labeling differences, there is wide agreement around pedagogical intentions and learning goals across programs. Across most programs the existing exam structures are believed by directors to assess students well in terms of their knowledge and competencies related to research methods and ethics, critical thinking skills, and competency to conduct independent research. The qualitative data highlight the importance of these areas and provide some important nuance about how program directors think about the purpose and goals of their exams. Whereas in response to the closed-ended items there was agreement that

social justice and action-oriented goals were important to the pedagogical purpose of the exam, these themes were not underscored in open-ended responses. Perhaps, these goals reflect implicit but not intentional exam goals; or, perhaps they are characteristic of overarching program intentions that may be less specific to the exam itself. This inconsistency between the quantitative and qualitative findings deserves additional study. Finally, most program directors expressed overall satisfaction with their exams and the majority also did not report a desire to modify the exam requirement of their doctoral program. During our summer working group conference calls, we learned that several programs were either in the process of modifying their exams or had recently made significant changes to them. Thus, some of the satisfaction that we observe in the survey data may reflect these recent program modifications. Even so, an important share of program directors who responded to the survey did identify particular aspects of the exam that they would like to change, reflecting some of the dissatisfaction with exam goals, structure, and process that fueled this initiative and the GADE working group that formed in the Spring/Summer of 2018. We hope that this survey will provide a starting point to guide exam reform for those programs that seek to modify aspects of their exam moving forward.

Importantly, the study has several limitations. The majority of GADE members responded to the survey, but of course the results are not generalizable to the full GADE membership or to program directors who are not GADE members. Demographic data were not collected on the respondents and only limited information was collected about the programs themselves, limiting our ability to determine the ways in which the sample may be different from the population as a whole. This concern extends to our inability to distinguish with certainty whether programs represented in the survey grant PhDs or DSWs. Moreover, our results are shaped by our data collection method. Our choice to administer a brief, on-line survey, in lieu of conducting in-depth interviews and/or review program materials, necessarily limits the depth and nuance of our conclusions. Finally, the responses represent the views of program directors, which likely vary in important ways from faculty as a whole, students, and other program administrators. Future research would benefit from gathering information from this more diverse set of stakeholders. In regard to student perspectives, it would be helpful to understand the views of a wide-range of students, for example those who did and did not have positive experiences, including some who may not have passed the exam.

As a first step in sharing some of the survey's preliminary findings, a special session was held at the January 2019 annual meeting of the Society of Social Work and Research (SSWR).¹⁴ The purpose of this roundtable was to discuss survey findings related to the role of the exams in preparing doctoral students to use scientific evidence to contribute to evidence-based practice and policy and to promote social work advocacy and social justice. The session's discussion echoed many of the same themes reflected in the larger survey results described above; namely, that multiple pedagogical intentions exist for the exam including critical thinking (synthesizing literature to uncover what's known and not known in a particular area of study), expert critiques of current literature (does the student know and apply knowledge of methods

¹⁴ Roundtable participants included Paula Nurius, Margaret Thomas, Elizabeth Aparicio, Nancy Hooyman, Julia Henly.

to critique the state of evidence in an area?); and developing well-informed research questions and hypotheses to address gaps in an area of study. In addition, a lively conversation unfolded regarding the extent to which programs take time to deliberate about the purpose of their exam and how well it is communicated to students. Many audience participants expressed that their programs must do better on both fronts – explicating exam purpose and goals and sharing this information with students. Moreover, audience participants also noted the importance of clarifying how a program’s exam ties into the other training aspects of the program (e.g., what is the program’s “arc of opportunities” and where does the exam fit?). While satisfaction was expressed by many survey respondents, the SSWR roundtable discussion called for action on the side of programs to i) reassess the underlying purpose and goals of their doctoral exams, ii) consider how the exam can best meet these aims within the broader program structure and requirements, and iii) clearly communicate the purpose and goals of the exam to students.

Questions posed in this SSWR session related to this issue include:

- What can we reasonably achieve through the exam?
- What other opportunities exist in the program (i.e., courses) that also achieve overall program goals? How does the exam factor into the overall program goals?
- What are our *intentions* and *assumptions* about the purpose and structure of the exam? Why do we do what we do?
- How could the exam be a useful product (i.e., a publication, grant proposal)? Can it be practical and promote/assess competency development?

Student participation in the roundtable was invaluable. As a result of this dialogue, we recognize that a notable limitation to the survey is that students’ perspectives and experiences were not assessed, which we believe should be an important aspect of any program’s assessment of the doctoral exam process and a critical step for programs seeking to modify their exams and/or communicate more clearly their purposes to students.

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Background and Impetus for the Survey

The successful completion of a comprehensive or qualifying exam prior to candidacy is an important milestone for students enrolled in most academic programs leading to the PhD. However, despite the importance of these exams in terms of their gatekeeping role and relevance for the formation of emerging scholars, few national-level discussions have taken place among graduate educators on the purpose, format, and content of these exams in graduate education. Cassuto (2012) has argued that these exams serve an important role in the assessment of knowledge and competency in specific academic fields. However, he further notes that the exams may serve different purposes, described in terms of ‘looking backward’ (assessing knowledge of the field based on coursework) or ‘looking forward’ (assessing competency to advance through the dissertation). Giordano (2012), in a discussion of comprehensive exams in psychology, further emphasizes diversity in the format and purpose of these exams, noting that wide variation can occur by program as well as by mentors within programs. Although some texts (e.g., Rossman, 2002) discuss comprehensive exams as part of a broader effort to advise graduate students on strategies for doctoral program success, relatively little attention has been paid to critical review and discussion of the larger role of these exams in graduate education. The Group to Advance Doctoral Education (GADE) has a mission focused on promoting academic excellence, advancing the quality of doctoral student research in social work, and providing guidance and direction to new and emerging doctoral-level social work programs (Lightfoot & Beltram, 2016). Given this mission, and a limited focus on exam issues in doctoral social work education to date, further assessment (or exploration) is clearly needed on the purpose and content of the comprehensive and qualifying exams in PhD social work programs in order to enhance GADE member programs and student outcomes.¹

As a first step in addressing this gap, Nancy Hooyman conducted a pilot survey among a nonrandom sample of 14 social work doctoral programs in March 2018. The preliminary data obtained found wide variation in the name, format, content, timing, and grading and retake options. From the responses and subsequent discussions, it was readily apparent that a number of GADE members were not satisfied with their current exam structures, and were eager to learn about the experience of other programs as a means of enhancing exam quality and relevance. Further informal discussions of these issues took place at the 2018 GADE Annual Meeting, and several GADE members indicated that they were interested in participating in a working group related to qualifying and comprehensive exams. These members, who represent a range of social work PhD programs across the United States, met by conference call in May 2018 for an initial discussion of issues and questions concerning doctoral program comprehensive and preliminary exams. The conversation was continued during another conference call in July 2018. These discussions revealed wide variation across exams in terms of purpose and content. In a similar way to the arguments advanced by Cassuto (2012), one of the committee members identified a useful distinction between exams focused backward with an eye toward assessing competency, and those focused forward with the aim of securing

¹ This report focuses primarily on research-based programs, especially that grant a PhD. The report does not consider the role of exams in DSW programs. It is recognized that this would be an important topic for future study.

specialized knowledge that will facilitate progress toward the development of a dissertation. Group members related that there were a range of exam goals and formats in their doctoral programs. Some members also expressed frustration and dissatisfaction about the effectiveness of their exams in attaining pedagogical goals. In addition, some members were interested in making modifications to their exam formats, but uncertain about how to proceed and what changes would be most helpful for students. The group made the decision to survey the doctoral directors from GADE member programs to collect systematic information about the exam purpose, structure, and content, as well as director perceptions of what works and does not work in terms of exam structure and processes. A subgroup of members – Julia Henly, Nancy Hooymann, Faith Hopp, Cassandra Simmel and Anne Williford – developed an online survey to assess these domains. This report summarizes the results of that survey.

Sample and Procedures

The survey was distributed to all programs represented on the GADE Listserve in September 2018 through an on-line Qualtrics platform. After being contacted three times to encourage directors to complete the survey, 50 did so.² Not all respondents answered all questions, so the response rate varies slightly across items. The vast majority of programs represented in the survey are full time (81%) or have both full and part time programs (13%). Most of the programs were judged by the respondent to be “research intensive” (69% strongly agree; 27% somewhat agree).³

The survey instrument consisted of both quantitative and qualitative components (see Appendix for complete instrument). It included 26 general questions (some with several sub-items) that addressed topics related to exam type(s); purpose and goals; administration; evaluation of effectiveness; and desire for exam modification.⁴ For open-ended questions, respondents were asked to provide written comments to four questions regarding the exams’ purposes, consequences of poor student performance, how students incorporate feedback from the exam, and anything else that the respondent wished to add. The majority of the respondents (41) included written comments.

Results

Exam Type

The survey asked respondents to indicate if their program required doctoral students to take a “qualifying,” “comprehensive,” “both,” or “other” type of exam (see Figure 1). Overall, 13 programs (26%) reported having a qualifying exam only, 23 programs reported a

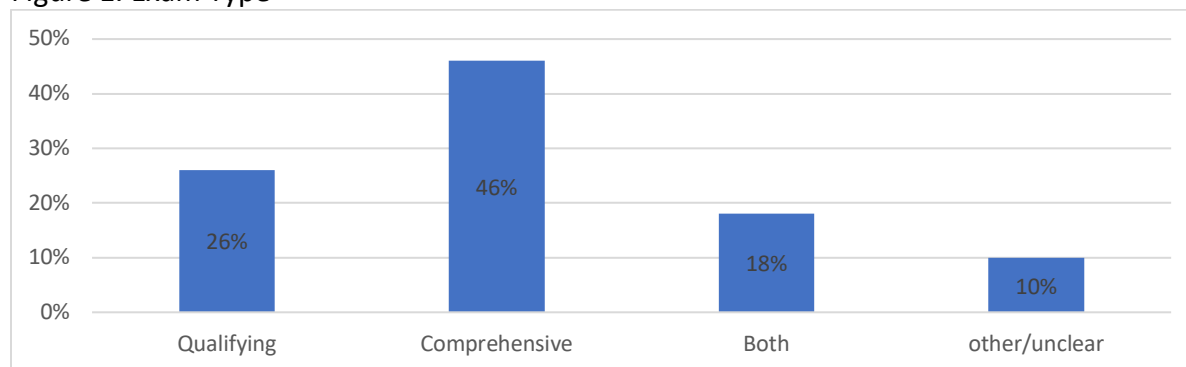
² 54 individuals responded to the Qualtrics survey by clicking the link; however, in four cases there were no data recorded suggesting that the respondent chose not to complete the survey after opening it. In November 2018 there were 89 members of GADE, 79 PhD programs and 10 DSW programs. This suggests a 56% - 63% response rate (depending on whether DSW programs are considered part of the study population.)

³ Unfortunately, a question regarding whether the program was a DSW or PhD program was not included. However, all but one program reported to be research intensive.

⁴ The instrument accommodated programs that require students to take more than one exam. In these cases (n=9), the respondents answered the relevant questions separately for each type of exam.

comprehensive exam only (46%), and nine programs reported both a qualifying and a comprehensive exam (18%). The remaining programs reported that they have another type of exam, such as a paper, or that the classification is unclear or not meaningful. Importantly, although most programs were able to classify their exam type in response to the survey item, we found that these names do not necessarily distinguish distinctive exam types, an issue that was raised by respondents in open-ended comments.⁵ Moreover, some respondents who reported their program as having one of the two exams did not consistently respond to subsequent survey items according to the classification. This lack of distinction between exam types has implications for how we present the data. In particular, for most of the items, we did not analyze the data separately by exam type and report overall statistics instead.

Figure 1. Exam Type



Note: n=50.

Pedagogical Intentions of Exams

A series of 11 questions were asked about exam purpose, with the following lead-in text: *In consideration of the primary pedagogical intentions of your doctoral program's exam(s), how important are each of the following?*

Nine of these 11 items addressed three key areas related to knowledge, critical thinking, and impact:

1. **Knowledge of basic competencies.** Three items related to broad knowledge of the social work discipline and in specialization areas, as well as preparation for the dissertation process.
2. **Competencies in critical analysis.** Two items address critical thinking skills and competency in critical use of scientific evidence in order to assess cross-cutting competencies that may indicate student ability to think analytically.
3. **Competencies to conduct research that has impact and is actionable.** These four questions assess whether the exams are meant to prepare students to conduct high

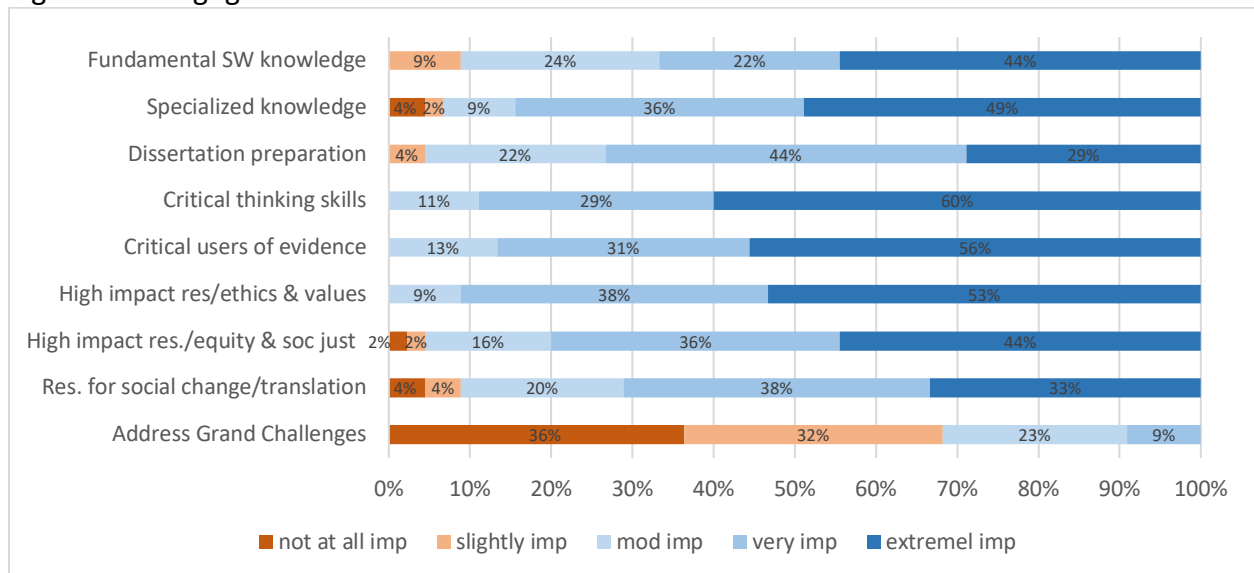
⁵ For example, one respondent noted that “comprehensive” exams typically cover three major areas of program content and thus have the purpose of checking that students are sufficiently well-versed across the program curriculum. At the same time, the exams are “qualifying” in that students are required to pass all three exam components in order to qualify for continuation in the doctoral program.

impact research that matters (e.g., is consistent with ethics and values of social work; advances social work’s equity and social justice aims; and to use research for the purpose of social change and translation to policy, practice, and/or community impact). The fourth item asked about the extent to which the exams are explicitly designed to address the Social Work Grand Challenges, which are themselves aspirational in their change mission.

Overall, the vast majority of respondents thought all but the Grand Challenges question represented important pedagogical intentions of their exams (see Figure 2). The exams are meant to assess competencies in basic social work knowledge (foundational and specialized); over 80% of respondents rated these items to be moderately to extremely important. There is even more agreement that the exams intend to assess competencies in critical analysis – no one felt these were unimportant aspects of the exam. Regarding competencies for impact and action – once again, there was wide agreement of the importance of these, especially to assess doctoral students’ competencies to conduct high impact research that is consistent with social work ethics and values, but also for the more change-focused items, such as the equity and social justice mission, social change, and translational research.

As noted above, only the question related to the Social Work Grand Challenges is ranked as not particularly important as a pedagogical intent of the exam. This does not mean that the profession’s grand challenges are judged to be unimportant by doctoral programs or that the exams do not ultimately help prepare students to do work that contributes in important ways to one of the grand challenges. Rather, the finding suggests that for the most part our doctoral exams are not intended to directly teach (or gauge mastery of content related to) the profession’s grand challenges.

Figure 2. Pedagogical Intentions of Exams



Note: n=45.

Competencies Assessed by Exams

A series of 10 questions asked about the kinds of competencies that the exam aimed to assess. These items on assessing competencies followed this lead-in text: ***Please indicate if your doctoral program's exam(s) evaluates the following competencies.***

- evidence-based interventions to address social problems
- specific substantive area of social work (e.g., child welfare, mental health, etc.)
- social science theory/theories
- research skills to advance social work's equity and justice mission
- ethical issues/values in social work research
- history of social work profession
- team-based science
- quantitative methods
- qualitative methods
- mixed methods

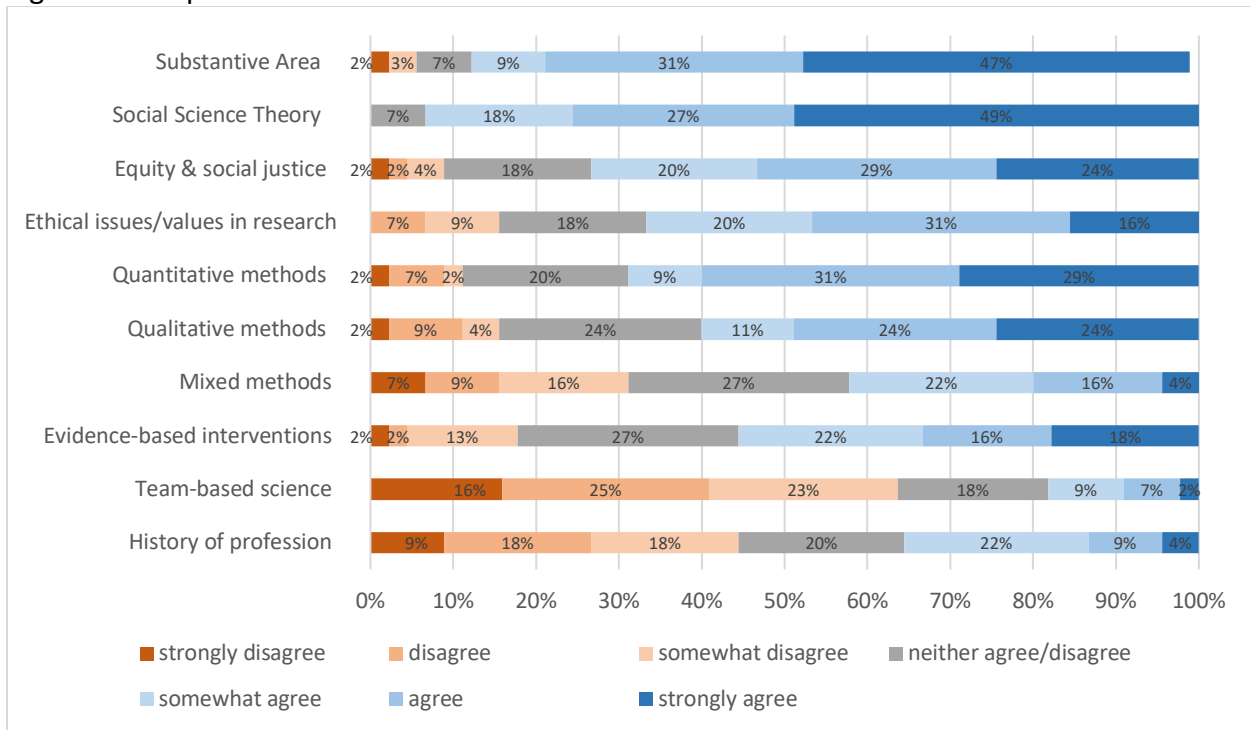
There was strong agreement for the most part across the items, although these items resulted in somewhat greater heterogeneity in responses than the pedagogical intentions items discussed above. These items used a 7-point agreement response scale (rather than the 5-point importance response scale used to measure pedagogical intent).

As is illustrated in Figure 3, of the 10 items, the majority of respondents reported at least some agreement that the exam aimed to assess competency in 7 of 10 of the items queried. The greatest agreement was in regard to competence in social science theories and specific substantive areas of social work or social welfare; there was over 80% agreement on both and over 45% of respondents reported strong agreement.

The majority of the sample agreed that the exam aimed to assess competencies in ethical issues and values related to conducting social work research and competencies in research skills related to social work's equity and social justice mission. In neither case was the agreement as strongly held as for the first two items.

Regarding methods training, the majority of the sample agreed that the exam aimed to evaluate competencies in quantitative methods, qualitative methods and evidence-based interventions. On the other hand, competency in mixed-methods research was less commonly evaluated, although 42% of respondents did report this was a competency assessed by the exam. The most disagreement was related to team-based science, where 64% of respondents disagreed that this was a competency that was evaluated by the exam. Finally, 45% of respondents disagreed that their exam aims to assess competencies related to the history of the social work profession.

Figure 3. Competencies evaluated with exams



Note: n=45.

The qualitative data gathered from open-ended responses deepen understanding and provide nuance to respondents' answers to the above questions regarding pedagogical intentions and competencies. Most frequently noted was the exam's intention to assess students' basic or foundation knowledge or basic mastery of required curriculum content, as reflected in the comments below. These suggest that the content of Years 1 and 2 may drive most exams.

Our exam aims to assess students mastery/synthesis of foundation or core (minimal level of) theoretical and research content (may or may not be in students' substantive area) in order to advance to next year of program.

The purpose of the exam is to be certain that all students are sufficiently knowledgeable on an agreed-upon minimum level in order to continue in the program.

I view the comprehensive exam as an opportunity for students to demonstrate their breadth of knowledge, by applying each area of their coursework to a substantive topic of their choosing. This demonstration, in turn, has at least two functions: first, to assure them, as well as their faculty, of their preparation for dissertation work, teaching, and scholarship; and, second, to provide a structure within which they engage in the process of a truly comprehensive review of what is known in the substantive area they have chosen for their dissertation research. We position the comprehensive exam as a product that emerges from a lengthy process of engagement.

Closely related were comments about the use of the exam to determine students' readiness for their dissertation or as a "spring board for the dissertation proposal," although this often referred to a mastery of more specialized than foundational content.

For our qualifying exam, the purpose is to assess student ability to integrate and apply content from the core curriculum, and specifically to do so in ways that demonstrate that they are prepared for and capable of formulating and conducting a dissertation research project.

The focus of inquiry for the exam must align with the dissertation, thus contributing to theory, method or substantive area associated with the planned work. This shows that the student is ready to develop a proposal.

Our exam is designed to be a synthesis and evaluation of research in the student's main area of focus.

The purpose of the exam is to demonstrate that one can use the knowledge and skills during doctoral preparation to synthesize prior research, ask a focused research question, and utilize appropriate methods to examine that question.

Our exams also help students also push students to dive deeply into the literature/theory related to their own field, in preparation for their dissertation and research career. Their specialized paper is usually incorporated into their final dissertation, and is often a stand-alone publication.

The open-ended responses also indicated strong support for competencies for critical analysis.

At this time, our qualifying exam is intended to allow students to demonstrate their analytic and critical reasoning skills and their ability to articulate and present an original piece of writing in an area of emerging expertise.

Students are to demonstrate an engagement with intellectual thought and ability to articulate that engagement through writing, oral presentation and discussion.

Our program is interested in having students be scholars, not just scientists. We are staying away from a totally specialized approach to ensure that our students aren't just narrowly focused on advanced methods/topics/etc. We want them to have a broad knowledge of history, origins of science, epistemology.

Numerous program directors in their written comments identified a closely related competency of the ability to conduct independent (but mentored) research.

For one program students are to demonstrate a testable research questions. We aim to prepare independent researchers/scholars with strong knowledge and skills in

conceptual framework, methodology, and analysis. Students are to demonstrate sufficient mastery of the theoretical and empirical content in their area to suggest preparation to advance work as an independent scholar.

I also think that with the competitive nature of the job market and time needed to complete three paper dissertation option, it is necessary now, more than ever, to ensure that the qualifying exam both demonstrates student readiness to do independent research and leads them closer to a publication or dissertation prospectus.

The exam must be completed largely independently, so this is a demonstration of independent capacity to conceptualize, write, and present one's thinking and work. It also has the intended benefit of providing students with the opportunity to develop another first-authored publication.

It is striking that there is no mention in any open-ended responses of exam goals related to the achievement of competencies regarding equity, social justice, translational science or impact. Overall, there appears to be a disconnect between the quantitative responses and the open-ended responses in these equity- and action-driven areas.

Exam Format, Process, and Feedback

In 66% of the programs, the exam is individualized to reflect each student's specialized area of interest, whereas in the remaining programs, all students take the same exam (e.g., a common methods exam) or subsets of students take common exams in their specialized areas (e.g., all students interested in intervention science take the same intervention science exam; all students interested in public policy take a common policy exam). In programs that have more than one exam, it is possible to have a mix of both common and specialized exams. The development of exams with an individualized format may include input from both the student and one or more faculty members. When an exam is not individualized, a common question may still require students to apply concepts from their specialized area of research. In some programs, students choose particular fields that match their area of interest and respond to common questions from within those specialized subject areas.

Exams are usually taken in the second year or in the summer between Year 1 and Year 2, with some variation across programs; programs that require more than one exam often administer them at key points in the first three years (i.e., end of year 1 and beginning of year 3). Exams also vary in terms of their duration, with fewer than 20% of programs reporting the exam is taken within a day, 28% within one week, and the remainder within one semester or summer break, or in an otherwise untimed period.⁶

Almost all programs' exams have a written component (84%); exactly half of the programs include an oral component; and 44% require students to prepare a paper or manuscript. (These

⁶ Results based on n=40.

categories are not mutually exclusive.)⁷ For the majority of programs, students are provided some written feedback (72%) and 44% receive some oral feedback. However, 24% of respondents reported that their students are provided basic feedback about the outcome (pass/not pass) without substantive information about the quality of their responses.⁸ Moreover, only two-thirds (68%) of students' faculty mentors or dissertation advisors are informed by the program of the student's results on the exam.⁹

The open-ended responses provide more detail about the feedback process and suggest that there are a variety of ways in which feedback on exam performance is given and utilized. Students are often required to address feedback on their written exam during a subsequent oral exam. Most frequently it is discussed one-on-one, such as with the Director or an advisor during in-person annual reviews, or with the review committee. In many instances, the feedback provides scaffolding for dissertation research or is incorporated into their dissertation, such as in the development of a dissertation proposal and the research agenda/questions to be addressed. Qualitative comments included some specific examples of how feedback is provided.

Each student is encouraged to meet with the three members of the committee that evaluated the comprehensive exam to discuss the feedback for consideration as they develop their dissertation ideas and refine their research agendas.

Students receive limited written feedback (after the written portion of the exam), but extensive feedback during the oral portion. Since the examining committee includes their major advisor, who generally goes on to serve as dissertation chair, this feedback often shapes a student's next steps in working toward development of their dissertation proposal. For instance, feedback may identify an additional area of theory or advanced method in which the student then takes elective courses or an independent study.

The prelim at our school is typically viewed as a stepping-stone into the dissertation research, particularly since students choose the topic of their prelim (with guidance from committee to narrow and refine scope).

In some instances, exam feedback is a springboard for generating publications and/or conference presentations.

Students typically convert at least one of their comps essays into publications (and feedback from committee members is meant to facilitate this).

The qualifying exam process allows them to have a very real, in-person experience of what it is like to receive feedback on thinking about an independently developed paper,

⁷ Results based on n=50.

⁸ Results based on n=50.

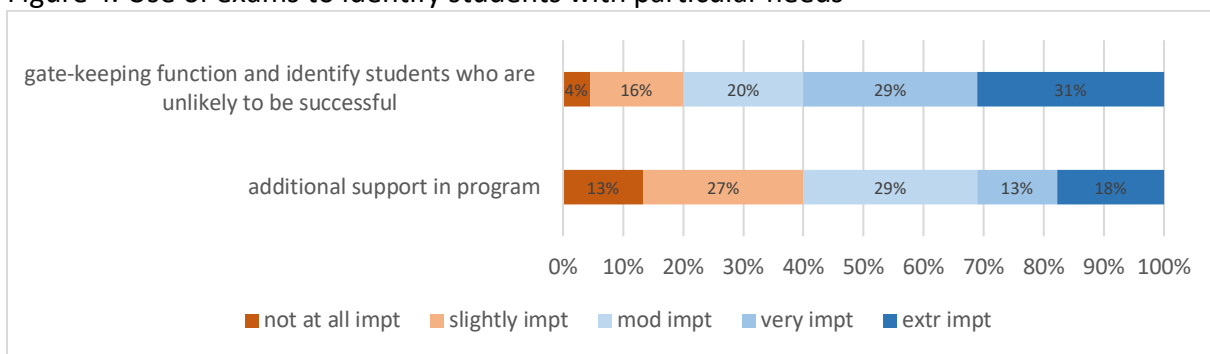
⁹ Results based on n=47.

from a committee that has reviewed it. This is relevant substantively, but procedurally it is also relevant to thinking about preparing for the dissertation and/or for other kinds of written products that will be evaluated, such as other papers or grant proposals.

Consequences for Failing or Doing Poorly on an Exam

In addition, two items assessed whether the exam aimed to identify students who may need additional support in the program and serve as a gate-keeping function and identify students who are unlikely to be successful in the program (see Figure 4). The results indicate that programs do view the exam as useful in identifying students who need extra support or who may not be successful.

Figure 4. Use of exams to identify students with particular needs



Note: n=45.

Respondents to the open-ended questions all noted that they have policies and procedures regarding failing or performing marginally on the exam. Many programs give the students a second or even third chance. A few programs acknowledged that it is normative for students to have to rewrite parts of the exam.

It is fairly typical for students to have to rewrite segments of their prelim exam, but very uncommon for students to fail a revised prelim. If they fail a revised prelim, they are not permitted to try again.

Quality control purposes are closely related to assessing mastery of foundation content, but less frequently mentioned as an exam objective.

We use our exam ensure “quality control”/be able to track or monitor students’ performance (“gatekeeper function”), although exams are rarely used to remove someone from the program

Several programs referred to the expectations of their University’s Graduate School related to ensuring the quality of graduates from the institution.

Our exam is an important milestone. If a student is not developing competence, we do a disservice by allowing her/him to progress through the program. At the university level, we are required to monitor progress and propose program improvement. Such exams serve a critical role in our ability to monitor/track student learning and their ability to translate learning beyond the confines of individual classes.

The quantitative data indicate that almost all programs (87%) allow at least one retake should a student fail the exam.¹⁰ But a small number dismiss a student immediately under certain conditions related to performance.

Failing all three parts of the exam leads to immediate separation from the program. If a student fails two parts, a leave is required with subsequent successful retaking of the two parts in order for a student to remain in the program. If a student fails one of the parts of the exam, they must retake that part of the exam several months later and pass it in order to remain in the program.

If they fail outright, they are dismissed. If they are asked to revise, they have 1 month.

There are four possible outcomes to our written exam: pass with high standard, pass, pass with revision, or not passing. In the case of the third option - pass with revision - the student is given an opportunity to revise their submission over the course of two weeks, in response to substantive feedback from their three-person review committee. In the case of a not passing decision, the student can be given the option to repeat the exam the following year. Only one repeat option is allowed.

The open-ended responses suggest that many programs allow two to three retakes, with some programs allowing up to one year for the student to meet exam expectations. In some instances, there is a more flexible and protracted process of providing additional feedback and mentoring or “counseling out” a student. These processes may vary with whether the product is a paper to be published or a more traditional exam format.

For the comprehensive exam, student with marginal pass may be "counseled out." For the qualifying exam, because it is paper format suitable for publication, student will be asked to keep reworking it until it meets committee expectations/standards. In rare instances, students may realize that they no longer want to pursue a doctorate.

Most programs acknowledge that it is highly unusual for a student to be dismissed because of poor performance and suggest that high admission standards mean that dismissal should be rare.

I think if the exams serving a gatekeeping function, that this is an indication that something is not right about our program. We either admitted students who were not

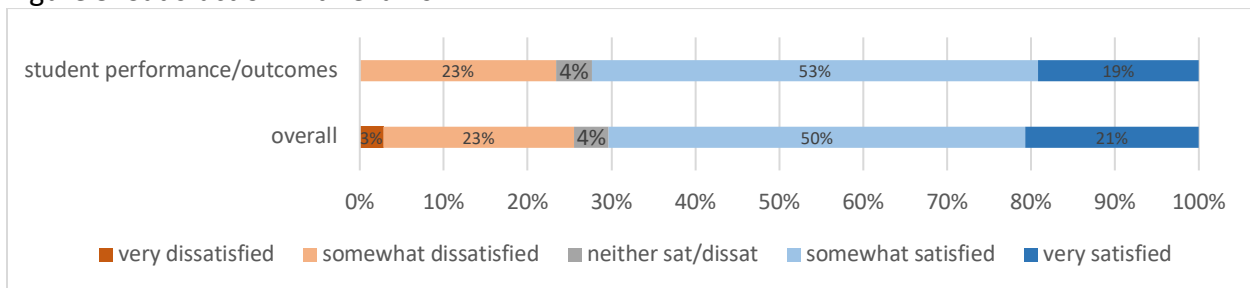
¹⁰ Results based on n=47.

prepared for doctoral work or there were unexpected personal issues that got in the way for the student, and we were not able to do anything to help the student get the resources to overcome these issues. If all goes as it should, students should be well prepared for exams and pass them on the first try. We had some problems several years ago with admissions and are working to rectify our processes.

Evaluation of Exam Effectiveness

As noted above, an impetus for the survey was a sense of some frustration and dissatisfaction among GADE members about how well their exam served its intended purposes. Two questions about respondent satisfaction were asked:¹¹ one to gauge overall satisfaction and one to assess satisfaction with student performance on the exam. As illustrated on Figure 5, the majority of respondents were satisfied with the exam based on responses to both questions; however, about 25% of the sample reported overall dissatisfaction and dissatisfaction with student performance and outcomes on the exam.

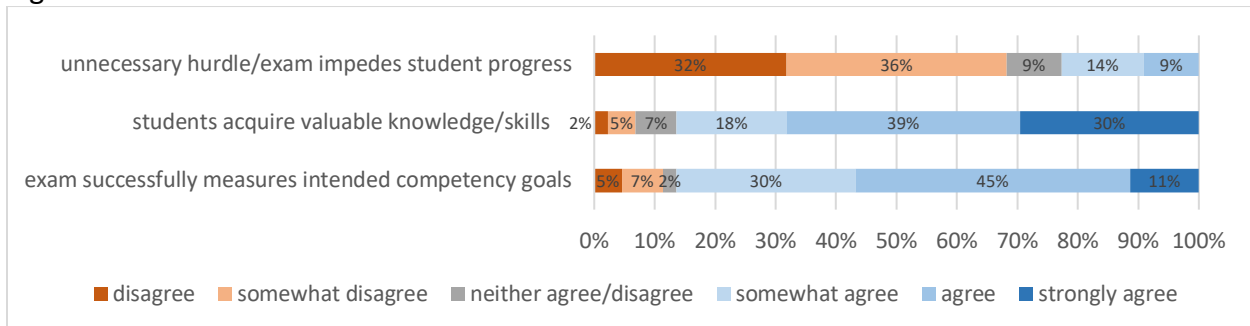
Figure 5. Satisfaction with exams



Note: n=48.

Moreover, as illustrated in Figure 6, the majority of respondents agreed that the exam successfully measures the intended competency goals and that students acquire valuable knowledge and skills as a result of exam preparation. The minority (23%) of respondents perceived the exam as an unnecessary hurdle that may impede student progress.¹²

Figure 6. Evaluation of exams



Note: n=44.

¹¹ Results based on n=48.

¹² Results based on n=44.

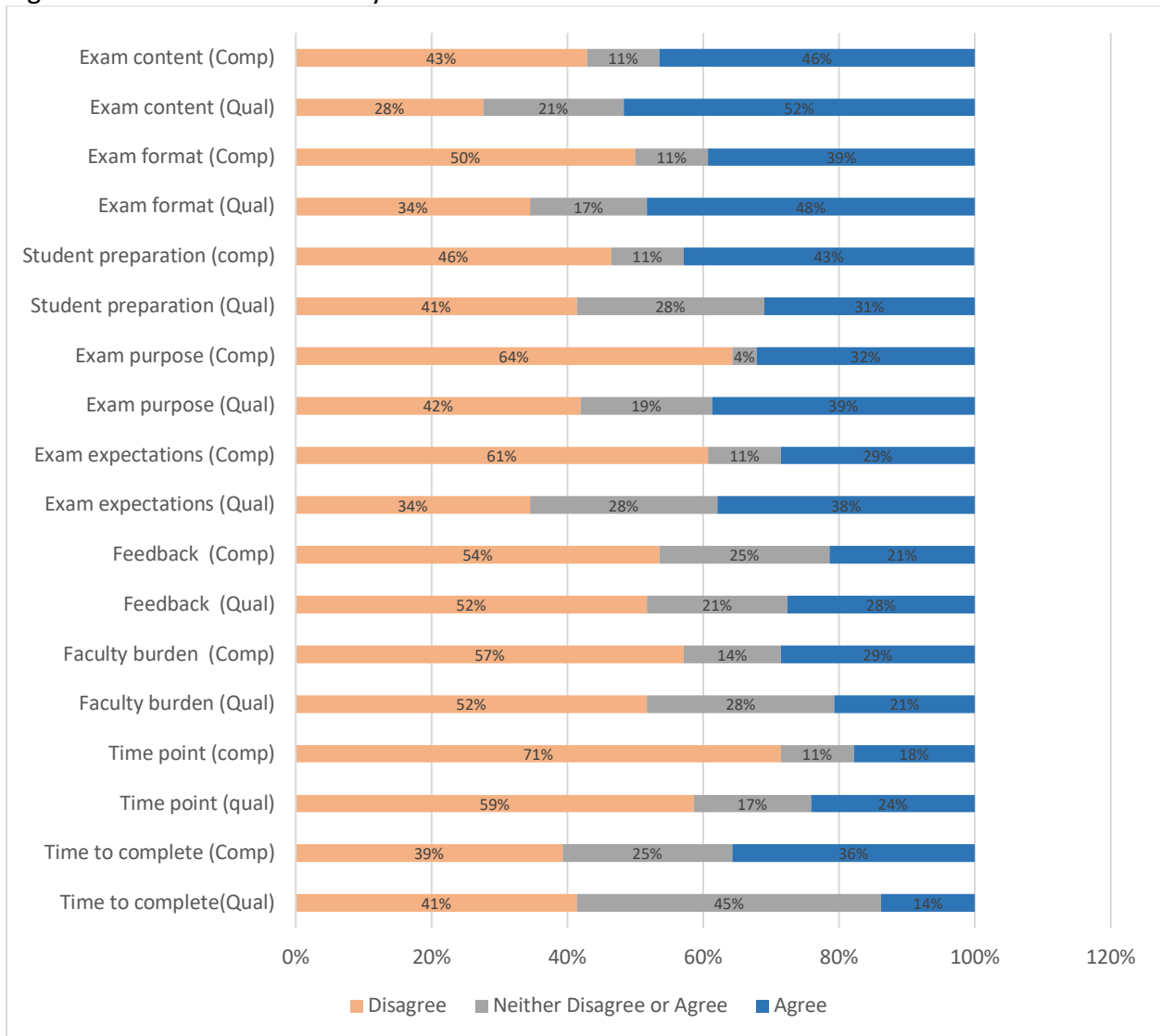
Exam Modifications

Finally, respondents were asked about several aspects of the exam that they would like to modify if they had the opportunity to do so. Nine areas were queried in the closed-ended survey items¹³ and each allowed for an open-ended explanation. In figure 7 these are presented separately for qualifying and comprehensive exams. Respondents from programs that have more than one type of exam were allowed to respond in each of the nine areas for both exam types.

- Exam content and format. 46% of respondents with a comprehensive exam and 52% of respondents with a qualifying exam reported that they were interested in modifying the content of the exam if given the opportunity and 39% and 49% respectively of respondents with a comprehensive and qualifying exam would like to modify the format of the exam.
- Student preparation. 43% of respondents with a comprehensive exam and 31% of respondents with a qualifying exam would like to modify the process by which students prepare for the exam.
- Exam purpose. 32% of respondents with a comprehensive exam and 39% of respondents with a qualifying exam would like to modify the purpose of the exam.
- Exam expectations. 29% of respondents with a comprehensive exam and 38% of respondents with a qualifying exam would like to modify their exam's expectations.
- At least 25% of the sample reported that they would like to modify their exams in at least one of the other areas queried (e.g., feedback, faculty burden), with two exceptions: Only 18% of respondents with a comprehensive exam were interested in modifying the time point in which the exam is taken and only 14% of respondents with a qualifying exam were interested in modifying the amount of time students are given to complete the exam.

¹³For ease of interpretation, we collapsed strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, and disagree together, and strongly agree, somewhat agree, and agree together into one category each.

Figure 7. Preferences to modify exams



Note: n=29 for qualifying exam; n=28 for comprehensive exam.

Responses to the open-ended questions indicated that several programs were changing their exam goals and structure or questioning the effectiveness of their current format.

It seems every 5 years or so there is a prompt to re-evaluate and change what we do in this regard. We've had comprehensive exams, qualifying papers and integrative/comprehensive exam.

We made major revisions to the exam a few years ago on grading, which reduced burden on our faculty enormously. Our biggest hurdles is that we'd like to have students take them during summer after 2nd year, but we can't because the university would require them to be enrolled, yet their funding doesn't cover summer tuition. So they go

from May until October just studying for exams (while doing other things). But it can put students who are making great progress somewhat back.

We changed the timing and process of our exam in the past few years. The former exams were individualized and were given when a student completed an "integrative paper." Many students took well over a year after finishing course work to complete the paper, and more than two years after completing course work to take the exams. Exam quality and grading standards varied by student. We got rid of the paper. We now give exams two times per year and most students take it in December of Year 3. Exam quality is more easily monitored and has improved. All students receive the same exam questions, but most questions ask students to apply concepts to their own research areas, so exam responses vary. So far, we are happy with our new exam process.

An issue is that we have many guidelines and expectations for the exam, and we have these in writing in our student handbook--but some students and advisors don't read the handbook, and advisors have often assumed we conduct exams as in their own doctoral studies. In one instance, social work content was not incorporated at all and the student had to re-do the exam. I recently offered a seminar for students/faculty to better review expectations and strategies, and plan to offer this again in the future.

Overall most respondents appear to be generally satisfied with their exam goals and structure, but may nevertheless seek ways to improve it.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this survey is the first to assess the structure, process, and perceived strengths and weaknesses of the comprehensive exams in social work doctoral programs. Given the important role of GADE in promoting and supporting academic excellence, supporting new and emerging programs, and in providing relevant and comprehensive education for the next generation of social work scholars and educators, the information from this survey is likely to be of relevance to GADE members and others interested in social work doctoral education.

The results indicate that social work doctoral exams have a wide range of formats and structures, and feedback mechanisms operate in diverse ways across programs. Commonly applied labels ('comprehensive exam' and 'preliminary exam') are not terms used the same way by all programs. Thus, these terms may not be useful ways to categorize program exam types nor do they meaningfully differentiate the exams that programs require of their doctoral students. Despite these labeling differences, there is wide agreement around pedagogical intentions and learning goals across programs. Across most programs the existing exam structures are believed by directors to assess students well in terms of their knowledge and competencies related to research methods and ethics, critical thinking skills, and competency to conduct independent research. The qualitative data highlight the importance of these areas and provide some important nuance about how program directors think about the purpose and goals of their exams. Whereas in response to the closed-ended items there was agreement that

social justice and action-oriented goals were important to the pedagogical purpose of the exam, these themes were not underscored in open-ended responses. Perhaps, these goals reflect implicit but not intentional exam goals; or, perhaps they are characteristic of overarching program intentions that may be less specific to the exam itself. This inconsistency between the quantitative and qualitative findings deserves additional study. Finally, most program directors expressed overall satisfaction with their exams and the majority also did not report a desire to modify the exam requirement of their doctoral program. During our summer working group conference calls, we learned that several programs were either in the process of modifying their exams or had recently made significant changes to them. Thus, some of the satisfaction that we observe in the survey data may reflect these recent program modifications. Even so, an important share of program directors who responded to the survey did identify particular aspects of the exam that they would like to change, reflecting some of the dissatisfaction with exam goals, structure, and process that fueled this initiative and the GADE working group that formed in the Spring/Summer of 2018. We hope that this survey will provide a starting point to guide exam reform for those programs that seek to modify aspects of their exam moving forward.

Importantly, the study has several limitations. The majority of GADE members responded to the survey, but of course the results are not generalizable to the full GADE membership or to program directors who are not GADE members. Demographic data were not collected on the respondents and only limited information was collected about the programs themselves, limiting our ability to determine the ways in which the sample may be different from the population as a whole. This concern extends to our inability to distinguish with certainty whether programs represented in the survey grant PhDs or DSWs. Moreover, our results are shaped by our data collection method. Our choice to administer a brief, on-line survey, in lieu of conducting in-depth interviews and/or review program materials, necessarily limits the depth and nuance of our conclusions. Finally, the responses represent the views of program directors, which likely vary in important ways from faculty as a whole, students, and other program administrators. Future research would benefit from gathering information from this more diverse set of stakeholders. In regard to student perspectives, it would be helpful to understand the views of a wide-range of students, for example those who did and did not have positive experiences, including some who may not have passed the exam.

As a first step in sharing some of the survey's preliminary findings, a special session was held at the January 2019 annual meeting of the Society of Social Work and Research (SSWR).¹⁴ The purpose of this roundtable was to discuss survey findings related to the role of the exams in preparing doctoral students to use scientific evidence to contribute to evidence-based practice and policy and to promote social work advocacy and social justice. The session's discussion echoed many of the same themes reflected in the larger survey results described above; namely, that multiple pedagogical intentions exist for the exam including critical thinking (synthesizing literature to uncover what's known and not known in a particular area of study), expert critiques of current literature (does the student know and apply knowledge of methods

¹⁴ Roundtable participants included Paula Nurius, Margaret Thomas, Elizabeth Aparicio, Nancy Hooyman, Julia Henly.

to critique the state of evidence in an area?); and developing well-informed research questions and hypotheses to address gaps in an area of study. In addition, a lively conversation unfolded regarding the extent to which programs take time to deliberate about the purpose of their exam and how well it is communicated to students. Many audience participants expressed that their programs must do better on both fronts – explicating exam purpose and goals and sharing this information with students. Moreover, audience participants also noted the importance of clarifying how a program’s exam ties into the other training aspects of the program (e.g., what is the program’s “arc of opportunities” and where does the exam fit?). While satisfaction was expressed by many survey respondents, the SSWR roundtable discussion called for action on the side of programs to i) reassess the underlying purpose and goals of their doctoral exams, ii) consider how the exam can best meet these aims within the broader program structure and requirements, and iii) clearly communicate the purpose and goals of the exam to students.

Questions posed in this SSWR session related to this issue include:

- What can we reasonably achieve through the exam?
- What other opportunities exist in the program (i.e., courses) that also achieve overall program goals? How does the exam factor into the overall program goals?
- What are our *intentions* and *assumptions* about the purpose and structure of the exam? Why do we do what we do?
- How could the exam be a useful product (i.e., a publication, grant proposal)? Can it be practical and promote/assess competency development?

Student participation in the roundtable was invaluable. As a result of this dialogue, we recognize that a notable limitation to the survey is that students’ perspectives and experiences were not assessed, which we believe should be an important aspect of any program’s assessment of the doctoral exam process and a critical step for programs seeking to modify their exams and/or communicate more clearly their purposes to students.

References

- Cassuto (2012). The comprehensive exam: Make it relevant. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 4, 2012. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Comprehensive-Exam-Make/131012>
- Giordano, P.J., Davis, S.F., Licht, C.A. (2012). *Your graduate training in psychology: Effective strategies for success*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Lightfoot, E. & Beltran, R. (2016). *The GADE Guide: A program guide to doctoral study in social work*. St. Paul, MN: The Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work.
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GADE Survey on Doctoral Program Exams

Default Question Block

Q1. Is your doctoral program full-time?

- Yes
- No
- Other (please describe)

Q2. Would you consider your doctoral program to be research-intensive?

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

Q3. Please indicate the type of exam required of your students in your doctoral program.

- Qualifying Exam only
- Comprehensive Exam only
- Both Qualifying and Comprehensive exams
- Other

Q4. Approximately how many students take the QUALIFYING exam every year? (if your program does not offer a qualifying exam, please indicate NA for Not Applicable)

Q5. Approximately how many students take the COMPREHENSIVE exam ever year? (if your program does not offer a comprehensive exam, please indicate NA for Not Applicable)

Q6.

For questions 6-12, only indicate a response for the exam type(s) your program offers.

Otherwise, please leave the row blank.

At what point in the program is the exam(s) offered?

	Point in Program			Other (please describe)
	End of 1st year	End of 2nd year or completion of coursework	Prior to dissertation defense	Briefly describe
Qualifying Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Comprehensive Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Other Exam Type	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

Q7. How is the exam(s) composed?

	Exam composition			Other (ple
	Identical for all students	Individualized content/format for each student	Developed cooperatively with student input	Briefly

	Exam composition			Other (please specify)
	Identical for all students	Individualized content/format for each student	Developed cooperatively with student input	
Qualifying Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Comprehensive Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Other Exam Type	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

Q8. What is the duration of the exam(s)?

	Duration					Other (please specify)
	Untimed (no specific due date)	Within one day	Within one week	Within one semester	Within the summer "break"	
Qualifying Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Comprehensive Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Other Exam Type	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

Q9. What is the exam(s) format? (check all that apply)

	Oral exam component Check if Yes	Written exam component Check if Yes	Preparation of paper/manuscript Check if Yes	Other (please describe) Briefly describe
Qualifying Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Comprehensive Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Other Exam Type	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

Q10. How is exam(s) graded?

	Grading		Other (please describe) Briefly describe
	By same committee for all students	By individualized committee for each student	
Qualifying Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Comprehensive Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Other Type of Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

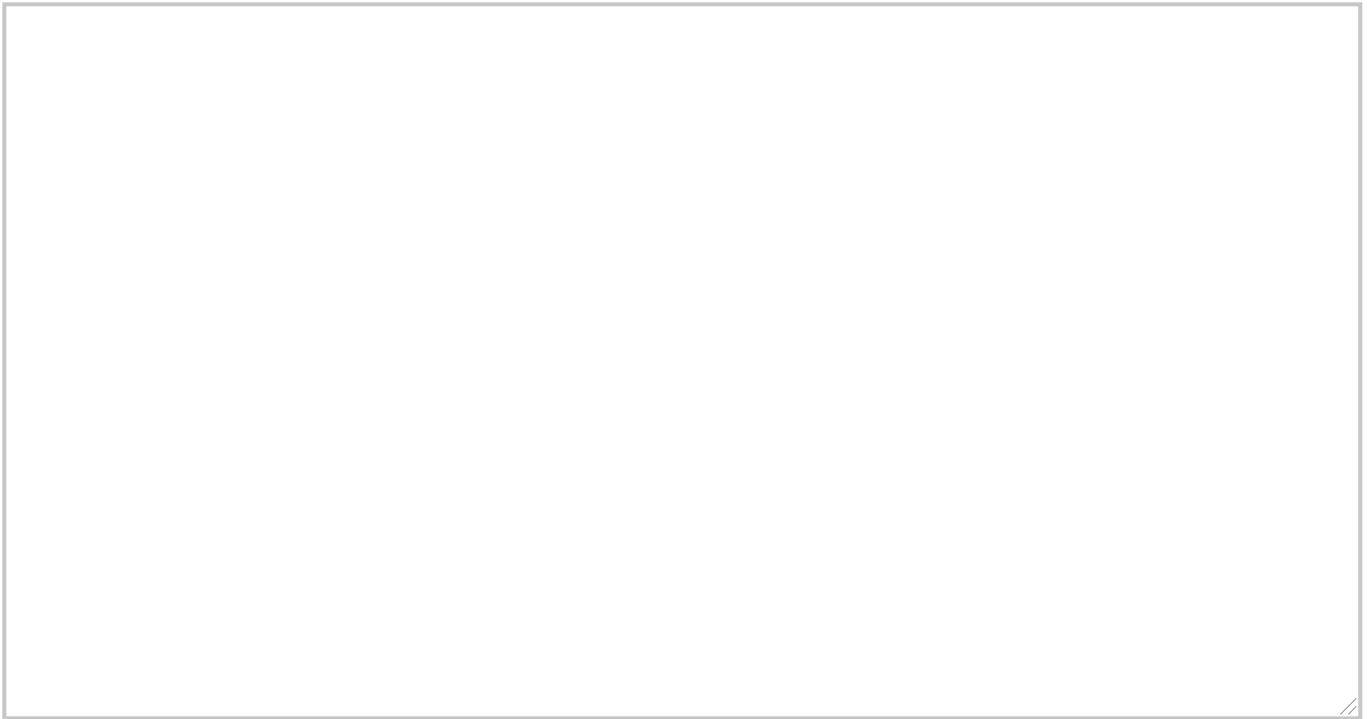
Q11. Overall, how satisfied are you with how the exam(s) is developed, administered, and graded?

	Satisfaction				
	Very dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied
Qualifying Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comprehensive Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other Type of Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q12. Overall, how satisfied are you with student performance and outcomes on the exam(s)?

	Satisfaction				
	Very dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied
Qualifying Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Comprehensive Exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other Exam Type	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q13. Regardless of your program's exam type, what do you believe is its purpose in terms of doctoral social work education? (open-ended)



Q14. In consideration of the primary pedagogical intentions of your doctoral program's exam(s), how important are each of the following?

Not at all important Slightly important Moderately important Very important Extreme important

To assess competency in a body of social work knowledge that your program believes is fundamental to the broader social work discipline

	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extreme important
To assess competency in specific content that has relevance for each student's specialization	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To prepare students to address the Grand Challenges in Social Work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To assess students' critical thinking skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To prepare students to be critical users of scientific evidence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To prepare students to conduct high impact research that is consistent with social work ethics and values	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To prepare students to conduct high impact research that has the potential to advance social work's equity and social justice aims	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To prepare students to use research for the purpose of social change and translation to policy, practice, and/or community impact	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To prepare students for a specific aspect of the dissertation process	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To identify students who may need additional support in your program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To serve as a gate-keeping function and identify students who are unlikely to successfully complete the program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (please describe)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q15. Please indicate if your doctoral program's exam(s) evaluates the following competencies:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree
Competence in quantitative methods	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Competence in qualitative methods	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Competence in mixed methods	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Competence in the history of the social work profession	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Competence in ethical issues/values in social work research	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Competence in research skills to advance social work's equity and social justice issues	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Competence in social science theory/theories	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Competence in specific substantive area of social work/social welfare (e.g., child welfare; mental health; substance abuse, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Competence in evidence-based interventions to address social problems	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Competence in team-based science	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (please describe)					
<div style="border: 1px solid gray; height: 80px; width: 100%;"></div>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q16. How are students provided feedback about their exam performance? (check all that apply)

- Not provided feedback on regular basis
- Provided exam outcome (pass/not pass) but no substantive feedback
- Written feedback
- Oral feedback
- Other (please describe)

Q17. If a student fails the exam, are re-takes permitted?

- Yes
- No (Skip to Q19)
- Other

Q18. If student can re-take exam, how MANY re-takes are permitted? (provide number)

Q19. Please describe the consequences for failing OR doing poorly on the exam. For example, are students at risk for separation from the program? (open-ended)

Q20. How do students incorporate feedback from QEs and/or Comp exams into their overall doctoral studies? (open-ended)



Q21. Are students' faculty mentors/dissertation advisors informed of their student's exam outcomes?

- No
- Yes
- Other (please describe)



Q22. To what extent to do you agree with the following statements about your program's exam(s)?

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree
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	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree
The exam successfully measures the intended competency goals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Students acquire valuable knowledge and skills as a result of the exam/exam preparation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The exam is an unnecessary hurdle that may in fact impede student progress	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (please describe)					
<div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; height: 80px; width: 100%;"></div>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q23. If you are in a position to modify the QUALIFYING exam(s), would you like to modify any of the following? (If your program does not offer a QUALIFYING exam type, please leave blank)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree
The purpose of the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The time point in the program in which the exam is required	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How students prepare for the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The format of the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

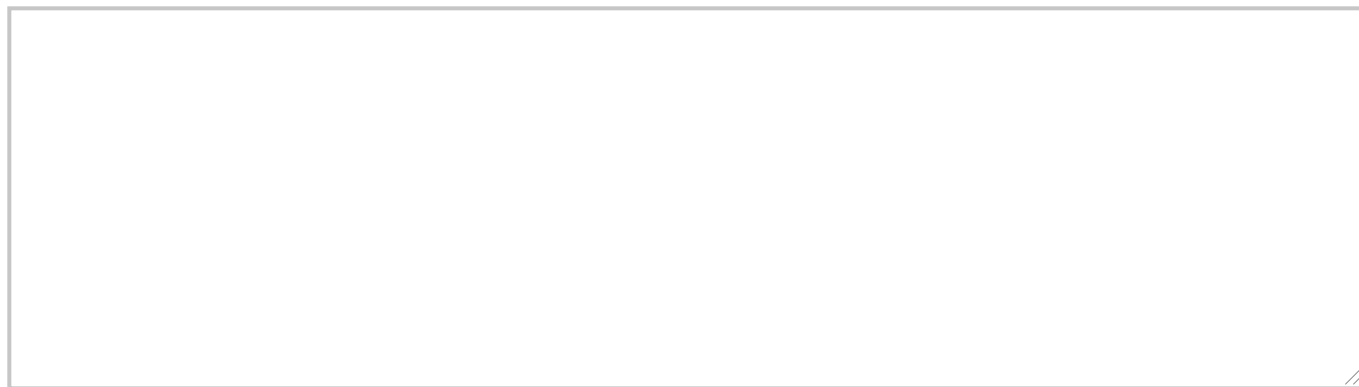
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree
The content of the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The expectations for the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The amount of time students have to complete the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The feedback loop regarding student performance on the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The burden on faculty who oversee the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (please describe)					
<div style="border: 1px solid gray; height: 80px; width: 100%;"></div>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q24. If you are in a position to modify the COMPREHENSIVE exam(s), would you like to modify any of the following? (if your program does not offer a COMP exam type, please leave blank)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree
The purpose of the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The time point in the program in which the exam is required	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree
How students prepare for the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The format of the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The content of the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The expectations for the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The amount of time students have to complete the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The feedback loop regarding student performance on the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The burden on faculty who oversee the exam	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other (please describe)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<div style="border: 1px solid gray; height: 80px; width: 100%;"></div>					

Q25. Is there anything else that you would like to add about your exam's pedagogical goals, structure, or expectations that has not been addressed in this survey? (open-ended)



Q26. Is there anything else you would like to add about the structure of your doctoral program that has not been addressed in this survey? (open-ended)

