

Assessment of Student Learning in Graduate Programs: The Need for Standardization and Guidelines

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BRIEF:

- Purpose of Study
 - Examine nature and extent of variation across disciplines in CHHS design and implementation of requirements for the Master's degree
 - Determine perceived need for definition of minimum standards for a thesis, project or comprehensive exam
- Methods
 - Mail surveys administered Spring 2000 to 11 CHHS departments
 - Graduate advisors
 - N=215 full-time and part-time faculty in CSULB phonebook
 - Response rate of 35 percent (n=75)
 - Nearly 50% full professors, 20% associate, 11% assistant
22 percent lecturers
 - Review of graduate student handbooks for CHHS departments
 - Mail survey to Grad advisors similar departments 5 CSU campuses: Fresno, Los Angeles, Northridge, Sacramento, San Diego, San Jose
- Department Profiles
 - Between 3 and 27 full-time faculty, average of 11
 - Between 1 and 40 part-time faculty, average of 14
 - Median size 60 graduate students enrolled, range of 9 to 585
- Comprehensive exam option in 80 percent of departments (1 exam only)
 - Variation in preparation: special courses, faculty meetings,
 - Between 3 and 5 questions, average of 4
 - Between 2 and 12 hours, average of 6
 - Exams are graded by 4 faculty on average, range 2 to 9
 - Majority (71%) of faculty served on committee, 27% only when asked
 - Up to 50 percent of students fail, 13% on average

- One third of faculty reported awareness of student grievances
 - Questions instructor-specific rather than subject-specific
 - Questions not reflective of the course material
 - Uneven number of questions across students
 - Uneven administration of exam
 - Inconsistent and unfair grading
- Between half and two-thirds of advisors and faculty responded there is a need for standardizing the comprehensive exam
- Thesis option in 90 percent of departments (2 have thesis only)
 - One thesis course in 56 percent of departments, two courses in others
Between 1 and 27 faculty “teach” thesis course
 - Average 30 students per year write a thesis, range of 1-200, median 10
 - Over 80% of faculty have served on committee, nearly half every semester
 - Average 5 thesis committees per semester
 - One third act as chair every semester, average of 3 theses
 - More than half of departments have written thesis guidelines
 - Some student complaints being assigned research for faculty publication
- Project option in about 40 percent of departments
 - Thirty percent have served on committee, of those 1/3 every semester
 - Average 3 projects per semester
 - About half of departments have written guidelines in handbook
- Implications
 - Need for consistent policy and procedures for all degree options
question of due process for students
 - Preparation for comprehensive exams (core course elements)
 - Fair administration of comprehensive exams
 - Impartial grading of comprehensive exams
 - Written guidelines for exam, thesis and project in student handbooks

REPORT:

The purpose of this project was two-fold. The first objective was to examine the practices of the different departments within the College of Health and Human Services (CHHS) in order to determine the nature and extent of variation across disciplines in the design and implementation of requirements for the Master's Degree. The second objective was to determine the need for a manual that will define the minimum standards for the thesis, project or comprehensive exam and provide a common understanding of the requirements, help increase accountability, and decrease the number of student complaints.

Mail surveys were administered during Spring 2000 to three sample groups: graduate advisors in CHHS, all part-time and full-time faculty within the 11 different departments in CHHS who were listed in the CSULB phonebook, and graduate advisors in similar departments at five other CSU campuses: Fresno, Los Angeles, Northridge, Sacramento, San Diego, and San Jose. The response rates at CSULB were adequate with almost all of the graduate advisors responding and 35 percent of CHHS faculty responding, but the response from other CSU campuses was poor. Due to the timing of the survey administration it was not possible to conduct a follow-up with a second mailing or phone calls.

The results are presented in the tables below. Some of the major findings are as follows:

- Most of the programs have both comprehensive exam and thesis options; two have only thesis.
- Between half and two-thirds of advisors and faculty responded there is a need for standardizing the comprehensive exam.
- Slightly more than half of departments have written thesis guidelines in a student handbook.
- Between 1 and 50 percent of students who take the comprehensive exam and an average of 13 percent fail the exam each year.
- Between 1 and 200 students and an average of 30 per year write a thesis.
- Thirty-three percent of faculty were aware of student complaints about the comprehensive exam.
- The complaints included: (1) questions being instructor-specific rather than subject-specific and not reflective of the course material, (2) uneven administration of the exam and an uneven number of questions across students, and (3) inconsistent and unfair grading.
- There was little variation across departments, tenure, or rank in responses to questions regarding the purpose of exams versus a thesis, how well students are prepared for the field, and whether these two different options measure student knowledge. Generally faculty were in agreement with the majority of the statements.

Response Rates

Department	Number of Full and Part-time Faculty	Number of Full-time Faculty	Number of Respondents	Response Rate
Criminal Justice	17	10	10	.588
Communicative Disorders	9	7	6	.667
Family & Consumer Sciences	39	15	10	.256
Kinesiology and Phys Ed	31	24	8	.258
Health Science	26	8	6	.231
Nursing	26	17	11	.423
Occupational Studies	7	5	4	.571
Physical Therapy	9	9	3	.333
Public Policy	7	7	2	.286
Rec and Leisure Studies	12	8	4	.333
Social Work	32	27	8	.250
Unknown			3	
Total	215	137	75	.349

Percentage Responding by Rank

Department	N	Rank					Not Specified
		Lecturer	Assistant Professor	Associate Professor	Full Professor		
Criminal Justice	7	28.6%	28.6%		42.9%		
Communicative Disorders	6			16.7%	66.7%	16.7%	
Health Science	6	50.0%	16.7%	16.7%	16.7%		
Family & Consumer Sciences	10	20.0%	10.0%	40.0%	30.0%		
Kinesiology and Phys Ed	8			25.0%	75.0%		
Nursing	11	27.3%	9.1%	18.2%	45.5%		
Occupational Studies	3	33.3%			66.7%		
Physical Therapy	3			33.3%	66.7%		
Public Policy	2		50.0%		50.0%		
Rec and Leisure Studies	3	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%			
Social Work	5	40.0%			60.0%		
N	64	14	7	12	30	1	
Overall		21.9%	10.9%	18.8%	46.9%	1.6%	

Percentage Responding by Tenure Status

Department	N	Tenured	
		No	Yes
Criminal Justice	5	20.0%	80.0%
Communicative Disorders	5	20.0%	80.0%
Health Science	2	100.0%	
Family & Consumer Sciences	6		100.0%
Kinesiology and Phys Ed	5	40.0%	60.0%
Nursing	8	25.0%	75.0%
Occupational Studies	1		100.0%
Physical Therapy	2	50.0%	50.0%
Public Policy	1	100.0%	
Rec and Leisure Studies	2	50.0%	50.0%
Social Work	3		100.0%
N	40	11	29
Overall		27.5%	72.5%

Descriptive Statistics

	Comprehensive exam	Need for standardization	Thesis	Guidelines in handbook
Criminal Justice	Yes ^a	Yes	Yes	Yes
Communicative Disorders	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Family & Consumer Sciences	Yes	Yes	Yes	No ^b
Health Science	No	NA	Yes	Yes
Kinesiology & Physical Educ.	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Nursing	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Occupational Studies	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Public Policy	Yes	Unknown	No	No
Recreation & Leisure Studies	Yes	No	Yes	No
Social Work	No	NA	Yes	Yes
Overall percentage	80%	50%	90%	56%

Note: a Comprehensive exam no longer option for class entering Fall 2000

b No handbook at time of survey, but one exists now

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Number of full-time tenure/tenure track faculty	10	3	27	11.10	8.44
Number of part-time instructors	10	1	40	13.80	11.73
Number of graduate students enrolled	11	9	585	144.00	173.53
Number of core courses in program	9	4	7	5.11	.93
Number of questions on exam	9	3	5	4.06	.53
How many hours for exam	9	2	12	5.94	2.96
How many faculty grade exam	9	2	9	4.22	1.99
What proportion of students fail	9	1	50	13.11	14.13
Number of thesis courses	9	1	2	1.44	.53
Number of faculty responsible thesis course	10	1	27	7.80	8.94
Proportion of students completing thesis	10	5	200	30.10	59.97

Types of Options Available

		Comprehensive Exam		Thesis		Project	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Have this option?	No	13	17.3	3	4.0	36	53.7
	Yes	62	82.7	72	96.0	31	46.3
Ever serve on committee? ^{ab}	Yes	44	72.1	58	84.1	14	29.8
How often serve?							
	Every semester	26	59.1	26	44.8	5	29.4
	Once a year	4	9.1	4	6.9	2	11.8
	Only when asked	13	29.5	20	34.5	8	47.1
	Other	1	2.3	8	13.8	2	11.8
Average number on which serve each semester				52	4.6	13	2.69
How often chair?							
	Every semester			19	33.3	4	25.0
	Once a year			5	8.8	2	12.5
	Only when asked			21	36.8	7	43.8
	Other			12	21.1	3	18.8
Average number chair each semester				53	3.26	14	3.07
Guidelines for supervision?	No			15	22.7	13	37.1
	Yes			31	47.0	13	37.1
	No response			20	30.3	9	25.7
Need for standardization	Yes	36	65.5				
Aware of student grievances?	Yes	21	33.3				

Note: a Significantly fewer lecturers than other ranks reported serving on exam or thesis committees

b Significantly fewer non-tenured than tenured faculty reported serving on thesis committees

Educational Attitudes

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean Score
Purpose of graduate education is to prepare students for career	2.7	2.7	5.5	47.9	41.1	4.22 ^a
Comprehensive exams are a good measure of students knowledge	6.8	13.7	27.4	47.9	4.1	3.29
Better for students pursuing an academic career to write a thesis	4.2	4.2	5.6	31.9	54.2	4.28
Graduate curriculum is designed for basic knowledge	5.5	21.9	9.6	43.8	19.2	3.49 ^b
Grad curriculum is designed to integrate and synthesize key concepts in the field	1.4	4.2	12.5	51.4	30.6	4.06 ^c
Thesis is better measure of theoretical knowledge than exam	4.2	27.8	26.4	29.2	12.5	3.18 ^d
Students who write a thesis work harder for degree than take exam	1.4	23.3	24.7	34.2	16.4	3.41
Taking comp. exam is equally preparing for the field as a thesis	2.8	18.1	27.8	40.3	11.1	3.39
It is fair to have different degree options for graduate students	1.4	6.9	9.7	48.6	33.3	4.06
Current practices in my department prepare students for the field	1.4	4.2	11.3	54.9	28.2	4.04

Notes: a Significant difference by rank in agreement (assistant, associate lower than full)

b Departments with thesis option scored significantly lower (less in agreement)

c Departments with comprehensive exam option scored significantly lower

d Non-tenured faculty replied lower score (less in agreement) than tenured faculty

Other CSU Campuses

Department	Campus						Total
	Sacramento	San Diego	Northridge	Los Angeles	San Jose	Fresno	
Criminal Justice	1				1		2
Communicative Disorders	1						1
Family & Consumer Studies			1	1			2
Physical Therapy	1					1	2
Social Work		1					1
	3	1	1	1	1	1	8

Types of Options

	Comprehensive Exam		Thesis Option		Project Option	
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Criminal Justice	1	1		2	1	1
Communicative Disorders		1		1		1
Family and Consumer Studies		2		2		2
Physical Therapy	2		2		1	1
Social Work		1		1	1	
Total	37.5%	62.5%	25.0%	75.0%	37.5%	62.5%

Preparation for Comprehensive Exams

	Workshop	Study guide	Special courses	Faculty meetings	Exam review
Criminal Justice			1		
Communicative Disorders			1		
Family and Consumer Studies	1			1	1
Physical Therapy					
Social Work		1			
Total	20.0%	20.0%	40.0%	20.0%	20.0%

Comprehensive Exams

	Committee	Percentage Take Exam	Students Fail	Percentage Fail	Need to standardize
Criminal Justice		13.0	Yes	13.0	Yes
Communicative Disorders	Yes	30.0	Yes	10.0	Yes
Family and Consumer Studies	Yes	35.0	Yes	12.0	
Physical Therapy		0.0	No	0.0	
Social Work		90.0	Yes	10.0	
Total	40.0%	40.6%	80.0%	11.4%	40%