Qualifying Exam Policies and Procedures
Introduction

The Qualifying Exam (QE) is a comprehensive exam that evaluates the student’s level of competencies related to the PhD program learning objectives. Passing the QE allows the student to move forward with his/her dissertation research. This document provides information about the policies and procedures regarding the QE in a question/answer format. Information is provided regarding the student’s responsibilities, the timing of the exam and other deadlines, eligibility criteria, preparation tips, format and content of the exam, and grading procedures.

When does the department offer the QE?
The department will offer the exam once a year, in mid-August. The actual date will change every year at the discretion of the Department, but will be announced at least by May 31st of each year on the Department website.

What coursework must be completed to be eligible to take the QE?
All core courses with the exception of HLSA 601 and MIEH 600, all advanced theory and applications courses, and all advanced research methods and statistics courses must be completed with a passing grade of C or better before taking the QE. For example, if a student finishes all courses listed above in December 2018 or May 2019, the student must take the QE at the next exam administration, which will be in August 2019. HLSA 601 and MIEH 600 can be completed after the exam, if needed.

Is it the student’s responsibility to schedule themselves for the QE?
Yes. If an eligible student does not schedule his/her QE within 30 days of the next exam administration date, then he/she will be dismissed from the program. For example, if the exam is to be administered on August 15th, the student must schedule themselves for the exam by July 16th.

How does a student schedule themselves for the QE?
When the student has completed the necessary coursework to take the QE (see above), the student must provide the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) with his/her updated program plan. The student must obtain the signature of his/her faculty advisor in the specific space on the program plan indicating eligibility to take the QE.

What can a student do to prepare for the QE?
All students are required to attend a one-hour orientation session that is held each year in February for any students planning to take the exam within the calendar year. Exam logistics and preparation tips will be covered. Students may ask questions about the general exam content and/or preparation. The content or structure of a specific exam will not be revealed. Students can attend the orientation session in the year prior to his/her anticipated date of taking the exam. Students may attend the orientation session more than once, but students are strongly cautioned not to attend early in his/her program if they are prone to high levels of anxiety.

In addition to attending the orientation session, some students prepare for the exam by forming study groups. Other students prefer to study on his/her own. Some students work
with faculty to help them review material. The student is responsible for requesting help from faculty to help prepare them for the QE, but help sessions with faculty are entirely dependent on the faculty’s willingness and availability. There is no right or wrong way to prepare. The student should use his/her own judgment as to how they should prepare for the QE. It is important to remember that the QE evaluates student progress toward achieving competencies that have been taught throughout his/her coursework. Thus, the student should review the competencies to understand his/her own strengths and areas of weakness.

What content areas comprise the QE?
The content areas that are most critical are health behavior theory, research methods, and statistics. Writing a grant proposal, critiquing an article and orally responding to questions will be used to measure knowledge and application of these content areas.

I have a documented disability. What accommodations can be made with regard to the QE for students with disabilities?
If you have an acute or chronic physical or mental disability, please inform the Director of Graduate Studies (Dr. Kathy Sharp) 30 days prior to the date of the exam. Proper accommodations can then be made within the department and/or through University Student Disability Services. It is imperative to inform the department ahead of the time if accommodations are needed as your performance may be adversely affected and will not be appealable on the basis of the disability after the completion of the exam should you not pass one or more sections of the exam. If the student does not notify Dr. Sharp within 30 days of the exam date about the need for special accommodations, then the student will not be allowed to take the QE with any accommodations.

What is the format of the QE?
The exam consists of three parts: 1) a research proposal; 2) an article analysis and 3) an oral presentation. The student will be allowed to complete the research proposal and article analysis during a period of two weeks. For the research proposal, the student will be asked to write a grant application in response to an actual Request for Application (RFA) or Program Announcement (PA). For the article analysis, students will be asked questions regarding the author’s application/evaluation of theory, interpretation of data in tables/figure, strengths and weakness of the methodology used and other features of the research. The oral exam/presentation must be scheduled by the student within 30 days of receiving feedback on the research proposal and article analysis and will focus on the strengths and weaknesses of these components.

How long does the student have to complete the exam?
The research proposal and the article analysis will be distributed via e-mail by the DGS to the students by 12:00 noon in mid-August. The student responses must be returned electronically via an email attachment to Dr. Sharp (ksharp1@umd.edu) by 12:00 noon on the day it is due, two weeks from the date the questions were provided to the student. Late responses are not accepted. If the completed research proposal and article analysis are both not received by the due date and time, a “no pass” grade will be automatically
given. Experiencing Internet connectivity issues is not valid excuse for missing the exam deadline.

**What resources can the student use to complete the QE?**
The research proposal and article analysis components of the QE must represent original work by the student. Background information can be accessed online—from books and other published material, but the writing must be the student’s writing. The University Honor Pledge must be **handwritten** and signed by the student on the first page of the exam. This first page must be submitted in person to Beverly Monis or Dr. Sharp or electronically to Dr. Sharp on the exam due date.

**Who writes the QE questions?**
The research proposal and article analysis components of the QE will be created by members of the Graduate Program Committee (GPC). The content of the exam changes every year.

**Who scores the student’s QE responses?**
A committee of three faculty members, some of whom are not GPC members, but teach doctoral courses in the Department of Behavioral and Community Health, will be responsible for scoring the student’s written and oral responses.

**What overall assessment/grades are possible on the research proposal?**
A preliminary numerical score on the research proposal will be given based on standard NIH guidelines (see Appendix 1.NIH scoring guidelines) and will represent a numerical average of the committee. While the strengths and weaknesses of the student’s proposal will be shared with the student, the preliminary numerical score will not be given to the student until after the oral exam. In this way, the committee can evaluate the appropriateness of their preliminary score and assign a final score on the basis of what occurs during the oral exam. While an overall impact score of 1, 2 or sometimes 3 might put a proposal within funding range in the “real-world”, a student can achieve a “pass” on the research proposal with a score of 6 or below. This scoring scheme is to illustrate that the committee is not holding pre-doctoral students to the same standards as an investigator who would typically apply to the NIH.

**What overall assessment/grades are possible on the article analysis?**
For the article analysis, a preliminary rating of high pass, pass, no pass will be based on the majority vote of the committee. While the strengths and weaknesses of the student’s article analysis will be shared with the student, the preliminary rating will not be given to the student until after the oral exam. In this way, the committee can evaluate the appropriateness of their preliminary score and assign a final rating on the basis of what occurs during the oral exam.

**What grades are possible on the oral exam?**
Based on a majority vote of the committee, the oral exam will be scored with a rating of pass/no pass.
Do the faculty members who score the responses to the research proposal and article analysis components of the QE know the identity of the student?
No. All faculty members who score the student’s QE responses are blinded to the identity of the student. No personally identifying information should be included on any of the answers. Students will be asked to put a 4-digit identifier code in the footer on each page of their research proposal and article analysis.

What feedback will be given to the student regarding the written components (the research proposal and the article analysis) of the exam?
Within six weeks after completing the research proposal and article analysis components of the QE, a detailed results summary using the BCH QE Results Form will be e-mailed by the DGS to the student, the student’s faculty advisor and the Department Chair. The strengths and weaknesses of the student’s research proposal and article analysis will be provided.

When does the oral exam take place?
Within 30 days of receiving the results from the research proposal and article analysis.

What is the oral exam designed to measure?
The oral exam is designed to measure student’s critical thinking skills and his/her ability to think on his/her feet. During the oral exam, students will be asked to clarify, justify and/or elaborate on sections/statements of his/her research proposal and/or article analysis that might not have been clear to the committee.

Is the student responsible for scheduling his/her own oral exam?
Yes. The oral exam must be scheduled by the student using Doodle (www.doodle.com) within 30 business days of receiving the results for his/her research proposal and article analysis. The student is also responsible for scheduling an available conference room in SPH for the oral exam through Beverly Monis. The oral exam will be scheduled for one hour. The three BCH faculty members who graded the student’s research proposal and article analysis are required to attend the oral exam. If a mutually convenient time cannot be scheduled within the 30 day time frame, the student must submit a written request for an alternate date to the DGS using formal letter format (attach to an e-mail) immediately upon determining that the grading committee will not be able to convene within 30 days, but will be able to meet at an alternate date within 30 days of the original deadline.

What happens after the oral exam?
Within 3 business days of the oral exam, a results summary using the BCH QE Results Form will be e-mailed by the DGS to the student, the student’s faculty advisor and the department chair. A description of the strengths and weaknesses and a final grade of either pass/no pass will be given for the entire QE. (See Appendix 2. Summary of QE Grading Process). The student must sign the form and return the form to the DGS within 3 business days. It is recommended that students keep a copy of his/her results for his/her own records.
What happens if the student does not receive an overall assessment/grade of pass?
He/she will need to retake the oral exam. The student must meet with his/her advisor to determine what the remediation is required. An email from the student must be sent to Dr. Sharp within 60 days of receiving a “no pass” grade verifying that a meeting with the faculty advisor has taken place and detailing the remediation plan. If the student and advisor are unclear about how to remediate/what to remediate, the student and his/her advisor must schedule a meeting with the GPC to discuss within 45 days of receiving the “no pass grade”. Please contact Dr. Sharp to schedule this meeting with the GPC.

What is the maximum amount of time allowed between earning an overall grade of no pass on the QE and re-taking the oral exam?
One semester. For example, if the student receives his/her overall assessment of no pass on November 25th, he/she has until the last day of the following spring semester to retake the oral exam.

What steps must the student take after passing the QE?
Because students will not receive the grade on the QE until mid to late November, the student should have already registered for some of his/her 15 Individualized Research Plan (IRP) credits (HLTH 898) and any additional courses they wish to take.

When is a student allowed to apply for candidacy (ATC – advance to candidacy)?
Students may apply to ATC only after they have completed his/her 15 IRP credits. All part-time students are expected to apply for candidacy within three semesters of passing all sections of the QE. All full-time students are expected to apply for candidacy within two semesters of passing all section of the QE.

How does a student apply for candidacy?
The student must fill out the ATC form on the UMD Graduate School’s website, obtain all required signatures, and e-mail to the Graduate School’s e-mail address on the bottom of the ATC form.

What happens once a student advances to candidacy?
Once advancing to candidacy, students must complete a minimum of 12 credits of dissertation research (HLTH 899) before graduating.

Is passing the QE necessary to advance in the program?
Yes. Students must pass the examination within two attempts in order to continue in the doctoral program. If a student does not pass after two attempts, the student will be dismissed from the doctoral program.

Appealing Examination Results
If a student wishes to appeal the results of his/her examination results, he/she must do so in writing to the Chair and DGS within 10 business days of receiving his/her results. If a student wishes to appeal the exam administration process, the student should write a letter to the chair and DGS (can be sent electronically or hand delivered hard copy) describing his/her concerns. If a student wishes to appeal the overall grade he/she received, the
student should write a letter to the original grading committee and send the letter to the chair and DGS (electronically or hand delivered hard copy) who will then forward to the original grading committee for his/her review.

If the student wishes to appeal something other than the exam administration or the grade they received, please contact the DGS for further instruction. Appeals will be discussed by the original grading committee(s), the GPC, or all department faculty depending on the type of appeal. A decision will be communicated to the student within 10 business days of receiving his/her appeal. If a student appeals the exam administration process, the chair will conduct a thorough investigation, which may include but is not limited to in-person interviews with the student and the faculty involved. If it is determined that the exam administration process was violated, the student will be given another opportunity to take the exam within 60 days of the final decision being made by the chair and communicated to the student. If a student appeals the grade they received, the original grading committee will review the appeal and meet in person to discuss whether to change the grade. If the grade is changed, the student may be able to forgo any prescribed remediation or retaking of the exam. If a student is not satisfied with the appeal decision, he/she will need to first consult the department chair. If the student is not satisfied with the chair’s response, the student should consult the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs.
Appendix 1. NIH Application Outline, Page Requirements and Scoring Rubric

The Research Proposal component of the QE must be limited to 7 single-spaced pages (exclusive of Literature Cited, Appendices), use 11pt. Arial font with 0.5 inch margins and follow the following outline:

A. Specific Aims (1 page)
B. Significance (generally 1-2 pages)
C. Innovation (generally 0.5-.75 pages)
D. Approach
   1. Overall design and rationale
   2. Participants
   3. Procedures
   4. Assessments/Measures
   5. Statistical Analyses (organize by Specific Aim)

Scoring Rubric: A score of 6 or less will earn a score of “pass”. A score of 7, 8, 9 will earn a “no pass”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Additional Guidance on Strengths/Weaknesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Exceptional</td>
<td>Exceptionally strong with essentially no weaknesses</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Outstanding</td>
<td>Extremely strong with negligible weaknesses</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Very strong with only some minor weaknesses</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td>Strong but with numerous minor weaknesses</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Strong but with at least one moderate weakness</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>Some strengths but also some moderate weaknesses</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Some strengths but with at least one major weakness</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Marginal</td>
<td>A few strengths and a few major weaknesses</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Very few strengths and numerous major weaknesses</td>
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Minor Weakness: An easily addressable weakness that does not substantially lessen impact
Moderate Weakness: A weakness that lessens impact
Major Weakness: A weakness that severely limits impact
Appendix 2. Summary of QE Grading Process

The student must achieve a passing grade on all three components to pass the QE.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article Critique</th>
<th>Research Proposal</th>
<th>Oral Exam</th>
<th>Overall QE Grade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0: no pass</td>
<td>0: no pass (NIH score of 7, 8, 9)</td>
<td>0: no pass</td>
<td>Pass QE</td>
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<td>1: pass</td>
<td>1: pass (NIH score of 6 or lower)</td>
<td>1: pass</td>
<td>Retake Oral Exam within 1 semester</td>
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<td>2: high pass</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>Use oral exam as an opportunity to thoroughly discuss remediation plan; retake QE in a year</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No pass, meet with advisor to discuss remediation plan; retake QE in a year</td>
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<td>no formal grade on oral given</td>
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