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. Students are required to take the first exam following completion of all requirements. 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 the 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. However, if the student’s advisor does not feel as though their advisee is ready to take the exam, the advisor can submit a request in writing to the DGS asking for an exception to department policy. The maximum delay is one year (until the next exam administration). If the student is still not ready to take the exam following the one year delay, the student will be dismissed from the program.

How does a student schedule 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, preparation tips, and general format will be covered. Students may ask questions about the general exam content and/or preparation. The actual questions 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 the 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 their 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 personal 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. Specific key skills include writing a grant proposal, analyzing an article, and orally responding to questions.

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 DGS 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 performance may be adversely affected. Additionally, it is not possible to appeal on the basis of the disability after the completion of the exam. If the student does not notify the DGS 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 exam. 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 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 written 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’s responses must be returned
electronically via a PDF email attachment to the DGS 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 given automatically. Experiencing Internet connectivity issues is not a valid excuse for missing the exam deadline.

**During the two week period that students are working on the written exam, can they send each other motivational messages and/or emoticons or emojis?**

No. Students should be focused on their own exam, not other students.

**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 typed on the first page of the exam.

**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 who 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 the standard NIH guidelines (see Appendix 1) of 1 (high) to 9 (low). The score will represent a numerical average of the individual committee members and will be applied in a manner appropriate for the work of doctoral students. 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. A passing score will be in the range of 1 to 6; scores of 7 to 9 will not be considered passing.

**What overall assessment/grades are possible on the article analysis?**

For the article analysis, each rater will grade each question as not acceptable, acceptable or outstanding (see Appendix 2). In order to earn a preliminary rating of pass, the student must earn an acceptable or outstanding rating on at least 80% of the questions asked on the exam. This preliminary rating 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 the 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 his/her 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.

Can the student meet with their advisor, other faculty and/or their peers to discuss the feedback in their results letter in between the written and oral components of the exam?
No. The student is still in examination mode and should not consult any other individuals about their results.

What is the oral exam designed to measure?
The oral exam is designed to measure student’s critical thinking skills and the 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 the research proposal and article analysis that might not have been clear to the committee.

Can the student bring their results letter to the oral exam and consult it, if needed?
Yes.

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 the written component of the exam. The student is also responsible for scheduling an available conference room in SPH for the oral exam through the Department Coordinator. The oral exam should 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 a formal letter format (attached to an e-mail) immediately upon determining that the grading committee will not be able to convene within 30 days.

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 3. 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 the results for his/her own records.

What happens if the student does not receive an overall assessment/grade of pass after the oral component of the exam? See Appendix 3 for a visual depiction of these scenarios.

Scenario 1: Entire Retake of Exam
If the student does not pass both of the written components (the research proposal and the article analysis), the student will still need to schedule an oral exam. However, the time that would normally be used for questioning the student will be an open discussion among the student, the grading committee and the student’s advisor to determine what needs to be done during remediation. The student will need to retake the entire exam at the next exam administration the following August.

Scenario 2: Partial Retake of Exam
If the student earns a no pass on only one of the written components (the research proposal or the article analysis) and is unable to adequately respond to questions during the oral exam about that component, the student will need to meet with his/her advisor to determine what remediation is required. In addition, the student will need to rewrite the response to the original failed component and submit it by the last day of the winter session that immediately follows the original exam session. The evaluation of the rewrite will be sent to the student within 6 weeks of the last day of winter session (i.e., mid-March). The student will then need to schedule another oral exam within 30 days of receiving the rewrite results letter. As with the first exam attempt, 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 or no pass will be given for the retake of the QE. The student must sign the form and return it to the DGS within 3 business days. It is recommended that students keep a copy of the results for their own records.

Please note: If the student and their advisor decide that the student needs to take another class, repeat a class or complete a semester long independent study prior to rewriting the exam and retaking the oral, alterations to the timing described above will be considered
by the GPC on a case-by-case basis. An email from the student must be sent to the DGS within 30 days of receiving a “no pass” grade verifying that a meeting with the faculty advisor has taken place and detailing the remediation plan and timing alterations if needed. If the student and advisor are unclear about how to remediate/what to remediate, the student and his/her advisor can schedule a meeting to discuss the possibilities with the GPC within 30 days of receiving the “no pass grade”. Please contact the DGS to schedule this meeting with the GPC.

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, they should have already registered for some of their 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 their 15 IRP credits. All part-time students are expected to apply for candidacy within three semesters of passing all components of the QE. All full-time students are expected to apply for candidacy within two semesters of passing all components of the QE.

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

What happens once a student advances to candidacy?
Once advanced to candidacy, students complete a minimum of 12 credits of dissertation research (HLTH 899) and orally defend their dissertation before graduating.

Is passing the QE necessary to advance in the program?
Yes. Students need to 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 the examination, he/she must do so in writing to the Chair and DGS within 10 business days of receiving the results. If a student wishes to appeal the exam administration process or the overall grade, 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 the student wishes to appeal something other than the exam administration or the grade, please contact the DGS for further instruction. Appeals will be discussed by the original grading committee, the GPC, or all department faculty, depending on the type of appeal. A decision will be communicated to the student within 30 business days of receiving the 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 made by the chair. If a student appeals the grade received, the chair will appoint two additional faculty members to review the student’s original response and assign a grade. The two new reviewers can agree or disagree with the original grading committee. If they both disagree, the grade may be changed and if 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 SPH 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, or 9 will earn a “no pass”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Additional Guidance on Strengths/Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Exceptional</td>
<td>Exceptionally strong with essentially no weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Outstanding</td>
<td>Extremely strong with negligible weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Very strong with only some minor weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Very Good</td>
<td>Strong but with numerous minor weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Strong but with at least one moderate weakness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>Some strengths but also some moderate weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Some strengths but with at least one major weakness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Marginal</td>
<td>A few strengths and a few major weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Very few strengths and numerous major weaknesses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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. Article Analysis Scoring Rubric

Each individual question on the article analysis component of the exam will be graded using the rubric below. The rubric below is for one question. Each of the 8 to 12 questions on the article analysis component of the exam will follow the rubric below.

Scoring rubric
Pass = 80% or more of individual questions graded as acceptable or outstanding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 1</th>
<th>Rater</th>
<th>Not acceptable</th>
<th>Acceptable</th>
<th>Outstanding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3. 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 Analysis</th>
<th>Research Proposal</th>
<th>Overall QE Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0: no pass</td>
<td>0: no pass (NIH score of 7,8,9)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: pass (80% of questions acceptable or outstanding)</td>
<td>1: pass (NIH score of 6 or lower)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pass QE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Use oral exam is used as an opportunity to thoroughly discuss a remediation plan; retake QE in a year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Use oral exam to assess adequacy of preliminary scores. If a no pass is reassessed as a pass, student may be determined to have passed the overall exam. If the oral does not lead to the reassessment of a score, the student will receive a no pass and will need to retake the written and oral components of the QE. The student will then meet with his/her advisor to discuss a remediation plan. The student must rewrite the response to the original failed component and submit it by the last day of the winter session that immediately follows the original exam session. The results of the rewrite will be sent to the student within 6 weeks of the last day of winter session (i.e., mid-March). The student will then need to schedule the oral exam within 30 days of receiving the rewrite results letter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>