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**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 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 via email.

What coursework must be completed to be eligible to take the QE?

All core courses with the exception of HLSA 601, MIEH 600 and EPIB 697, all advanced theory and applications courses, and all advanced research methods and statistics courses must be completed with a passing grade of B- 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 2019 or May 2020, the student must take the QE at the next exam administration, which will be in August 2020. HLSA 601, MIEH 600 and EPIB 697 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 the student 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 students have completed the necessary coursework to take the QE (see above), students must provide the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) with their updated program plan. Students must obtain the signature of their faculty advisor in the specific space on the program plan indicating eligibility to take the QE.

How can a student prepare for the QE?

All students are required to attend a one-hour orientation session that is held each year during the spring semester 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 their anticipated date of taking the exam.

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 exam preparation and help from faculty is entirely dependent on the faculty's willingness and availability.

It is important to remember that the QE evaluates student progress toward achieving competencies that have been taught throughout their coursework. Thus, students should review the competencies to understand their own personal strengths and areas of weakness. The student is ultimately responsible for exam preparation and self-assessing readiness.

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 proposing original research; analyzing an article's theory, methods and analysis; 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 UMD Accessibility and Disability Service (ADS). It is imperative to inform the department ahead of the time if accommodations are needed. Additionally, it is not possible to appeal on the basis of the disability after the completion of the exam if appropriate accommodations are provided. 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 with GPC approval.

What is the format of the QE?

The exam consists of three parts: 1) a research proposal (see Appendix A); 2) an article analysis and 3) and an oral exam. The student must 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 proposal in response to an NIH 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 weaknesses 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 weaknesses of these components. Students may want to revise portions of their research proposal to address weaknesses identified on their results form. Please be reminded that students have the opportunity to the change the evaluation of their research proposal and/or the article analysis during the oral exam, including moving from a no pass (a score of 0) to a

pass (a score of 1 or 2) as long as a pass is achieved on at least one of the sections (See Appendix 2). In contrast, students who earn a pass (a score of 1 or 2) on the research proposal and article analysis, but do not adequately address the weaknesses identified in their results letter during the oral exam (a score of 0) will need to repeat the oral exam.

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 on the start date of the exam. 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 problems with Internet connectivity is not a 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 entirely **original** work by the student that has not been previously submitted elsewhere (e.g., a course assignment). 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. Students should NOT sign or write their name under the typed pledge. No human resources can be used. Software that evaluates grammar and writing clarity is allowed.

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?

GPC members, Human Subjects and Research Committee members, faculty who teach BCH doctoral courses, and faculty who advise BCH doctoral students are responsible for scoring the student's written and oral responses. Graders are assigned randomly. Faculty advisors are not permitted to grade their students' exams.

What overall assessment/grades are possible on the research proposal?

See Appendix 2. Preliminary numerical scores of 0-2 will be given based on Appendix 1 (0=unacceptable, 1=acceptable, 2=excellent). The overall scores represent each committee member's overall assessment of the merit of the proposal. Students receive each committee member's individual scores in addition to compiled strengths and weaknesses on their results form. Overall scores can be improved during the oral exam.

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

Preliminary numerical scores of 0-2 will be given based on student's responses (0=unacceptable, 1=acceptable, 2=excellent). Scores can be improved during the oral

exam. However, if the weaknesses in the written portion of the exam are not addressed adequately, the student will fail the oral portion of the exam.

What grades are possible on the oral exam?

The oral exam will be scored with a rating of pass (=1 or 2) /no pass (=0).

What if the two graders do not agree?

If the two graders do not agree on whether the student has passed the exam after the oral portion of the exam, the GPC representative at the oral will cast the deciding vote.

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 of their choosing 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 two 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 and the review committee.

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 on their results form 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 responses. The student may ask their advisor or other faculty members clarifying process questions (e.g., how long should the presentation be, how should the student should prepare for the oral exam) if they are confused after reading the guidelines. It is fine to share information with faculty and peers about scheduling.

Can the student meet with their advisor and other faculty to discuss the feedback on their results form after the oral component of the exam?

Yes. If the student has passed their exam, they may discuss with faculty their experience and any weaknesses they would like to address. If the student did not pass the oral exam, the student may meet with their advisor and other BCH faculty to discuss remediation.

Can the student discuss with their peers the feedback on their results form after the oral component of the exam?

Yes. Please refrain from discussion of exam responses until all students who took the exam have completed remediation/retake and passed the exam.

Can the student share the exam topic with younger cohorts after the exam?

Yes. The topic can be shared but responses should not be shared to maintain the integrity of the exam.

What is the oral exam designed to measure?

The oral exam is designed to measure students' critical thinking skills and the ability to think on their feet. During the oral exam, students will be asked to give a 10-15 minute (maximum) presentation that contains a very brief (one slide if using slides) overview of their research proposal, as well as additional slides addressing committee concerns. Please do not describe your entire proposal again as committee members have read it multiple times. Instead, focus on changes after reflecting on feedback. If using slides, additional slides should address major weaknesses identified by committee members for both the research proposal and article analysis.

What happens during the oral exam?

The student will present up to a 15 minute presentation with slides how they have addressed the weaknesses in the written critique of the proposal and the article analysis. Slides should be brief – not a rewrite of sections. Instead, the slides should summarize major changes. During and after the student's presentation that directly addresses the weaknesses identified in the written portion of the exam, the grading committee will ask the student questions 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. These questions should directly relate to the enumerated weaknesses in the written portions of the exam.

Who attends the oral exam?

The oral exam is attended by the student, two graders, and a neutral third party who is a member of the BCH graduate faculty. The neutral third party is there to (1) be a tie-breaking vote in the event that one grader passes (a score of 1 or 2) and one grader fails (a score of 0) the student and (2) ensure the integrity of the process and adherence to instructions. This helps to ensure fairness across grading committees and ensure the committee's questioning aligns with the weaknesses identified in the written critique of the qualifying exam. Should a second oral examination be required, the same process shall be used with one difference. The advisor is allowed to attend the retake as an observer (4th faculty member).

How should students prepare for the oral exam?

The student should carefully and thoroughly analyze the written feedback from the committee and revise the proposal and article analysis response with this feedback. This work should be done without the assistance of others, including the student's advisor. This may entail conducting additional research or rewriting responses to ensure the student is well prepared to answer questions about weaknesses. The presentation should present a summary of new thinking, not a rewrite of responses.

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

Yes.

Are students responsible for scheduling their own oral exam?

Yes. The oral exam must be scheduled by the student using Doodle (www.doodle.com) to take place 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 two BCH faculty members who graded the student's research proposal and article analysis and the GPC representative 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 5 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 their 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 receives overall scores of zero from both reviewers for both 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 a remediation plan. 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 (zeros from both reviewers) 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, remediation and a retake is necessary.

Having only failed one of the two written sections, the student is eligible 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.

If the student passes the written components, but is unable to adequately respond to the weaknesses identified on their results form, the student will earn a no pass on the oral and

will have to re-take the oral exam before the end of first week of winter term. To prepare for an oral exam retake, a student may work with their advisor or other designated faculty members (up to 3) during the remediation period.

The evaluation of the rewrite will be completed by the same grading committee that graded the student's first attempt (unless the student in writing requests a new committee in writing to the DGS by the end of the fall semester) and will be sent to the student within 14 days of the last day of winter session (i.e., mid-February). The student will then need to schedule another oral exam with the grading committee within 30 days of receiving the rewrite results letter. As with the first exam attempt, within 5 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.

If the student and their advisor decide additional remediation time is necessary (e.g., 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), the student has the option to take a new QE the following summer along with that cohort of students instead of the winter retake.

Who determines and oversees the remediation plan?

The student is ultimately responsible for developing the remediation plan in consultation with their advisor and recommendations from the grading committee. Once the advisor signs off on the remediation plan, it goes to the GPC for approval. The plan must be submitted to the GPC within 30 days of the oral exam.

If the student and advisor are unclear about how to remediate/what to remediate, the student and their 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.

In order for the student to sit for the QE, the advisor must indicate that remediation work has been completed by emailing the DGS.

How is an honors pass determined?

An honors pass is granted for students who receive all 2s for all sections/subsections of the article analysis and grant application from both reviewers pre-oral and on the oral exam.

What steps must the student take after passing the QE?

Because students will not receive the grade on the QE until after the fall semester starts, 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. The student is permitted to begin dissertation proposal writing.

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 exam administration process or the overall grade, the student must write a letter to the BCH Chair and DGS (can be sent electronically or hand delivered hard copy) describing the concerns within 10 business days of receiving the exam results. 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 members, depending on the type of appeal. The DGS in consultation with the Department Chair will decide who discusses the 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, members of the GPC 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 on the written portion of the exam, the Department 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, the student will need to first consult the BCH Chair. If the student is not satisfied with the Department's response, the student should consult the SPH Associate Dean for Academic Affairs.

Appendix 1. Research Proposal Format

Format: Use Arial 11 point font, 0.5 inch margins, numbered pages, single spacing. Be sure to include your unique 4-digit identifying number in the footer of all pages. In the header of all pages, include page numbers and a brief header (i.e., short title).

Content. Develop your grant application to include the following sections. Begin each lettered section on a new page. Adhere strictly to the page limits. Use all available space.

A. Public Health Relevance Statement (3 sentences maximum)

B. Project Summary/Abstract (30 lines of text maximum)

C. Specific Aims (1 page)

D. Research Plan (6 pages)

- a. Significance
- b. Innovation
- c. Approach

The approach must include but is not limited to the following:

- Theoretical framework
- Research design
- Procedures
- Eligibility criteria and recruitment plans
- Intervention development and description
- Data collection methods—baseline and follow-up, as appropriate
- Measures (operational definitions of study variables and psychometric properties)
- Data analysis plan (including statistical analyses to test study hypotheses)
- Power analysis/sample size calculation
- Potential Problems and Alternative Strategies
- Timeline for achievement of major project activities and objectives

E. Protection of Human Subjects Section (up to 3 pages)

- a. Human subjects involvement and characteristics
- b. Potential risks and adequacy of protection against risks (e.g., recruitment, consent procedures, data management)
- c. Potential benefits of the proposed research to participants and others
- d. Importance of the knowledge to be gained

F. References (APA or AMA style)

G. Intervention diagram(s) or description (1 page maximum, no other appendices are allowed). This is an opportunity to have additional space to share with the review panel more information on the conceptual underpinnings of the intervention and/or the specific intervention components.

Appendix 2: QE Research Proposal Grading Consideration

Instructions: Please score each section of the student's response using the 0-2 scale below. The overall score does not need to be an average of the individual scores. This score instead should inform the overall score, which represents an overall assessment of the merit of the proposal—NIH refers to this as an impact score. Use whole numbers only (no decimals) for all ratings. In addition, you must provide up to 5 bullets of strengths/weaknesses (e.g., 3 strengths and 2 weaknesses) on the QE results form.

Proposal Scoring: 0=unacceptable, 1=acceptable, 2=excellent

Specific Aims:

- identified and clearly articulated a relevant public health problem
- justified the need for the intervention
- spelled out clear and logical aims
- wrote a convincing and persuasive narrative using language and structure appropriate for an NIH grant
- used appropriate formatting, font, and citations

Significance:

- drew on relevant, appropriate and high quality literature to provide a convincing rationale for the work
- identified the gaps in the literature that this work will address
- articulated how this work will add to the field of knowledge or benefit practice

Innovation:

- explained how the application challenges and seeks to shift current research or practice paradigms (e.g., what is novel about this work)
- described any novel theoretical concepts, approaches or methodologies, instrumentation or interventions to be developed or used
- articulated any advantage over existing methodologies, instrumentation, or interventions

Approach:

- chose an appropriate research design and provided enough details on procedures to judge its adequacy
- provided an appropriate timeline to the study goals and design
- provided a logical conceptual model and described bringing in one or more appropriate theories
- identified appropriate measures that reflected the theoretical constructs (e.g., mechanism, outcomes)
- included appropriate analyses to answer the research question
- described appropriate power analyses for the chosen study design and correctly described how the analyses are carried out

Human Subjects:

- described the risk to participants
- provided an adequate plan to protect against risk (e.g., sensitive information, vulnerable populations, coercion, voluntary participation, withholding of benefits)
- identified the potential benefits of the research to participants and the field
- articulated the importance of the knowledge to be gained
- justified the inclusion or exclusion of women, children, and minorities

Appendix 3. Summary of QE Grading Process

The student must achieve a passing grade on both the article analysis and research proposal post-oral to pass the QE.

Article Analysis	Research Proposal	Oral Exam	Overall QE Grade
Pass	Pass	Pass	Pass QE
No pass ¹	No pass ¹	Not assessed	Use oral exam as an opportunity for the student, committee and advisor to discuss a remediation plan; retake QE in a year.
Pass	Pass	No pass	Despite passing the written components, if a student is unable adequately address the weaknesses identified in their written exam, the oral will need to be repeated by the last day of the first week of Winter Term. See exam procedures for remediation and retake instructions.
No pass	Pass	No pass ²	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 component that was failed and redo the oral component of the QE. See exam procedures for remediation and retake instructions.
Pass	No pass	No pass ²	

Note: A score of a zero is a no pass; a score of a 1-2 is a pass.

¹This is a pre-oral score as the oral exam is not conducted if the grades for both sections by both reviewers are a no pass.

²By definition, if a student is not able to ameliorate a no pass to a pass during the oral exam, the oral exam is considered a no pass and must be repeated.