

## **Master of Arts in International Relations Information and Guidelines for the Comprehensive Exam**

### **General Information**

The purpose of the comprehensive exam is to provide students with an opportunity to use the knowledge gained during the course of the program to deepen their understanding of a particular issue of interest. The exam also serves as a method of evaluating students' progress by requiring them to integrate different types of material and to think critically about how this material contributes to a broader understanding of the discipline of International Relations.

The exam is offered twice in the Fall and twice in the Spring. The calendar is generally available one month before the beginning of each semester. Students take the comprehensive exam during or after their last semester of coursework for the program. Because the exam builds on what students have learned in the program, students cannot take the exam until they have completed at least 21 and preferably 24 units. Furthermore, because the exam requires a substantial amount of work, students are advised to register for no more than six units during the semester in which they plan to take the exam. This is particularly true of students who have demanding outside commitments (e.g., full-time job, family, etc.). For those students who prefer to take the exam after completing all of their coursework, but who will no longer be in San Diego, it is possible to submit exam documents via courier service or email. However, these students are required to 1) request and receive prior approval from the Graduate Director, 2) assume responsibility for knowing and respecting any and all deadlines, and 3) be physically present for the oral exam.

The format of the exam is as follows. Students propose a question that they will answer in a 25 to 30-page paper (double-spaced, 1-inch margins, 12 point font with numbered pages). Each student is assigned to a committee of two full-time faculty members. The committee will review the question and revise it if necessary. Students receive the revised version of the question and then have two weeks to craft an answer. After reviewing the paper, faculty committees advance the student to the oral exam phase, request a rewrite, or give the paper a failing grade. Students who are asked to rewrite the paper have approximately one week to submit a revised draft. Faculty committees will then determine whether the student is cleared to take the oral exam, or failed. The oral exam is typically one-hour long and may include discussion of the paper and the student's program of study as a whole. After the oral exam, the committee will inform the student of his/her overall performance on the comprehensive exam. Students who fail the exercise at either the written or the oral stage may retake the exam once during another semester.

Below are some more specific guidelines for each stage of the comprehensive exam.

### **Dossier**

The dossier is usually a one-page document that contains the following information:

1. Name
2. Semester and session in which you intend to take the exam
3. A list of the courses (and professors) taken for the degree (including those in progress)
4. A list of the titles of the papers written for each course
5. A proposed question for the comprehensive exam

## Exam Question

Students should propose a question that draws on at least three of the graduate political science courses taken for the degree. It should be designed as an integrative research paper with sound analysis that draws together ideas and analysis culled from the student's graduate experience. Students can solicit advice from individual faculty regarding the construction of a sound question, however, it is the student's faculty committee that will ultimately determine the final version of the question. Some of the most common problems with exam questions are listed below.

1. **Too broad:** remember that this is only a 25-30 page paper. If you propose to examine how globalization has altered the international system, you can be relatively certain that the committee will narrow the question down substantially. In order to avoid a situation where a committee revises the question in an undesired direction, make your question as specific as possible.
2. **Too vague:** similar to the problem mentioned above, but in this case it is not clear what you really intend to examine, e.g., "How important was the ABM Treaty?" Again, try to be very clear about what you intend to do.
3. **Too narrow:** it is not generally the case that proposed exam questions are too specific, however, it is common for them to be too limited in scope or in geographic focus. For example, "What are the prospects for democracy in Iraq?" This is a valid question, but it should be cast more broadly, e.g., "It is commonly believed that Islam and democracy are fundamentally incompatible. What is the basis of this assertion and what does it suggest about the prospects for democracy in the Middle East?"
4. **Theoretically void:** while the question need not mention a specific theory, it is expected that all answers will be theoretically well-grounded. That is, if your question is "What is the state of US intelligence and how does it affect the country's ability to fight the War on Terror?" you should be prepared to situate the issue within a larger theoretical context, whether that is Realism, Idealism or something else altogether. In order to avoid this pitfall, you will need to think about how your question relates to material covered in your courses on IR Theory and/or Comparative Politics.
5. **Too much overlap with previous work:** while you are strongly encouraged to build on work you have already completed in the program, simply rehashing a paper submitted for one of your classes is unacceptable.

## Writing (and Rewriting) the Paper

The comprehensive exam paper is an opportunity for you to demonstrate to the committee not only what knowledge you have acquired about the topic at hand and the field of international relations, it is also a demonstration of your critical thinking skills and your ability to apply theory to reality. These are the most important assets that you will take away from the program. Therefore, faculty committees are looking to see that you have a solid base of knowledge about your chosen subject and that you can discuss the issue at hand, that you can cogently present evidence in support of your argument, and that you can use your knowledge of the subject to understand a broader array of issues. In other words, demonstrating, for example, how and in what specific ways NAFTA has increased the interdependence of the US and Mexico is important, but it is also important that you can talk about the broader implications of such

interdependence (e.g., for a specific theory, for the Americas, for globalization, for international competitiveness, etc.).

Students have two weeks to write the paper. It should be treated as an open book exam. You should NOT confer with other students or with faculty about the exam during this time frame. Documentation (footnotes or endnotes) should be included as professionally appropriate, and there must be a bibliography.

It is quite common that students are asked to rewrite their papers. In this case, students are strongly encouraged to speak to the faculty on the committee and to respond to their comments and concerns in the rewrite. Second drafts that do not address the main concerns of the faculty committee may result in a failing grade.

### **Oral Exam**

The oral exam is really a conversation between the committee and the student. It provides students the opportunity to clarify or respond to questions posed by the committee, and it gives faculty members the opportunity evaluate how well the student knows the subject, and importantly, how well the student can apply what he or she has learned to other related issues within international relations. For this reason, students should be prepared to discuss not just their paper, but material covered during the course of their program.

Following the oral exam, the committee informs the student whether s/he passed, received a conditional pass, or failed. A conditional pass generally means that the student will pass as long as he or she satisfactorily makes the necessary changes/additions, etc., to the paper.

If you have questions about the comprehensive exam process or the specific requirements, please do not hesitate to contact the Graduate Director of the MAIR program.

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