Report on OU SLIS Faculty’s Views of Comprehensive Exams

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
SCHOOL OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION STUDIES
GRADUATE STUDIES COMMITTEE
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INTRODUCTION

During the Fall 2010 semester OU SLIS faculty were asked to complete two surveys by members of the Graduate Studies Committee. One was a lengthy survey on EPAs in general, including comprehensive exams. From this survey the opinions on advantages and disadvantages of comprehensive exams, and a set of Likert-type scale questions about satisfaction with comps were extracted for this report. The other survey concerned faculty views on how the current process for comprehensive exams is working for OU SLIS masters students and faculty.

Over the past few years, we have had several conversations at faculty meetings about comprehensive exams and how they are functioning for SLIS students. Hopefully the data from these two surveys will help these conversations progress in a meaningful manner. Very little pre-faculty-discussion analysis has been done on the following data. Please take the time to review the results and bring your thoughts about them to the faculty meeting on December 6 for discussion.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS

The following charts display the data from the first survey on opinions concerning the advantages and disadvantages of comprehensive exams. After Charts 1 and 2, Table 1 from this survey addresses thoughts on how comprehensive exams at OU SLIS are currently working.

There was one “Other, please specify” comment concerning the question on advantages of comprehensive exams. This comment was: “not sure what the advantage is.”

There was one “Other, please specify” comment for the question on disadvantages of comprehensive exams. This comment was: “Student responses are often shallow and meaningless as to measuring what the student knows. Also, exams do nothing to prepare students for the job market. Portfolios are much better at this.”
Table 1: Satisfaction with Current Comprehensive Procedures and Exam Overall (N=8) (numbers in frequencies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Satisfied</th>
<th>Satisfied</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Unsatisfied</th>
<th>Very Unsatisfied</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creating questions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administering exam</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value for students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grading</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall use as EPA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HOW CURRENT PROCEDURES ARE WORKING FOR OU SLIS

The following charts and table display the data from the second survey on faculty views of the current procedures being used for comprehensive exams in OU SLIS. Numbers are given in frequencies rather than percentages as the N for the SLIS faculty is small. For the response category “working fine as is,” the chart bar is green to indicate that respondents did not perceive a problem with that aspect of the comprehensive exams.

Chart 3 (below) indicates that of general current design issues, half or more of the faculty thought that the amount of time students get for the exam, and the faculty proctored setting were problematic. Additional comments from “Other, please specify” were:

1. There is a need to re-set students' concepts of a defense within the comp process. A defense is required for the portfolio and the thesis; a defense for the comp is perceived as failure.
2. When a set percentage of students (e.g., 20%) fail a comp question, the faculty should assume a systemic failure (not penalize students for not learning) and seek to end the problem (e.g., the process of the exam, standards of admission, or the construction and delivery of the curriculum).
3. Although I'm fine with the half-day proctored exam, I would be equally fine with a take-home week-long exam. OR I would be fine with giving the comp questions to the
students one week ahead of time to prepare, then have them come in to the half-day proctored exam to write their answers.
Faculty had the following comments concerning question generation:

1. This aspect is very much tied to no. 5 below [Chart 7] --what is expected, how is evaluation of individual questions to be done.

2. A question deals with a jargon or a theorist that other faculty who teaches the same class did not sufficiently cover.
The majority of faculty felt there were several issues with how students prepare or are prepared for comps. “Other, please specify” comments were:

1. I don't think that students look for all sorts of ways to guarantee success on the comps--and peer guidance seems as reliable to them as anything in a handbook or that faculty say.

2. It's not that I am against student-run study groups, but it seems that lots of rumors have been created and passed down from generation to generation (e.g. last semester a student told me that she was concerned because it was "required" that to pass the comps, students must include at least 3 citations. To my knowledge, this is a fallacy.
3. Students' reliance on past experiences and questions may not work to their advantage—things change and students differ. Students need the current information from the guidelines—why else do we develop and update the guidelines for 3 different end-of-program assessments? However, I am convinced that many students never read carefully any of the guidelines or any of the program goals/objectives. Information professionals should have a deep understanding of the goals of their curriculum and of the objectives of their comprehensive exam. These understandings are the ultimately the test.

**Chart 6: Conduct of Examinations (N=9)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency: Found Problematic</th>
<th>Conduct of exams working well as is</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
<th>Written instructions given before day of exam</th>
<th>Written instructions given at the exam</th>
<th>Oral instructions read at exam by faculty proctor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the faculty were satisfied with the conduct of the exams. There was one “Other, please specify” comment: “Faculty need to be consistent in granting extra time in the event of problems.”
Concerning the grading of comps, there was one “Other, please specify” comment. “Last comp's grading (Fall 2010) worked out the best. in the past, the assumption was that every faculty member should be able to grade all the questions. That simply is not true nor realistic.”
There was one comment in “Other, please specify” for this question. It was: “These are not necessarily major problems, but are areas that could benefit from some attention.”
Since the answer categories for the question represented by Chart 9 were quite long, abbreviations had to be used in the chart. Following are the full-length answer categories concerning conversations the faculty should have concerning the comprehensive exams:

1. As faculty, what do we hope to achieve educationally by using the comprehensive exams?

2. Do we need to come to some shared conclusions about how we grade (approach grading) at the planning session for devising the test?

3. Does any test “measure” more than a student’s ability to succeed on that type of test?

4. Students who cannot follow directions and specifically answer questions don’t do well on this type of test – can we detect them earlier? How would we remediate?
5. Is it possible to have a “perfect” test/questions/EPA which which students will be universally happy? Is that a goal?

6. Does the students’ disciplinary backgrounds enter into their satisfaction rate with an essay comps format?

“Other, please specify” comments concerning conversations faculty should have about comprehensive exams included the following:

1. We need to have a discussion about changing the format of the exam (students trapped in a room with no access to information resources). This discussion has been delayed for two years while the Graduate Studies Committee conducts a national survey of end of program assessments used at other schools.

2. Should there be a mechanism by which students assure the faculty and themselves that they are ready to take comps? In the classes we teach, do/should students have experiences with assessment that prepare them to fulfill the objectives of the comprehensive exam?
Table 2: Overview of What is Problematic with Comps Process (N=9) (numbers in frequencies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is it that is problematic?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>No Opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Process (test/questions)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grading (outcomes)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question wording</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need more specific post- grading forms?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need rubric for grading?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Comments” on the overview of what is problematic with comps were:

1. To me, the largest challenge is going to be shaping any EPA to accommodate what is increasingly an online program.

2. Regarding the rubric, "Yes" if the rubric addresses the objectives of the comprehensive exam.

RESULTS AND COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

In considering the results, the Graduate Studies Committee saw a strong theme of expressed need for faculty consensus regarding question formation, grading, expected outcomes, and other aspects of this EPA experience.

At the last Graduate Studies Committee meeting, the Committee decided to forward the following recommendation to the faculty for consideration at the Monday, December 6 regular faculty meeting:

1. That the SLIS faculty hold a called meeting (an afternoon or morning) to discuss the issues of most concern on the survey, with consideration of possible policy changes regarding the comprehensive exam.

2. That the meeting be scheduled the first week of classes, Spring 2011 (January 18-21).
3. That among considerations would be the increasing growth in SLIS online program experiences, with implications for all EPAs, including the comprehensive exam. Potential issues include administration of the exam in a proctored, off-site location (currently policy allows) and administration of an oral off-site (no current policy or procedures), and the consequent staff time for individualizing these experiences, if they are allowed.

For reference purposes, the current OU Graduate College policy regarding comprehensive examinations (from the 2010-2011 Graduate College Bulletin) may be accessed on pages 58-60 at: http://gradweb.ou.edu/Current/gcBulletin/GCBulletin.pdf