UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA
SCHOOL OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION STUDIES

COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

DATA-GATHERING FOR PROGRAM ENHANCEMENT

Spring 2009

Were the comprehensive exam questions representative of the content included in the learning experiences undertaken during your master’s program (not necessarily in any specific class)?

I felt that the questions this time were representative of my experiences in my courses and in my overall studies. I also think that was because I took the right classes that I can this, I felt that the answers that were expected on at least one question were outside the realm of the required courses that everyone has to take. I think that my experiences as a GA and doing an internship helped enhance what I had learned and allowed me to better answer the questions. I am not sure that is the case for all students though.

yes

I felt that the questions asked were covered in some way by several classes. I did not feel that they were the main focus of many of my classes, however, but simply mentioned at some point along the way.

The questions were more representative of what is going on in the real world rather than what we learned in our classes. However, the tools and information we obtained in our classes were important in answering the questions.

No, it is laughable. The questions were vague, and it was not clear what the expectations of any one question were. Question 5 (over management) could be answered by anyone in any department that deals with management, but did not require content directly related to the program. In addition, it was blatantly obvious that several of the best students, and most prepared students, in the department had to defend a failed question, while others that had prepared poorly passed everything on the first attempt because the questions did not adhere to the course content. Many students who were prepared and passed on the first attempt considered it luck after seeing who had to defend. The exam process failed miserably if the point is to separate the best students from the worst, or those deserving of a degree from those that do not deserve to lead the profession.

Yes—with reservations. I felt that they focused a little too closely on the new and exciting things in libraries right now, and strayed a little too far from the stated purpose of synthesizing and drawing together the core curriculum classes. If trends are going to be a big part of the exam, then tell us that. It was little confusing to go to some of the study sessions and suddenly be stressed out about keeping up to date. I spent a lot of time preparing answers for questions based on the core classes, only to have them be of no use in the exam.

Yes, I felt that they were an accurate reflection of what I had learned.

The questions on the comprehensive examination were representative of the content included in the classes I took. The core courses were the basis of the learning I received, but the elective courses were a valuable supplement as well.

Yes. Questions including management/planning were especially relevant/related to classwork, but all of the questions were representative of topics of learning/discussion in the program.

I felt that the ones I was most prepared to answer were related to management. That feels to me like the only class that talks about specifics, like knowledge loss, planning, etc. The other topics, like CIPA, USA PATRIOT Act,
social networking, metadata, digitization, etc. seem to be talked about only in passing. It would have been very difficult to pass the exam had I not studied so hard and so long.

**Was the wording of each of the exam questions easy for you to understand?**

The wording was easy to understand. However, some of the questions were simplified (meaning the answer was meant to be more in-depth than the questions led the student to believe).

In general, I understood the questions. My interpretation of the questions and their main focus may have differed from the intent of the question writers’, though.

The questions were easy to understand and straightforward.

No, not at all. The question worded most poorly was about intellectual freedom. Although I felt confident about this topic, the question was worded in a way I did not feel I could predict the answer the graders would require. Some questions, like the advocacy and user generated content questions, could have books written over them, yet very specific things were required in the answer. The questions should ask you what you know about rather than what you don’t know, and should be graded to see if students hold enough knowledge to constitute the degree, rather than if they can play the professors’ guessing games of what buzz words should be included in each answer.

Yes.

I had no difficulty understanding the wording of the exam questions.

_The wording on one question was a bit vague (intent unclear). Otherwise, they were clear and easy to understand._

Not entirely! The questions seemed to be worded to trip the test taker. It would be more beneficial if the questions were more broad therefore could be answered in a variety of ways.

Two of the questions were awkwardly worded and contained what seemed to be superfluous information. I think the questions that were answered most often (1, 3, and 5) were the most clearly worded.

**Did you attend a comprehensive orientation session? Yes = 8; No = 1**

*If your answer is yes, did the session appropriately represent the faculty expectations of student responses on the comprehensive exam questions?*

I was able to attend only one session, but I think I had a better idea of faculty expectations as a result. Before experiencing a comprehensive examination, the unknown factors and the rampant speculation can really be unsettling. I think I finally realized a day or two before the exam that if I didn’t know the material by now, I was never going to know it. It was not about memorizing; it was all about absorbing the material and being able to apply it in real-life scenarios.

_No, I was unable to attend the orientation session._

If I had known what a joke the comprehensive exams would be, I would not have chosen them and likely would not have continued in the department.

I guess, though I have never been comfortable with what exactly the expectations of the faculty have been throughout this process. When I asked various professors, I felt like the answers I received did not always match up. This made it very frustrating as I was trying to prepare to take my exam. One question I have always had about the exam is whether there is a rubric or points that each professor are looking for in the answers to ensure that each student is being graded on the same standard by each faculty member. I know that several read each
response but that is not the same as having a written criteria that each faculty member uses as an evaluative tool. I think that my feeling about faculty expectations would be clearer to me if I had received some feedback on my answers. While I passed, I am always curious as to where I was strong and weak in my answers. Right now the process seems to have an air of hostility, at least from the student end, as there is not clear understanding as to where the questions come from and how they are specifically evaluated. It gave me and others the feelings like the questions were meant to throw us a curve and maybe cause us not to pass the test. I know that is not the intent but it was the feeling that I had before the exam and afterward. Even those that pass that I have discussed the experience with seem to not feel the whole process was productive. I think some transparency to the process, through something like the use of rubrics, could greatly improve the process.

I think you should have the orientation sessions be closer to when students actually take the exam, rather than at the beginning of the program. By the time comps rolled around, I had forgotten nearly everything we talked about in the orientation, but didn’t know how or who to ask my questions to.

It was stressed to answer the question, it should be stressed to answer the question AND ELABORATE!

The study session I attended seemed to basically be my study group telling everyone what we had studied. The issues we discussed were not really on the exam, though we did mention budget in some way. Advocating for funds was not mentioned a lot, though.

Yes

Yes, I felt like I had been made very aware of what was expected of me and I knew going into the exam what I needed to do to best answer the questions.

Do you have suggestions that could help SLIS improve the comprehensive exam process for students?

Make it multiple choice…

Providing students with an idea of possible question for the exam, and not just past questions, would make studying more productive. I felt like I studied many things that I had not learned in classes but worried might be on the exam. Having specific questions ahead of time to study would make it a more productive experience.

It would be very beneficial if students preparing to take them exam were given some subject lines to narrow their study criteria. It is entirely too broad of a spectrum to narrow.

This process needs to be completely overhauled. I passed, so I am not just griping because I did not get the end result I wanted. Suggestions would include having the comprehensive exam take place after the core courses, asking for information directly related to the core courses, and then allowing those who pass to continue in the program. This would weed out weaker students early on, as well as keep the exam from covering elective courses that will be different for everyone. Or, have a different set of questions for different elective tracks. Also, the defense process is much too inconsistent: some students went in and had a friendly discussion while others were grilled harshly. There should be a defense committee that is the same for all students. At least that way the defense experience would be consistent. The double blind process does not equal fairness to students when one has a committee of professors they know while another has a committee of professors they’ve never had in class, or a committee of more “easy-going” professors versus a committee of “stricter” standards. Again, it is obvious to the students but maybe not to the administration that because several top students had to defend, the system is quite broken.

I think the pre-comps meeting that was held was useful, although I left the meeting more worried and anxious than when I went in. It was beneficial to hear recent graduates relate their experiences with the comps. The released
questions from previous exams were helpful. I do not have any new suggestions that I think would improve the process for students.

*Offer multiple orientation sessions.*

Also, the testing process should change. Never in our academic or professional career will we have to write 3 essays in 4 hours with absolutely no resources. Having students write coherent essays, for example, over a weekend with appropriate works cited would be much more relevant to our line of studies.

I was really shocked that there was not an explicit copyright question, especially since we talk about it every five minutes in our courses. I also think that people make way too much of this exam, focusing on how hard it is instead of how to prepare for it. I also heard from friends that the defense portion was unnecessarily antagonistic.

I think the best way to improve the exam and to truly evaluate what a student has learned is to give them a set of questions from which to study. Because the amount of material is so broad, many students feel intimidated and do not do as well on the exam because they have no idea what to study. To tell a student to study what they learned in their core courses and to read the professional literature is not much guidance. I understand that the faculty wants to see what a student understands but because each of those core courses are taught by different instructors who all stress different things in the courses does not exactly make the process fair and equitable. I think that the best thing that the faculty could do is generate a list of ten questions that may make the exam which would give students some guidance on what to study. When it comes to the exam the faculty could then make it so if the student has to answer three questions, that they are required to answer certain ones and maybe only have a choice of one to answer that is their own choice. By providing the questions the faculty would be decreasing the stress that students have in taking the comprehensive exam, but would also allow them to hold students to a high standard as they would have the questions ahead of time. The way the comprehensive exam format presently is, I am not sure it truly measures what a student knows because sometimes the questions just happen to be the ones he/she has studied the most for or the difficulty of the questions may vary from one semester to another. I could also see making the exams oral, as another way that the process could be improved as it would allow professors to ask questions of students to probe for greater understanding. I am not sure how feasible that is but it would be a way to get the process over more quickly and do away with the oral defense as a make up for not getting the required number of questions correct. This would especially be true if the student was given the questions ahead of time to prepare, as there would be no excuse not to give a satisfactory answer if you had the questions before the exam. The format could be the same as the written where the student had one that was their choice and two chosen by the faculty panel. The defenses could be scheduled over a two day period and would not have to be strung out over several weeks. I have some background in education and grading a national exam, and so I know from which I speak when it comes to grading exams and constructing questions. I would like to see changes made so that both the faculty and students feel good about the process and it becomes a culminating event that allows the student to show what he/she has learned, and leaves the faculty feeling good about what the students learned coming out of the program.

Well, something definitely needs to be done about the oral defenses. I heard such a wide variety of experiences, it was difficult for me to imagine that these oral defenses are in any way fair. Some students had a friendly chat with professors, and others had a graduate level thesis defense. I understand that it is not possible to remove all bias from professors when they see who a student is. However, I do feel that a more consistent and fair approach is possible. Also, having professors on teleconference from Tulsa is extremely distracting and was simply a terrible idea. I could not hear what the professor was asking me, and the connection was terrible which was even more distracting. I understand the need for a wide variety of faculty, but please stop doing it.

I think the ideal situation would be for students to have a take home exam that is tailored to fit the classes they took and the type of library they were studying to work in. At the very least, I think a reading list, compiled by those whose questions were selected, should be given to the students ahead of time.