

## *UNLV DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY*

### **AREA OF SPECIALIZATION (AOS) COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATIONS POLICIES & PROCEDURES**

The Department of Sociology has NINE distinct areas of specialization (AOS) for research and teaching. These areas are: (1) Family, Aging, & the Life Course; (2) Culture; (3) Deviance & Criminology; (4) Environment & Health; (5) Race & Ethnic Studies; (6) Gender & Sexuality; (7) Politics & Social Movements; (8) Social Psychology & Theory; and (9) Urban, Community, & Population Studies. Each AOS has at least three faculty specialists. The department regularly offers designated courses, directed studies, and special topics courses in each of these areas.

Masters students must declare ONE AOS and complete at least ONE 3-credit 600 or 700 level course taught by a graduate faculty member expert in this area. Doctoral students must declare TWO areas of specialization and complete at least ONE 3-credit 600 or 700-level course taught by a graduate faculty member expert in each area.

Doctoral students take comprehensive exams in both of their declared AOS. Even though some courses are listed under more than one AOS, each course can only count toward one AOS.

#### **Timing Requirements**

Students are eligible to take their first AOS exam after they have completed all of their *required* coursework and at least one 600 or 700 level course in the specialty area as described above. The AOS comp exam requirement is generally met during the third year of graduate study, but **MUST** be met by the end of the student's fourth year of study. Students who do not complete both comprehensive exams by the end of their fourth year of study will be placed on probation for one semester. Students who do not complete both comprehensive exams by the end of the probation period may be separated from the PhD program, at the discretion of the Graduate Studies Committee. Students may submit a petition for an extension to the Graduate Studies Committee if extenuating circumstances arise. While it is not recommended, there is nothing precluding a student from taking both comprehensive examinations in the same semester.

Students who fail an AOS comprehensive exam on their first attempt must retake the exam the following semester. Students failing an AOS comprehensive exam on the second attempt will be separated from the PhD program.

Students who are receiving funding from the Sociology Dept. and who fail a comprehensive exam or who are placed on probation may risk losing their funding. Funding decisions will be made by the Graduate Studies Committee. The Committee will use performance on comprehensive exams as one criterion when making funding decisions.

## **Process for Declaring Areas of Specialization, Preparing for, and Completing Exams**

Students are expected to prepare for AOS exams by enrolling in and passing courses or directed studies with faculty members in their two AOS. AOS exams are designed, administered, and evaluated by a committee of THREE faculty members, all of whom must be listed as experts in the AOS. One of these faculty members serves as chair. The AOS Committee evaluates the exam and recommends a grade to the student's Advisory Committee.

In order to declare an AOS and set up an AOS comprehensive examination, students must complete the following sequence for EACH of their areas of specialization:

- 1) Select a committee of three faculty members and obtain their approval of the AOS. The three committee members must be faculty members listed as specialists in the AOS in which the student wishes to complete the AOS requirement. The student should first choose an AOS chairperson. Said chairperson will likely be a member of the student's Advisory Committee, though this is neither required nor imperative. The student's AOS Chairperson can then help the student choose the other two committee members.

While students cannot declare an AOS until after they have completed all required coursework, they should be thinking about AOS and the composition of their committee during their first and second years of study.

- 2) Obtain approval for the AOS and associated committee from the Graduate Studies Coordinator, in consultation with the Graduate Studies Committee, by completing the appropriate form available on the Sociology Department website. Students must also obtain verbal approval from the chairperson of their Advisory Committee. The choice of AOS and the composition of the committees must be approved in writing before the student will be granted permission to take the exam. Faculty from departments other than Sociology may be added (or, if necessary, substituted) by petition to the Graduate Studies Committee.
- 3) Prepare a plan of study that includes coursework and independent study in the AOS. With the help of the approved AOS Committee, students must develop an extended reading list in the AOS. Each AOS will have a master list of readings created by the faculty area specialists. AOS reading lists consist of articles, book chapters, books, and other media. All lists will be organized into categories denoting core texts and more specialized topics. Students are expected to add readings of special interest to them that will assist them in preparing their dissertations and the *Critical Review Essay* (described later). Added readings must be approved by the student's AOS Chairperson. As a guideline, well developed reading lists generally include about 80-100 items. Students should begin working on and through their AOS reading list well before the semester in which they plan to take the AOS comp exam.

4) Complete the AOS Exam as described below:

- a. *Written Examination.* Students will complete an in-class Written Exam (prepared by their AOS Committee) using only their reading list and previously prepared notes. Students may NOT bring books or articles into the examination room. The exam is divided into two sections: one on theoretical issues and one on methodological practices. There will be four total questions; two in theory and two in methods. Students will choose one of each (i.e. one theory and one methods question) to answer.

The exam is designed to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge of key issues and debates as well as the broad, conceptual history of the AOS. Students are expected to know the central arguments of the articles and books included on the AOS reading list. The answer to each question on the exam should be about 10-15 typed pages, for a total of about 20-30 typed pages, excluding the list of references and any other supplemental material (e.g., tables, figures). Students will have a maximum of 8 hours to complete the Written Exam. All AOS exams will be administered during a two-week period in the middle of the semester determined by the Graduate Studies Committee.

- b. *Oral Defense.* An *Oral Defense* will be conducted by the AOS committee approximately two weeks after the student has taken the *Written Exam*. The student's Advisory Committee will observe the *Oral Defense*. The *Oral Defense* affords students an opportunity to clarify specific questions the AOS committee has about the *Written Exam*. While it will also involve questions about expanded and peripheral ideas, its main goal is to ensure that the student can adequately address the AOS committee's questions and concerns about the exam.

Students will be allowed to keep the answers to their *Written Exam*, but under no circumstances are they allowed to share the exam and/or their answers or discuss the exam and/or their answers with any other students or faculty until after the *Oral Defense*. Students who are found to have broken this rule may receive a grade of *Fail* on the comprehensive exam.

Prior to the *Oral Defense*, students should review their exam in order to prepare for and anticipate the questions the committee may ask during the *Oral Defense*. The student's performance in the *Oral Defense* will be used as one of the criterion in determining the overall grade on the Comprehensive Exam. The AOS committee will not give the student any comments about the *Written Exam* prior to the *Oral Defense*.

## Evaluation

After the student has completed the Oral Defense, the AOS committee will confer and recommend a grade to the student's Advisory Committee. This grade will be one of the following: Pass with honors, pass, conditional pass, major revision, and fail.

The student's Advisory Committee (including an outside member) will either accept or reject the grade recommended by the AOS committee.

*Pass with Honors:* The student has answered both questions and performed an Oral Defense in a manner that significantly exceeds the AOS committee's expectations that the student has a mastery of the specialty area.

*Pass:* The student has answered both questions and performed an Oral Defense in a manner that satisfies the AOS committee's expectations that the student has a mastery of the specialty area.

*Conditional Pass:* The student has answered both questions without glaring omissions or errors, but there are some minor omissions, errors, or inconsistencies on the exam. The student's answers to questions during the Oral Defense may clear up some of these issues, and the committee will pass the student, pending the completion of minor revisions on the Written Exam. All revisions must be completed within two weeks of the Oral Defense.

*Major Revision:* The committee has identified significant omissions, errors, or inconsistencies with at least one of the answers on the exam that the student is unable to clear up during the Oral Defense. The student must correct those flaws and resubmit the Written Exam for reevaluation. In the case of a Major Revision, a second Oral Defense will not be conducted. Students who are unable to adequately correct the flaws in the revision will fail the comprehensive exam.

*Fail:* The AOS committee has identified significant omissions, errors, or inconsistencies with both answers on the exam that the student has been unable to adequately address during the Oral Defense. The AOS committee also deems these flaws egregious enough that the student could not possibly correct them in a revision. Additionally, students who have been granted a *Major Revision* but who are unable to adequately correct the flaws identified by the AOS committee will receive a grade of *Fail*. Students receiving a grade of *Fail* will have an opportunity to retake the exam no later than the end of the following semester. Students failing the same AOS exam twice will be separated from the program.

## **CRITICAL REVIEW ESSAY**

After successfully passing the Comprehensive Exams in BOTH AOS, students are required to complete a *Critical Review Essay*. While the student may not submit the *Critical Review Essay* until s/he has successfully passed *both Written Exams*, all students should be working on the essay while they are preparing for the *Written Exams*. Preparing for the *Written Exams* is intended to help the student in writing the *Critical Review Essay*.

The student, in consultation with his/her Advisory Committee will negotiate the scope of the *Critical Review Essay*. The essay is intended to allow students to show specialized knowledge of a more specific or specialized topic and, ultimately, to prepare them for writing the Dissertation Prospectus. Though not always possible, students are encouraged to work with their Advisory Committees to integrate each AOS within the *Critical Review Essay*. The student and/or the student's Advisory Committee may request that a member of either or both AOS committees consult with the student and the Advisory Committee on developing and evaluating the *Critical Review Essay*

While the specific parameters of the *Critical Review Essay* will be determined by the student's Advisory Committee, the essay will typically include a review of the literature pertaining to the specific topic of interest, an identification of disagreements, debates, and gaps of knowledge on this topic, and proposals for theoretical or methodological development of the topic. The *Critical Review Essay* will generally be around 30 pages long, including references. The majority of references will come from one or both of the AOS reading lists.

### **Timing**

Students must submit the FINAL DRAFT of the *Critical Review Essay* to their Advisory Committee one month prior to end of their fourth year (eighth semester) of study (an exact due date will be determined by the Advisory Committee Chairperson). For this reason, students should ideally complete the two comprehensive exams by the end of the first semester of the fourth year (seventh semester) of study. Because some students may be completing the Written Examination requirement during the fourth year, they must be diligent in working on the *Critical Review Essay*. Students should consult with the Advisory Committee to ensure that the eighth semester deadline is met.

To improve the quality of the *Critical Review Essay*, students should submit drafts of the essay to their Advisory Committee Chairperson for comments and suggestions for improvement. Though each Advisory Committee will determine guidelines for the number of drafts they are willing to accept, students should generally submit no more than two rough drafts to the committee prior to submission of the final draft.

## Evaluation

Because the Critical Review Essay requirement **MUST** be met by the end of the fourth year, there are only three possible grades a student may earn:

*Pass with Honors:* The student has produced an essay that has **far exceeded** the Advisory's Committee's ' expectations that the student has a mastery of the literature of the specialized topic, a firm grasp of the debates and gaps of knowledge in that topic, and substantial proposals for theoretical or methodological development of the topic.

*Pass:* The student has produced an essay that **meets** the Advisory Committee's expectations that the student has a mastery of the literature of the specialized topic, a firm grasp of the debates and gaps of knowledge in that topic, and substantial proposals for theoretical or methodological development of the topic.

*Fail:* A student can fail the *Critical Review Essay* in two ways.

- 1.) Students who do not submit the Final Draft of the *Critical Review Essay* by the due date specified by the Advisory Committee Chair (approximately one month before the end of the eighth semester of study) will be placed on probation for one semester. If the student does not submit the *Critical Review Essay* by the end of that semester, s/he will be given a grade of *Fail* and separated from the program.
- 2.) A student may fail the *Critical Review Essay* if the Advisory Committee has identified significant omissions, errors, or inconsistencies in the Final Draft. Because students will not be afforded opportunities for revision after they submit the Final Draft, they should be sure that they are submitting the very best work they can produce.

Students who are receiving funding from the Sociology Dept. and who are placed on probation for not submitting the Final Draft on time may risk losing their funding. Funding decisions will be made by the Graduate Studies Committee, whose members use performance on the *Critical Review Essay* as one criterion when making funding decisions.