

Separation of comprehensive exam and dissertation proposal meeting

Background: The Graduate Division has received inquiries and concerns regarding the combining of the oral portion of the comprehensive exam and the approval meeting for the dissertation proposal (sometimes referred to as “the proposal defense”).

It has been suggested that combining the oral exam and the proposal meeting makes scheduling easier, as students often find it hard to schedule 5 faculty for the oral exam, let alone a second time for a proposal meeting (although dissertation proposal meetings need not involve more than 3 faculty). The GSC recognizes there are times when scheduling does create special challenges. However, there is concern that when the comprehensive exam and the proposal meeting are scheduled together, there has been a tendency to treat the comprehensive more as a formality rather than a substantive and comprehensive exam in its own right, and that faculty report having found it difficult to tell to a student that s/he cannot proceed with the dissertation proposal part of the exam since the student has already been given permission by the advisor—prior to passing the oral—to write a dissertation proposal. This has been reported as especially awkward in cases where the oral portion merits a failing mark, and where the student’s exam performance is “excused”—allowing the student’s presentation of the dissertation proposal to carry the weight of the evaluation.

The GSC recommends, and encourages oral comprehensive examination committee members to invoke as a “best practice” that *at least one week shall transpire between a student’s oral comprehensive exam and dissertation proposal meeting.*