

Episode 46 – I Failed My PhD Qualifying Exam!

Welcome to Grad-post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

We continue with topics on your first year in graduate school, and for some of you that means facing qualifying examinations. I should start with a slew of clarifications. What we'll be discussing is the exam or set of exams that may be part of your requirements for official acceptance into a doctoral program. These exams are variably called "qualifying" exams, "entrance" exams, "cumulative" exams, "comprehensive" exams, or just "quals, cumes, or comps" They can occur your first few weeks on entering program, at the end of the first semester, at the end of the first academic year, or even after you have completed all of your required coursework. These exams are not the same as what is sometimes called the "prospectus" examination, which is related to your PhD dissertation. That step occurs later in the program and is the penultimate hurdle to your PhD. The qualifying exams come much earlier and can have many formats, which we will discuss in a moment, but they all have the commonality that you must perform satisfactorily on them to continue in the doctoral program. So, let's stipulate that we are talking about these formal examinations, regardless of format and regardless of when they happen, that are part of your final acceptance into a PhD program, and let's call them "qualifying" exams just for simplification. You may think that acceptance into grad school was the final hurdle to entering the PhD program, but if you read the fine print on your acceptance letter it probably was "conditional" admission. The condition is that you satisfy all the other requirements to enter the PhD program, including completion of coursework and passing the qualifying examination.

Those of you in master's programs are probably saying "What the funicular are you talking about?" Well, you probably don't have to take qualifying exams to get your master's degree – they aren't that common. You've been accepted into the program and as long as you maintain good academic standing – a minimum GPA – pass all the required courses, and achieve the necessary number of credits, you'll get your master's degree. But you may be sitting next to someone in one or more of your classes that is stressing out about qualifying exams. So, it's good to know what they are going through. You may also be a master's student in a program that first requires completion of the master's degree before you'll even be considered for admission to a PhD program. This is still common in some of the social sciences and humanities. In either case, it's good to know what your classmates are up against. You never know when the opportunity to continue on to the PhD might present itself.

There are some good overviews of qualifying exams like [Academic Insider "What is a PhD Qualifying Exam?"](#) and some not-so-good ones like the usual Reddit rants. There are also guidelines on preparing for the exam, like the [UC-Davis "Acing Your Qualifying Exam"](#) website. But I want to focus on key components of the exam and what to do if you should fail the exam. These are key issues that generic discussions cannot cover.

Nothing we will discuss should be taken as general justification for high-stakes exams or specifically whether qualifying exams serve their stated purpose. I simply take it as a fact that they exist. I have been in many, many discussions regarding their value and I can tell you that any concerns you may have about their validity are shared in some way by program faculty and administrators. The fact that qualifying exams are routinely overhauled because the program faculty feel they aren't improving student outcomes or program quality should indicate to you that they are imperfect. But, they're such a large milestone – second only to the dissertation defense- that it's worth discussing them.

So, let's limit our discussion to three central topics surrounding the qualifying exam: content, format, and outcomes. Keep in mind that there is a lot of variability surrounding even just the format and outcome of these exams beyond the issues of naming and timing that we've already touched on. I can't go into all the permutations these exams can take, so I'm going to shoot for the middle and describe some of the most common characteristics regarding content, format, and outcomes.

First, let's divide content into two broad categories, although we will see that there is definitely overlap: coursework-based and research project-based exams. There's a lot of debate over which emphasis is most effective, if at all. The program faculty I was part of went back and forth multiple times about the content and format of these exams and we seemed to be in a continual state of revision and fine-tuning since no one was happy with them. None of those discussions are relevant here, but if you're asking yourself why there is such variation in exam content it's because neither approach is perfect. The coursework-based exam is redundant, because if you took the course and passed, why should you have to be tested again? And the research-based approach is testing you over something that you may have never done before. How can you be tested on research skills if you've never been taught those skills? Either way, the content will reflect some basic tenets of your discipline. The content can be broad which is typically the approach of the coursework-based exams, or more specific to your sub-discipline or research specialty in the research-based approach. Regardless of the approach, you'll want to review your disciplinary foundations so that you are ready for any question.

Second, the format can be of two types: written or oral. Either format can be used to evaluate both coursework and research-based exam content, and many qualifying exams today have both written and oral components. That creates too many possibilities to go into great detail on each variation, but there are basically four general categories of content and format as shown in the table.

	Coursework	Research
Written	Exam(s)	Report/Proposal
Oral	Q&A	Presentation/Q&A

I won't go into the written exams based on coursework because this is essentially what you have been doing your entire academic career. Review the material, then be prepared to answer written questions on any of the content. These exams can be long and strenuous. I had to take four, four-hour exams in grad school. That's probably the upper limit. Most today are more like a final exam. A written qualifying exam based on a research project is much different, however. You will probably be given a research topic or asked to identify one. It might be in your designated research area, it might not be. It depends on the program. Regardless of the topic, you generally will be given a specific time period in which to submit your written report. In some instances the report may actually take on the format of a research proposal – something you might submit to a funding agency justifying a request for funding. If you've never done this before, the learning curve can be steep. Follow the instructions you are given very carefully and try not to run afoul of the report requirements.

I've saved the oral presentation formats for last because these can be the most daunting. Whether you are answering questions based on your disciplinary knowledge, your research project, or a little of both, how you comport yourself in front of the faculty or even your peers determines the level of success you will have. I've seen some very smart and well-qualified people crash and burn in orals and some so-so students

with great communication skills excel in oral exams. Know which one you are and prepare accordingly. If you are comfortable talking in front of people and are a whiz at Powerpoint presentations, then work on your content. Smooth talking won't cover for a lack of knowledge. Conversely, if you know your content inside out but get nervous speaking in front of people, practice that part of it. You may be prohibited from collaborating with others on your report, but that doesn't mean you can't practice public speaking and fielding questions. Start with a mirror, then your pet hamster, and work your way up to friends and family and even the church choir if that's your speed. Record yourself and play it back. You have to find some way to combat the nerves and focus. Being nervous is natural – some might even say necessary – but you can control nerves through breathing, stress relaxation, and concentration. Practice also helps you identify habits you might not even know you have. “Ums” and “ahs” are the most obvious, but you may not be aware that you are saying “like” every other word or overusing catch phrases like “in the current literature.” My kryptonite is talking with my hands. It used to look like I was practicing semaphore, but with repetition and discipline I was able to minimize that bad habit. You can do the same. If I have one bit of advice for how to excel in an oral question and answer session, it's to make sure you listen carefully to the question. Ask to have it repeated if necessary and repeat the question back if that is helpful to you. The number one mistake I've seen examinees make in oral Q&A is answering the wrong question.

As an aside, let's talk about rubrics. A rubric is some sort of guideline for judging performance, in this case on an examination. There is typically a list of criteria against which you are being judged, and categories for performance, usually on some sort of Likert scale. A rubric can help bring objective evaluation into what might otherwise be a totally subjective exercise. There are critics of rubrics to be sure, but for a qualifying exam – particularly the oral portion – it can help you prepare and focus on what is most important. I've provided a very general – yet common – rubric here for an exam that involves a research proposal followed by an oral presentation including Q&A.

Qualifying Exam Rubric					
	1-Not acceptable	2-Below expectations	3-Meets expectations	4-Exceeds expectations	Score
Written Report					
Overview of Existing Literature					
Technical Merit					
Novelty of Research Idea					
Effectiveness in Written Communication					
Oral Presentation					
Organization					
Confidence/Poise					
Effectiveness in Oral Communication					
Question and Answer					
Ability to Understand Questions					
Effectiveness in Responses to Questions					
Display of Knowledge in Responses					
TOTAL					

Sometimes weighting factors are used to give more emphasis to one or more portion of the exam, but you can clearly see what the important evaluative components are. Note that under Q&A the “Ability to Understand Questions” is an explicit review criterion, just as I mentioned earlier. A rubric may or may not be provided to you ahead of time, and you may or may not be given your formal score after the exam. In any case, the rubric is used by the examiners to provide context to their final determinations, which leads us into our final topic.

The assessment scale and thus the possible outcomes of the qualifying exam vary widely. Some are “all or nothing” meaning you pass you're in, fail you're out. Some programs have these two outcomes but allow you to retake the exam again if you fail, probably not more than once. Others give you no such option. Still other programs insert a third option which is kind of the same thing, sometime called a “conditional pass” or “conditional fail” depending on whether you are a glass half full or glass half empty program. There are

still the pass and fail options, but the conditional one in the middle means you are allowed explicitly to take the exam over again, or maybe do some kind of remedial action like additional coursework.

Those of you in the “pass” category don’t need any more advice. You get a virtual pat on the back from me and the odds are good that you’ll complete your PhD degree in a timely manner. But those of you in the “fail” or “conditional pass/fail” categories need a little guidance, so let’s focus our efforts there. If there is a formal “conditional pass/fail” category, you will have an opportunity to continue on in the program if you meet certain standards, such as re-taking the exam at a later date. That could be three months from now, it could be a year from now, it could be after completing some other requirement like obtaining a master’s degree or passing additional coursework. The variations are endless. There’s not much in the way of guidance I can give here, except learn from your mistakes and take advantage of a “do over.” You don’t always get such opportunities in life.

Which brings us to the whole point of this podcast: what to do if you fail your qualifying exam. If you are fortunate, that might mean being able to take it again despite the finality of the outcome. If that’s the case, see the previous “conditional pass/fail comments.” But if you outright failed it – you’re not getting into the PhD program here – you have some options, even though it may not seem like it. First and foremost, take a deep breath and congratulate yourself for making it this far. No, really. There’s only a few thousand people each year who make it this far and you need a little perspective. If you need to, seek out professional services to help you cope with your disappointment. Maybe this is the first time you’ve actually failed at something. It’s not unusual to need some assistance dealing with it. Once you have a little distance, catalog your options. I mean, actually write them down and start doing a cost-benefit analysis. Is there a possibility to re-take the exam even if there is no formal mechanism? Is there precedent in the program for someone re-taking the exam even if the guidelines say you can’t? I’m a stickler for rules and have had to tell several students that they just weren’t going on, but I’ve also recognized that there can be extenuating circumstances. It may take some convincing and documentation, but if you really feel like you need another opportunity, go ahead and ask. But be prepared to be told “no.” Honestly, I’m not even sure if lobbying for a re-take is your best course of action. Here’s why. If you failed a qualifying exam then the universe is trying to tell you something. Not that you’re a failure – we’ve covered that already – but that this program is probably not right for you. It does not necessarily mean that you are not doctorate material. It just means that you’re not doctorate material **at this institution**. So, my most general advice is to start looking elsewhere to pursue your career. Again, you have several options.

Maybe there are other doctoral programs at that same institution that are a better fit for you. Sometimes, it is possible to transfer into another program at the same place. This can be a viable option if you have reasons to stay where you are – like your partner or significant other is also at that institution or has a great job in that town. Be careful, though. Sometimes transferring after a failed exam is not possible, and again – this institution just may not be for you. What I would highly recommend, then, is moving on with your career somewhere else. The two most common options are to get a job using your current or anticipated degrees – more on that in a minute – or to apply to another PhD program somewhere else. In both instances, timing is everything. To this point I have ignored **when** these qualifying exams take place since that can vary widely. But timing is really important. If you fail the exam, you need time to figure out what’s next, and most programs recognize that. This is why the “terminate with a master’s degree” is often offered to those failing a PhD qualifying exam. There is a lot of stigma around this option. Terminating with a master’s is sometimes derogatorily referred to as getting a “consolation prize” – a term I really hate – but don’t let anyone tell you that it is anything less than a valuable postbaccalaureate degree. The career value of a master’s degree does indeed vary by discipline, but it’s also evidence that you’ve done advanced level work. Every degree counts, right?!

If you are given the option to obtain a master's degree prior to leaving the program – do it. This option can be especially important for international students who must show continuous enrollment to maintain their visa. There are even countries where the master's degree is seen as more valuable than the doctorate. But here in the US, the master's degree can also be a benefit if you intend to go on to another institution. It will enhance your application.

Timing also affects how long you have to look for a job. The worst cases – ones I constantly tried to talk programs out of - was to fail students later in the term and tell them they couldn't enroll for the next semester. That's really bad practice. Fortunately, not many programs do this but if you know this could happen start considering your options **before** the exam – like applying for jobs. You can always turn them down if you continue on in the program. Finally, if you really just want to get that PhD, then look elsewhere. I'm not condoning program-hopping here, nor am I talking about becoming what is sometimes called a "professional student," especially if you are an international student. I'm talking about those sincere cases where you just aimed too high and couldn't make it at a top-tier institution but have the skills and motivation to continue on to your PhD. There is a place for you. This can happen in faculty ranks, too. There are institutions that are notorious for hiring a bunch of faculty then weeding them out at tenure. That practice sucks, too, but those faculty go elsewhere and have equally successful careers. You can do the same. Look for the next application window and even consider starting mid-year if it is allowed. Your courses will likely transfer (up to some limit) and any research experience you have gained will look good on your application. Widen your range of institutions you are applying to and review my advice in Episodes [16](#), [18](#), [21](#) and [22](#) in preparing your applications.

Regardless of which option you think you want to take – re-taking the exam, getting a master's degree, getting a job, or applying to another PhD program – you really should have a conversation with your program advisor. If this is your research advisor or mentor, you will need to have that conversation anyway to determine how to wrap up your current research into either publications or a master's thesis. But also talk to them about career options. Do they think you are good enough to continue toward the PhD somewhere else? Will they even help you do that, as in writing a good letter of recommendation? Do they know of any job openings? What value is the master's degree in your discipline? Maybe you have both an academic advisor and a research advisor. Talk to them both. Talk to the program chair. Talk to people on the qualifying exam committee to get their take on your performance and strengths. These can be difficult but important conversations. Take this opportunity to re-evaluated yourself and your career goals using an Individual Development Plan as discussed in [Episode 9](#).

The qualifying exam can be stressful, mysterious, time consuming, but ultimately rewarding. Even if you fail the qualifying exam without an option to continue in the program, there is a career path for you. Corporations and university faculties are populated with people who failed some or all of their qualifying exams. Heck, I failed two out of those four, four-hour qualifying exams I told you about, yet here I am talking to you about how to plan your adventure for an advanced degree.

Thank you for joining me today. All of the links provided in my podcasts can be found in the transcripts available on my website at grad-post.com. There you'll find additional information and resources to make every degree count!

Links

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