

Department of History Florida International University

Comprehensive Exams

Student Rights and Responsibilities

Doctoral students are responsible for preparing three exam areas. The overall goals of exams can be described as display of depth and breadth of knowledge. First, exams are used to assess whether students possess the depth of knowledge in their area of expertise sufficient to carry out a monograph-length research project. Second, they are designed for students to display the kind of broad grasp of historical events, regional contexts and historiographical developments in ancillary fields necessary to contextualize their own work as well as to construct and teach courses at the university level.

Students preparing for exams have certain responsibilities as well as certain rights. These include:

- **Clarity in individual professor's aims, style of exam question, and expectations for your part in preparation.**

Students who approach individual faculty about serving as examiners reasonably can expect to know, at the outset, the general mode in which a faculty member conducts exam preparation. Students are responsible for ensuring they understand faculty expectations.

In assessing faculty expectations, students might consider the following: Some faculty members want students to display a readiness to teach a course in the field; others want students to show that they have knowledge for research. Some faculty members provide bibliographies and put the emphasis on reading a broad list of preselected works; others require students to construct narrower bibliographies as part of the intellectual process of exam preparation. Some faculty devise questions in consultation with students; some pose what they see as fundamental questions that anyone with a PhD in a given field should be able to answer. Some pose questions that require students to trace historiographical trends or assess the merits of different methodological approaches; others prefer questions that require you to display command of detailed knowledge about chronology, institutions and events.

No student is ensured that each examiner on her or his committee will proceed in the same manner, and being able to work with scholars with different intellectual styles is one of the hallmarks of academic professionalism. At the same time, no student is required to have any faculty member serve as an examiner on her or his committee.

- **Reasonable access to the faculty member during preparation.**

The exam preparation process is an opportunity for a student to demonstrate the indispensable ability to work independently. Nonetheless, students can reasonably expect at least two formal exchanges with a faculty examiner prior to writing an exam, and faculty may require more meetings. These exchanges will include at least one to establish the mode of preparation, and at least one after preparation has begun in order to ensure that the student is proceeding in a manner that appears satisfactory to the faculty member. If the faculty member is in residence, the student can reasonably expect these to be in-person meetings.

*** Timeliness in establishing a final bibliography and/or question-based set of instructions.**

Students can expect to have an approved final bibliography or the equivalent three weeks in advance at minimum, meaning that no additional titles or themes will be added to a student's bibliography during the crucial month before written exams take place.