

Binghamton University
Sociology Department

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GUIDELINES FOR THE DEMONSTRATION OF COMPETENCE

The purpose of the Demonstration of Competence is to construct the broad fields of inquiry that will form the context of the student's future research and teaching. Unlike the dissertation, which presents research in order to answer specific questions, the area papers are intended to map the terrain in which the student will work. A useful way to proceed may be for students to ask what they see as the major focus of their teaching and research over the long term, which are the issues and authors that they wish to engage, and what gives these areas of inquiry their scope, coherence, and significance. The demonstrations of competence are an important opportunity for students to organize the framework in which they will develop and present their work. The substantive content or subject of the area shapes how students present themselves to the wider public. Equally important is the process of constructing the areas that provides experience and skills that will enable students to reorganize their research and teaching as it evolves in the future.

The "Demonstration of Competence" written presentation and oral examination are distinctive to the program of graduate study in sociology at Binghamton. Each candidate for the PhD demonstrates competence in at least two separate fields (or areas) of scholarly inquiry. The writing of the areas normally follows the completion of required course work and precedes the presentation of a dissertation prospectus. After broadly determining the fields, the candidate forms a committee of faculty members for each field who provide guidance and advice. Committees are normally made up of three faculty members from the Sociology Department, one of whom will be the Chair. Additional faculty from Sociology or other departments may be included as members. The candidate is encouraged to have discussions with these faculty in the course of determining and constructing the area well in advance of the defense. A date for the session(s) shall be set by mutual consent, provided that it is a minimum of four weeks following the distribution of all supporting documents to all members of the Committee. Exceptions to this rule will be made only with the consent in writing of the Director of Graduate Studies, and for truly exceptional reasons. The candidate may demonstrate competence in both fields in a single session (normally of two hours) or in two sessions (normally one hour each).

To demonstrate competence, the student prepares a set of written materials for each field, designed to show (1) breadth, scope, and depth of knowledge and understanding of the field of intellectual inquiry; and (2) ability to express complex ideas (of a methodological, theoretical, and historical sort) in a clear and concise way. The student is asked to define and elaborate the nature and scope of these fields (or areas), and to display – through written work and oral presentation – a working knowledge and understanding of the chosen fields.

In general, a specific field (or area) begins with a challenging intellectual problem or question. The candidate must define the parameters of the two separate fields that are neither too broad (i.e., encompassing more than can reasonably be considered a specialized area of research and teaching) nor too narrow (i.e., restricting the focus to a highly specialized topic or issue). The candidate must be prepared to defend the chosen definition, scope, and coherence of the field.

Area papers generally start with an exposition of what the topic is and why it is worth writing about. The student should then review the literature that she thinks will serve as the essential building blocks of her field, and conclude with a discussion of how this review/ critique/ perspective helps in understanding the world, in evaluating the relevant literature, and in pursuing research. The student should bear in mind that an area paper is not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of the field, but a mapping of the terrain and a determination of the direction one would like to take in a continuing exploration. (Titles of articles in the *Annual Review of Sociology* may offer some indication of the scope of a field.) The research, thinking, and writing of each area paper should ordinarily take no longer than six months. The student would be expected to defend both areas, submit a dissertation prospectus, and earn ABD status within eighteen months of course completion.

The two fields must be substantively and analytically distinct. One field *may* be defined in terms of temporal-spatial boundaries of historical analysis. It is not, however, appropriate to define both fields in this manner. For each separate field of inquiry, the student is asked to present (1) an *analytical overview of the area* (as described above), which can usually be achieved within 30 to 40 pages, and (2) *supporting papers*. Supporting papers may be original work; ordinarily, they are papers already submitted for courses. They should demonstrate the candidate's ability to conduct research in the field. These can take the form of position papers or "reflections," historiographical essays on particular topics, research papers, notes and commentaries, presentations of materials, and the like. However, the sum of these papers should indicate the candidate's ability to translate the broad outlines of the conceptual fields into concrete, intelligible research and analysis. In addition, the candidate must include (3) an extensive *bibliography* of relevant published materials. This bibliography must be coherent, comprehensive, inclusive of the defined area, and relatively broad. It must be organized in terms of issues, problems, debates, etc. and should not simply be an alphabetical listing of books and articles.

The candidate should also submit evidence of ability to design a course. Normally this can be done by preparing and submitting (4) a detailed *outline or syllabus* with readings for a specific course of instruction for each of the chosen fields. Candidates may think of these courses as advanced graduate seminars that focus on relatively narrow topics. The candidate should be prepared to defend the logic, coherence, and conception of the proposed course along with the order of presentation and the chosen reading materials.

If the faculty committee decide that the candidate has not yet demonstrated competence in the chosen field(s), they will suggest what kinds of further evidence (whether written or not) would be necessary to complete this stage of advancement toward the PhD degree. The candidate will submit a dissertation prospectus within six months of the Demonstration of Competence.

To support students in meeting these goals in a timely fashion the graduate program will provide optimum conditions, beginning with the orientation meeting conducted by the DGS at the time of matriculation. In the course of their study, students will be encouraged to (a) think through their particular research questions and (b) identify faculty who might serve as resources and as members of their committee in the process of defining their fields of inquiry. Once students start developing their working relationships with advisors and/or committee-members, the DGS will additionally facilitate negotiations between students and members of their future committee. The committee members will assume increasingly greater responsibility in orienting and aiding students in preparing their two areas of study and they are expected to cooperate during the research and writing process, giving timely feedback and guidance. By the time they are course completed, students should have a fairly developed conception of the content and parameters of their two fields of inquiry. The graduate program will provide a structured and clearly delineated demonstration-of-competence seminar to be offered on a regular basis in order to assist course-completed students in the final, critical stages of fleshing out and writing their two areas of study in the expected time span indicated above.