The Ph.D. comprehensive examinations are an integral part of the Ph.D. degree in Criminal Justice. They represent the part of the program that requires students to demonstrate their understanding of the central issues facing the discipline. It also requires students to have formed their own positions on these issues, to demonstrate that they have the ability to articulate and defend these positions. As such, they place an emphasis not only on what people know but also on how they can use what they know, and if they have developed an understanding of how what we know can be transformed through research, theory development, and action. The student is expected to demonstrate in the examinations their reasoned perspective on the literature in our field and their ability to integrate that literature to describe future developments.

**Content**

The Theory/Methods examination includes the history of criminological theory, meanings of and trends in theory development, contemporary theories of crime and criminal behavior, research testing these theories, and applications of these theories to types of crime (e.g., drugs, violence, white collar crime, etc.) and groups of special interest (e.g., women, minorities, juveniles, and victims). In addition, this exam will require students to relate their knowledge of the methods commonly employed in criminological research, including both quantitative and qualitative methods and analytical techniques.

**Administration**

All examinations are given twice each year (generally on the third Saturday in January and August). Each exam will be eight hours in length. Students will be given between 6 and 8 questions of which they will be required to answer four. At each offering, the Department will designate a specific tenured or tenure-track faculty member to proctor the exam process. Copies of past examinations will be kept in the Department and will be available to students to facilitate their understanding of the nature of the examinations and the expectations for their overall content.

All examinations must be word-processed. Students who elect to hand write their answers must leave the answers with the examiner at the end of the examination, then return to
the Department on the next business day to key in the exact text they have handwritten during
the examination. The text will be proofread by staff. Any variation between the two versions will
be taken as a case of academic dishonesty and may result in failure of the comprehensive exam.

**Preparation**

Preparation for the Theory/Methods comprehensive examination is facilitated by taking
required and recommended courses. These courses are not required of students before taking
exams but are offered as guides to the kinds of materials that should be covered during the
preparation. It must be understood that completion of these courses is not all that needs to be
done to prepare for comprehensive exams. In addition to satisfactory performance in course
work, the students must develop their own positions and organize the literature in a way that
leads them to be able to “profess“ the discipline.

A key thrust of the Theory/Methods comprehensive examination is the expectation that
students will be able to integrate theory and research. Students are expected to know the
“empirical status“ of each theory; that is, to what extent do existing research studies support
each theory? Students also must be able to know how to test theories. This entails mastering
two types of knowledge: first, students must know how to measure the key concepts of each
theory; second, students must know how to measure “crime“–the dependent variable in tests of
crime.

For the Theory/Methods examination, students should consider taking courses offered
as part of the Criminological Theory track (Criminology, Delinquency, Individual Theories,
Structural Theories, Criminogenic Commodities, and Violence). Courses in research and
statistical methods will also be useful in preparing for this exam (Quantitative Methods,

**Additional Exam Requirements**

In addition to coursework, students have access to suggested reading lists compiled by
the faculty for each examination. As with coursework, these reading lists are designed to be
study **guides**. In addition to the reading list, students are expected– as noted–to know the
empirical research on the theories. This task involves reading the tests of these theories that
have been undertaken and that are usually published in academic journals (some findings
appear in books). Beyond classic empirical studies, students must examine the main journals in
the field over at least the past five years to find and then read articles that assess the theories of

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crime on this reading list. These journals include (but are not necessarily limited to):
Criminology, Justice Quarterly, Journal of Quantitative Criminology, Journal of Research in
Crime and Delinquency, Theoretical Criminology, American Journal of Sociology, American
Sociological Review, and Social Forces.

Taking the Examination

No advice can be offered that will ensure a passing grade on the comprehensive
examination. Even so, it might be helpful to share some broad suggestions on the factors that
often are considered in the grading of the examination. First, it is essential that students know
the theories accurately (e.g., what the theory argues; how theorists within a tradition differ from
one another; how a theory has developed and changed over time). Too often, students simply
make statements about a theory or about a concept within a theory that are incorrect.

Second, a related difficulty is when students display a surface knowledge of the
theoretical material. Stated positively, answers that show scholarly depth are accorded higher
grades. Stated negatively, answers that are filled with broad statements—which themselves are
not supported with appropriate citations to the literature—do not show convincingly that a student
truly knows the subject matter. Remember this simple but important point: only what is written
on the exam can be graded. Professors cannot “fill in the blank” or “assume you know the
answer.”

Third, scholarly depth is shown by citing appropriate works. Note that merely providing
“a string cite”—that is, a list of works cited with no discussion of any work in detail—is not
sufficient to answer a question. In assessing the empirical status of a theory or issue, students
must be able to discuss the research analytically: what are the major points or conclusions that
can be drawn from existing studies? Further, in conveying an answer, an effort must be made to
discuss research studies in detail (e.g., the sample and measures used, specific findings, the
reason why the study illuminates an important aspect about the theory). Thus, an answer might
make a point about a theory and list several citations, and then go on to say: “For example....” -
and discuss one or two studies in detail that substantiate this point being set forth.

Fourth, citations to textbooks are forbidden (do not do it!!!). Textbooks on theory—such
as Akers’ Criminological Theories and Lilly, Cullen, and Ball’s Criminological Theory—may be
useful in helping you to organize main points about different theories and learning about a given
theory’s empirical status. These works, however, are not replacements for reading the original
theoretical contributions of the authors listed on your reading list. In your examination, you must
cite the original theoretical works and research studies.

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Grading

Comprehensive examinations will be graded by at least three tenured or tenure-track faculty with full-time appointments in the Department. Each grader will grade each question “pass” or “fail” (faculty may also make a recommendation for or against a grade of “pass with distinction”). The Department Head, or his or her designee, will tabulate scores by student in a matrix by de-identified graders. Each student will be allowed to review the matrix for their own examination, but not for other students. All examinations with 75% of the total possible score will pass. Those with less than 75% will fail.

Once a student fails a comprehensive examination, he or she must retake the exam at the next offering. A student who fails will meet with faculty members for advising about how to proceed in preparation for the second administration. A student who fails a comprehensive examination a second time shall be terminated from the doctoral program.

General Theory Readings


Biosocial Perspectives


G. Lombroso-Ferrero, “Criminal Man.”
H. Goddard, “Feeble-mindedness.”
E. Hooton, “The American Criminal.”


Psychological Perspectives

**Psychoanalytical Theory**


**Behaviorism**


**Cognition**


**Moral Development**


**Personality Traits**


**Psychopathy**


**Intelligence and Crime**


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**Classical School and Deterrence**


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Rational Choice Extensions of Deterrence Theories


**Routine Activities**


Social Support


Social Disorganization


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**Shame, Embarrassment and Social Control**


Social Disorganization


Anomie/Strain and Subcultural Theories

**Institutional Anomie**


**General Strain**


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**Differential Association/Social Learning Theories**


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**Social Control Theories**

**Early Control Theories**


**Social Bonding**


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**Self-Control v. Social Bond**


**Low Self-Control Theory**


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**Life-Course/Developmental Theories**


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**Labeling Theory**


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Conflict/Marxist and Feminist Perspectives


**Critical/Feminist**


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**Theory Integration**


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**Methods**


**Experiments**

**Self-reports**

**Research design**

*Crime Trends & UCR/NCVS*


**Statistics and Data Interpretation**

(read in order)


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