Guidelines for the PhD Program

Department of Urban and Regional Planning
University of Hawai’i Manoa

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Background

This document is the result of an extensive review of the PhD program in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning (DURP). In addition to gathering background information on the student body, the faculty reviewed admission requirements, coursework, the comprehensive examination process, and defense of the dissertation research proposal. This document reflects faculty consensus on these issues. It thus establishes guidelines for administration of the PhD program. It is also intended to help students plan and chart their way through the process of earning their doctoral degree in urban and regional planning. The faculty remains open to questions or suggestions that students may have about the guidelines, as well as the process and requirements of the department’s doctoral degree program. Students with questions or concerns about their own specific requirements and/or plan of study should discuss these matters with a faculty advisor or the chair of their committee.

I. Admission

A. Admission Criteria: Given the importance of advising in the PhD program, faculty should admit qualified students whose research interests are shared by at least one and preferably two faculty members. The second faculty member may be someone affiliated with the program on the UH Manoa campus.

B. Admission of Non-MURP Students: Students without the MURP degree or the equivalent must take either 15 or 21 credits, distributed as follow:

1. 9 credits of MURP core requirements (PLAN 600, 601, and 603);
2. 6 credits of MURP distribution requirements (PLAN 610, 620, 630, and/or 640); and
3. 6 credits of MURP planning practicum (PLAN 751) if they lack professional planning experience or a similar planning practicum.
II. Course Requirements

A. **Credit Requirements:** A minimum of 15 credits is required, but these are in addition to any deficits removed by taking MURP core courses. The principal adviser and committee can make suggestions for further course work should students need more than 15 credits due to gaps in knowledge about subjects in either the comprehensive exam or the dissertation. The student needs to decide whether or not to take these courses.

B. **Study Plan:** In consultation with the principal adviser, the PhD student should prepare a working ‘Study Plan’. Its purpose is to put a calendar on courses to be taken, as well as proposed dates for taking the comprehensive exam and presenting the proposal for dissertation research. By the start of the student’s second year, the Study Plan should also include: (a) a working title and abstract for the dissertation, (b) identification of the principal fields of study; and (c) the identity of the student’s faculty committee. The status of the Study Plan is indicative rather than contractual. It should be updated at least every semester and periodically discussed with the principal advisor and committee members.

C. **Student Feedback on Courses, Instruction, and Advising:** Students have a number of ways to evaluate their educational experiences at DURP. Surveys are periodically taken and meetings among PhD students are convened to provide opportunities for shared discussion and understanding. The faculty encourages PhD students to have their own student association in tandem with MURP students affiliated with University Students of Urban and Regional Planning (USURP). In addition, a representative of the PhD students is encouraged to attend departmental faculty meetings. To become more familiar with the research of the faculty, the association of PhD students may invite faculty to present and discuss their research in an open forum.

III. The Comprehensive Examination

A. **Components of the Comprehensive Exam:** The examination has the following parts:

1. Completion of two courses: PLAN 602: Advanced Planning Theory and PLAN 655: Advanced Planning Methods and Models. Each course must be completed with a minimum grade of B (not B-).

2. Satisfactory completion of a written examination, which focuses on the student’s identified areas of concentration (normally a principal field and one or two sub-fields). The exam should test the student’s scope of knowledge in these subjects, in terms of theories and/or methods associated with each field, as well as policy applications and practical considerations in real world settings. The exam is open book and typically takes five days (i.e., Monday through Friday). It is not linked to a student’s PhD dissertation proposal.
B. **Preparation:** A PhD student should work with all members of his or her committee to prepare for the comprehensive exam. The student should initially identify fields of study to be tested in the exam and should actively consult with their committee chair to identify potential faculty members, both inside and outside the department, who have expertise in these fields. Ideally, the student should have taken courses from every committee member before the exam.

C. **Memorandum of Understanding:** Once the student has identified a comprehensive exam committee, the student should prepare a written ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ (MOU). The memorandum should identify the student’s principal field and subfields of study, and the body of literature (i.e. a list of books and articles) associated with each. The purpose of this memorandum is twofold. First, it should help students to identify what may become their areas of expertise in planning. Second, it should alert faculty to topics that ought be included on the comprehensive examination. Therefore, the memorandum must be completed prior to taking the comprehensive exam and should be signed by the student and all faculty members of the committee. In preparing the MOU, the student should seek the assistance of each committee member in compiling bibliographies and in identifying key theoretical issues and debates relevant to each field of planning. At its discretion, the committee may then ask the student to prepare discussion papers or course syllabi, if it believes these preparations will assist the student in preparing for and passing the exam. While it is assumed that the principal adviser plays a major role in advising his or her students, both the adviser and student should ensure that the entire committee participates in fully developing the student’s principal fields of study.

D. **Exam Administration:** The student’s principal adviser shall administer the exam process.

E. **Writing of the Comprehensive Exam:** The exam committee should consist of three to five faculty members. A majority of the committee must hold appointments in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning. The student’s principal adviser invites the entire committee to submit one or more questions for the examination, and should try to format the exam so that the student has an opportunity to answer at least one question from each committee member.

F. **Results and Evaluation:** The committee should either (a) submit written comments to the principal adviser who compiles and edits them for the student, and/or (b) present them orally to the student at a post-exam meeting. In either case, the adviser should write a summary of comments to identify strengths and weaknesses of the student’s responses for departmental records. If a student’s responses to exam questions are not deemed satisfactory, the student may be given an opportunity to retake the comprehensive exam at the discretion of the examination committee.
IV. **PhD Proposal and Advancement to Candidacy**

A. **Dissertation Committee:** Following successful completion of the comprehensive examination, the student consults with his or her principal adviser in selecting a dissertation research committee. The committee should consist of at least five members, three of which should hold appointments in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning.

B. **Dissertation Proposal:** The student must present a dissertation proposal to his or her committee at an open forum. The principal adviser should ensure that the student’s dissertation committee has been given an opportunity to review and provide comments on the proposal prior to presentation in an open forum. Official acceptance of the proposal by the committee (i.e., signatures on the appropriate forms) will qualify the student for advancement to PhD candidate status (i.e., satisfaction of all departmental requirements except for the dissertation), subject to completion of other credit and residency requirements of the University of Hawai’i.

V. **Records and Documents**

In addition to official University of Hawai’i forms, the following records or documents should be kept in student files at DURP:

- Copies of the ‘Study Plan’ and ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ described above
- A copy of the comprehensive examination questions
- A copy of the student’s answers to all comprehensive exam questions
- A copy of the grades and comments on the comprehensive exam as summarized by the student’s principal adviser