

Environment and Community M.A. in Social Science Graduate Program Comprehensive Exam Proposal

(approved by ICC May, 2021)

Proposed Changes*

The Environment and Community M.A. in Social Science graduate program seeks permission to offer our graduate students the option of taking a comprehensive exam to satisfy the requirements of completing a culminating experience. Hitherto, the E&C program has required students to complete a thesis or project. The proposed comprehensive exam option would be a third pathway for students to satisfy the culminating experience requirement. Title 5 Section 40510 of the California Administrative Code of Regulations, which lays out the requirements of the master's degree within the CSU system, describes the comprehensive exam in this manner:

(C) A comprehensive examination is an assessment of the student's ability to integrate the knowledge of the area, show critical and independent thinking, and demonstrate mastery of the subject matter. The results of the examination evidences independent thinking, appropriate organization, critical analysis and accuracy of documentation. A record of the examination questions and responses shall be maintained in accordance with the records retention policy of The California State University.

The proposed E&C comprehensive exam will be administered at the end of the fourth semester. It will have a written and an oral component, which together will cover the program's subject matter as described in our program learning outcomes (see below for our PLOs). Students electing this option will work with their comprehensive exam committee (formed when they advance to candidacy) during the fourth semester of the program to identify and research a suitable case study around which the exam questions will be organized. Students will register for EC 691 Comprehensive Exam (see new course proposal 20-984) (3 units) with their committee chair to provide a structured format for developing the case study, identifying suitable resources, and communicating information about the structure of the exam. In consultation with the committee members, the committee chair will prepare suitable questions for the student. At least one question will focus on the relevant analytical frameworks and ask the student to develop what would be considered a literature review. A second question will concern epistemology, methodology and research methods. Other questions will be developed that focus on key aspects of the case study. No more than eight questions will be on the exam. These questions will be provided to the student in week 10 of the spring semester. The student will have four weeks to prepare written answers to the questions. The total length of answers to all the questions should not exceed 40-50 double spaced pages. The oral component of the comprehensive exam will take place during week 14 of the semester, with all committee members present. During this portion of the exam the student will be asked to summarize key insights from the written answers they prepared. Committee members may also ask additional questions of the student that relate to the case study and the program learning outcomes. Following the oral portion of the exam, the committee members will meet to evaluate and score both the written and oral components against the program's student learning outcomes (see rubric below). A passing score requires that the student earn at least a "1" on each of the evaluated criteria and a minimum total score of 8. Following successful completion of the comprehensive exam, the committee chair and members will complete and submit the Comprehensive Exam Completion Form. Records of the exam questions and answers will be retained for five years in accordance with the records retention policy of the California State University.

For those students who elect to do a thesis or project for their culminating experience, this comprehensive exam proposal would have no effect on any of their E&C program requirements. Students choosing the comprehensive exam option would be required to take, in addition to EC 691 (3 units) mentioned above, two additional graduate seminars (three units each). These nine units of coursework will substitute for the six thesis/project units (EC 690) and three field research units (EC 695) that they will not take, and thus maintain the required 36 units required for the degree

program. Please see below for the E&C Program Learning Outcomes, the proposed exam scoring rubric, and a sample exam.

Appendix Materials

A) Program Learning Outcomes

1. Students can analyze the environmental and social implications of political and economic institutions, discourses, organizations, and movements.
2. Students can analyze issues of race, class, gender, culture, place and power in environment-community relationships.
3. Students can demonstrate an understanding of ecological processes and their relevance to environment and community relationships.
4. Students can apply diverse approaches to social science research and action.
5. Students demonstrate effective written and oral communication.

B) Scoring Rubric

Student Learning Outcome	Score
Present an analysis of the environmental and social implications of political and economic institutions, discourses, organizations or movements.	(0, 1, or 2)
Present an intersectional analysis of race, class, gender, culture, place and power in environment-community relationships.	
Identify and explain key ways of understanding ecological processes and their relevance to environment and community relationships.	
Demonstrate understanding of qualitative or quantitative methodology and methods, including discussion of epistemology and positionality, as appropriate.	
Demonstrate effective written communication skills in terms of organization and writing craft.	

Demonstrate effective oral communication skills in visual aids, speaking skills and response to questions.

Scoring: 0 = not demonstrated; 1 = demonstrated; 2 = mastered

C) Sample Exam Questions

Case study (developed in consultation with comprehensive exam committee chair and members): “The Proposed Terra Gen Wind Energy Project in Humboldt County: Colonization, Decolonization and Resistance.”

Describe the key dimensions of the proposed TerraGen wind energy project, including the project characteristics, the key players and the issues and concerns at stake. What arguments do the developers mobilize in support of the project? What arguments do those who oppose the project, including the Wiyot Tribe, make?

1. Review the relevant literature concerning environmental justice, settler colonialism, decolonization, community-based activism and alternative energy production as it relates to this case study.
2. How do discourses of crisis (global warming, capitalism) support the project proponents and their supporters, e.g. mainstream environmental organizations? In what ways do these arguments reinforce colonial relations of extraction and repression?
3. Analyze the arguments of the Wiyot Tribe against the project. What insights regarding interrelationships among race, place, power and culture emerge from these arguments?
4. Analyze the formal and informal decision-making processes and arenas in this case. Your analysis should include a discussion of the roles protest and resistance played.
5. How do culturally rooted, place-based understandings of ecology contrast with understandings rooted in western science within this case?
6. What would be the primary characteristics of a participatory action approach to activist research on this topic? Discuss issues relating to methodology, methods, positionality and epistemology.
7. What might a decolonized, antiracist approach to wind energy development in Humboldt County look like?

Offering students the option of electing to take a rigorous comprehensive exam offers both short and long term benefits. In the short term, some of our students are unable to pursue field research for a thesis or project due to the limitations and challenges that covid-19 represents. Social science research and in particular, forms of research requiring extensive interaction with individuals such as ethnographic approaches, unstructured interviews, and participant observation, is quite challenging during the

pandemic. Indeed, there has been significant discussion of the barriers and public health and ethical issues associated with trying to conduct these forms of social science research during the pandemic (Gunel et al., 2020, Wood et al., 2020). These issues are especially prominent when students wish to work with vulnerable or marginalized communities, as it is those communities that are most affected by the pandemic and usually have less time and energy with which to engage with a graduate student research project. Therefore, in the short run, offering a comprehensive exam option will, for some students, contribute to their ability to successfully complete their degree requirements and graduate in a timely fashion.

A comprehensive exam also provides long term benefits because it diversifies paths to success and enhances accessibility, while maintaining academic rigor and integrity. Provost Jenn Capps has recently reiterated this principle as one that should guide academic programming at HSU. In prior years some E&C students, after successfully completing all required coursework, are not able to complete most or all of their field research due to factors beyond their control. Without recourse to a comprehensive exam option, they have had to leave the program without their graduate degree, despite having invested significant time, money and effort. Providing a robust comprehensive exam option, as described in this proposal, will provide a viable pathway for such students to successfully earn their master's degree.

Gunel, Gunel, Saiba Varma, Chika Watanabe. 2020. Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography Society for Cultural Anthropology. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>

Wood, Elisabeth Jean, Douglas Rogers, K. Sivaramakrishnan, Rene Almeling. 2020. Resuming Field Research in Pandemic Times. Items: Insights from the Social Sciences, SSRC. <https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/social-research-and-insecurity/resuming-field-research-in-pandemic-times/>.

We decided to pursue developing a comprehensive exam option after a variety of self-assessments. These include:

- a. analysis of the reasons why some students in the program complete all course requirements, advance to candidacy and begin the process of field research, but do not complete the program;
- b. discussions at Environment and Community M.A. program faculty meetings beginning in spring semester, 2020 and continuing over the summer about the challenges our graduate students face conducting fieldwork during the pandemic;
- c. reading and discussing published literature about the challenges of mixed methods qualitative social science research during the pandemic.

E&C program faculty have worked assiduously over the last 5 years to improve graduation rates among our students. While it remains quite difficult for our students to complete all required coursework and a

thesis or project in four semesters, most of our students are able to successfully complete all degree requirements in a fifth or sometimes a sixth semester. For example, of the 13 students in the 2018 cohort, only four completed all degree requirements in four semesters; most of them are on track to finish this academic year, covid-19 related disruptions notwithstanding. However, within each cohort, there are some individuals who will not complete and defend their thesis or project due to extenuating circumstances beyond their control; they are the ones who would benefit the most from a comprehensive exam option. The table below indicates how many students from recent cohorts have yet to finish their degree. These students have completed all degree requirements except the thesis or project. These are the students who would be able to successfully earn their master's degree if an exam option was available to them.

	Cohort (start year)				
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
# of students who completed all course requirements but not the thesis/project	4	1	1	2	3

The proposed comprehensive exam option is both a formative and a summative assessment. The formative assessment relates to the research and learning that occurs as the student researches the case study developed through consultation with the comprehensive exam committee. Building on the foundations laid through successfully taking our required graduate seminars, the case study and associated questions are designed to deepen and demonstrate students' understanding of our student learning outcomes. This includes researching the case study, the writing undertaken while preparing answers to the exam questions, and the oral presentation to the exam committee. The summative assessment is comprised of the exam committee's review and evaluation of the student's written answers as well as of the student's oral presentation. Both of these forms of assessment allow students to develop their abilities to satisfy our program's student learning outcomes (see above table), which in turn reflect the HSU graduate student learning outcomes.