

FGSR Professional Development Student Life Module



Surviving the Candidacy Examination

The mere sound of the word, 'candidacy', might send shivers down a graduate student's back. Indeed, the candidacy examination is the revered rite-of-passage that all PhD candidates must go through in order to graduate.

Different universities, faculties and departments have their own set of regulations pertaining to this examination. At the University of Alberta, a candidacy examination usually consists of some sort of oral questioning session administered to the candidate by a panel of faculty members.

Although there is no straight-forward formula for passing the candidacy exam, there are various sources that you can learn from to make the most out of the experience.

See 'Other Resources' below for a list of excellent advices offered by a UofA faculty member, Dr. Colleen Cassady St. Clair, professor from Biological Sciences, on how to prepare for a candidacy exam.

“No point mulling over impending exams, rather,
dive your brain activities straight into studying.”
--Anonymous

Tips

1. Practice makes perfect

Prepare predictable questions and try to answer them vocally. By voicing out, you'll get a sense of your own ability to articulate ideas into words efficiently. Set up study sessions with fellow graduate students or your supervisor, if possible.

2. Give yourself enough time

It is important that you take time to study. You should only do your candidacy when you are ready.

3. Seek Advice

Studying for your candidacy can be a lonely experience, and as a result you might feel overwhelmed and suffer from anxiety. Try to stay calm and take the process a day at a time. It can also be beneficial to reach out to other students who had taken the exam before and seek advices from them.

4. Practice healthy study habits

Preparing for your candidacy is certainly stressful and time consuming. Nevertheless, it is advisable to maintain a healthy state of mind and body during this period. Fit exercise routines into your studying sessions and eat healthy foods in a timely manner.

5. Ask your supervisor

Should you have questions about the exam, do not hesitate to approach your supervisor or senior students who have gone through the exam. Some supervisors help their students with mock practice exams.

6. Try to make the most out of the experience

The exam is designed to attest your qualities as a PhD candidate: critical thinking abilities, oral communication skills as well as leadership potentials. The committee members are there to help you advance in your academic career, not pit for your downfall.

Activities to Do On Your Own

- Request senior graduate students or friends who have taken their candidacy exams to test you with questions every day, a couple of weeks before your exam. It could be related to your field of study or theirs, the point is to practice listening and answering to question.
 - Divide your thesis into the different categories that each examiner may take for questioning. Prepare questions that they may ask.
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Other Resources

- <http://www.gradstudies.ualberta.ca/gradmanual/eight.htm>
- http://www.biology.ualberta.ca/faculty/colleen_cassady_stclair/uploads/advice_for_grad_students/candidacy_exams_comments_Nov_06.pdf
- <http://education.guardian.co.uk/egweekly/story/0,5500,1042654,00.html>