

# Doctoral Comprehensive Exams in Marketing: Current Practices and Emerging Perspectives

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*Current and emerging issues concerning the written comprehensive exam process are addressed. Both the purpose and structure of this exam are considered. Survey results are presented that describe the purposes of the exam from the perspective of doctoral coordinators. Also included is a description of how marketing departments are currently administering these exams. The movement to nontraditional exam structures is documented, and a description of several of these nontraditional approaches is provided. The authors conclude with a discussion of comprehensive exam issues and provide a recommendation for ongoing assessments of exam choices based on specific program objectives.*

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**Keywords:** *doctoral education; comprehensive examination*

Doctoral programs are under continuous pressure to justify their mission, their training and their graduates' success.

—Bearden et al. (2000, p. 1)

Doctoral education in marketing has received much attention in the recent past. Institutional requirements, market forces, and student and faculty concerns have all contributed to this increased emphasis. Most national marketing organizations host some form of doctoral consortium designed to provide students with insights into research, teaching, and service—the three elements essential to an academic career—as well as how expectations in these areas have continued to shift throughout time. The American Marketing Association (AMA), Society for Marketing Advances, and Association for Consumer Research each host a doctoral consortium. Individual schools or a collection of schools also host doctoral student symposiums, such as the Nebraska Marketing Doctoral Symposium, the University of Houston Doctoral Symposium, and the Albert Haring Doctoral Symposium held at Indiana University. Specialty organizations such as the Council of Logistics Management and Management Science also sponsor a doctoral consortium. Furthermore, a number of sessions at recent national marketing conferences focusing on doctoral issues related to career

development, teaching, and research suggest the growing interest in addressing the needs of this important audience. Sessions entitled “Doctoral Education Best Practices” and “Doctoral Education in the 21st Century” indicate that there is great interest in the state of the art with respect to doctoral education in marketing.

The primary purpose of this article is to explore one facet of marketing doctoral education—the written comprehensive examination—and to ascertain existing and emerging perspectives with respect to its purpose and structure. To accomplish these objectives, this article is organized as follows. First, we review the limited literature on the topic and present our research questions. We then report the method used to study this topic—which involves an e-mail survey of current doctoral coordinators in marketing in the United States. Next, we report and discuss the results of our survey. Finally, we describe in greater detail a few of the more nontraditional structures that some universities have adopted and conclude with some thoughts about issues concerning the comprehensive exam process.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Doctoral Education in Marketing

The doctoral degree that is awarded by American universities is a research-oriented degree that certifies that the recipient has capabilities and training for independent scholarly work (Isaac et al. 1992). Bearden et al. (2000), as quoted earlier, suggested that doctoral programs, including those in marketing, are under continuous pressure to justify their mission, training, and graduates' success. Much advice has been given to doctoral students and recent graduates concerning various aspects of doctoral instruction (Alutto 1993; American Marketing Association [AMA] Task Force 1988; Bearden et al. 2000; Ferrell 1990; Hair 1990; Mason 1990; Roach et al. 1994; West 1992; Woodruff and Cravens 1990), including the development of teaching skills (Conant et al. 1988; Griffith 1997; Hershey et al. 1996; Smart et al. 2003), dissertation success (Smart and Conant 1990), and socialization/integration into the world of academia (Berry 1989; Conant et al. 1998; Lusch 1982; Smart and Conant 1990; Trocchia and Berkowitz 1999).

Another important aspect of doctoral instruction involves proper training in developing original research, because this is a key requirement for academic career advancement (Ganesh and Tripathy 1996). A number of researchers have considered how this aspect of faculty life can be fostered both in the doctoral program and in the early stages of an individual's career (Conant et al. 1998; Motes 1989; Swan and Martin 1994). Survey results from Bearden et al. (2000) led them to suggest that changes to the doctoral program are needed to adapt to the challenges of the future, including consideration of doctoral program breadth and depth.

Ideally, departments and schools must determine the mission for their program as well as set specific objectives for the various activities in which doctoral students are involved. From coursework to assistantships, from comprehensive exams to the dissertation process, each step and activity should usefully allow students to hone skills needed for a productive academic career. Faculty members must consider each phase of doctoral education and decide specifically what students should accomplish at each phase. Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Bloom 1994; Bloom et al. 1956) provides a useful framework for classifying learning objectives that are crucial for doctoral students to master.

### Educational Objectives

Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom 1994; Bloom et al. 1956) provides a framework for better understanding the purposes and processes of education in general. It may also be applied to better understand the purposes and processes that are specific to doctoral degree attainment. Although this taxonomy entails three domains (cognitive, affective, and psychomotor), it is the cognitive domain that encompasses those objectives specifically related to doctoral education (Loughead

1997). According to Bloom's taxonomy, there are six levels of objectives in the cognitive domain. Lower order objectives include (1) knowledge, defined as the ability to remember ideas, material, or phenomena by recognition or recall; (2) comprehension, which involves the understanding, proper translation, and/or proper interpretation of ideas; and (3) application, which is the demonstration of an abstraction in the proper context (Bloom et al. 1956). Higher order learning objectives are (4) analysis, or the ability to delineate the parts from the whole and to detect relationships among the parts, including the ability to recognize unstated assumptions, to distinguish fact from hypotheses, to distinguish cause-and-effect relationships from other sequential relationships, and to infer an author's concept of science or philosophy; (5) synthesis, which involves the organization of ideas and statements in writing, the ability to propose new ways of testing hypotheses, and the integration of results to find a solution or solve a problem; and (6) evaluation, which includes the formation of judgments about the value of ideas, solutions, and methods (Bloom et al. 1956). These levels are hierarchical in nature; that is, they are ordered from simple and concrete objectives to more complex and abstract objectives. As one moves to a higher objective, it is necessary to have mastered the skills and abilities that precede it (Loughead 1997).

In addition to the six educational objectives, Bloom's taxonomy emphasizes the generalizability of the higher order cognitive objectives stated above. This means that one is able to take existing problems and knowledge and apply them to a wide range of situations that have not been encountered before (Bloom et al. 1956). In other words, the ability to apply these critical-thinking skills to create *original* research is emphasized. In a doctoral context, students' abilities to conduct original research are an indication of their capacities to generalize the six educational objectives. The dissertation is the ultimate tool available for evaluating the extent to which the student has mastered this capability.

Each of these six objectives (and their generalizability) may also be ascertained through administration of the written comprehensive exam. These exams are typically broad and integrative in scope, with general purposes including the following: (1) an evaluation of students' comprehensive knowledge of the field, (2) an opportunity for students to integrate their learning, (3) enabling students to solve problems, and (4) providing a rite of passage (Anderson 1994; Burck and Peterson 1983; Manus et al. 1992). A study by Franke and Kahn (1992) on the use and purpose of the written comprehensive exam reveals that respondents (consisting of marketing doctoral coordinators) felt that the most important purpose of the comprehensive exam was to test students' abilities to synthesize information in developing research ideas. Because preparing for this important exam involves considerable study time, effort, and stress on students, it is certainly worthwhile for faculty members to have a clear picture of what they want to accomplish with such an exam.

We seek to address current and emerging perspectives relative to the written comprehensive exam. First, what is its purpose? In other words, what should students demonstrate to successfully pass this exam? Second, what exam structures are being used to test students' cognitive skills? Recent research by Bearden et al. (2000) reveals that programs may be moving away from the traditional structure of a 1- or 2-day, closed-book exam to a more nontraditional approach. If this is the case, what motivations do faculty members have for making these changes? And, finally, what are the specific structures of these less traditional approaches? The next section addresses the method used to examine these questions.

## METHOD

### Sample

Our sampling frame consisted of the complete list of marketing doctoral coordinators at universities with marketing doctoral programs in the United States. The doctoral student special interest group of the AMA provided this list, which included 97 coordinators. We view doctoral coordinators as the best key informants because they are knowledgeable about the issues being researched and would be the most able and willing to communicate about them (Kumar et al. 1993).

### Survey Instruments

Two survey instruments were used. The full survey instrument was pretested with doctoral coordinators at four institutions. Revisions based on these pretests produced a more focused instrument. In addition to the full survey instrument, a shortened version was developed for those coordinators who did not respond to the initial full survey after several reminders.

The full survey contained a variety of closed- and open-ended questions designed to ascertain institutional/program philosophy and practice relative to doctoral comprehensive exams. The closed-ended questions covered (1) the presence or absence of a first-year qualifying exam or oral exam, (2) the length of time the current written comprehensive exam structure had been in use, (3) if the structure had changed within the prior 10 years, and (4) if it had changed, perceptions as to how the new written exam structure affected students' preparation for dissertation work and for the job market. For classification purposes, respondents were also asked questions regarding the number of years they had served as doctoral coordinator, the number of years the marketing doctoral program had been in existence, and the average number of marketing doctoral students graduated per year.

The open-ended questions encouraged respondents to elaborate on their program's philosophy and specific practices relative to the written comprehensive exam. To assess the purpose and structure of these exams, respondents were asked two sets of open-ended questions. The first set of ques-

tions concerned the written comprehensive exam currently used and covered (1) the purpose of the exam, (2) details of the current exam structure, (3) the doctoral coordinator's perceptions and feelings regarding it, and (4) whether any changes in exam structure were anticipated. A second set of open-ended questions was addressed to programs that changed their written comprehensive exam procedure within the past 10 years. They covered (1) the details regarding the previously used exam structure, (2) the reasons for the change, and (3) the presence of any opposition to the change.

A second, shortened survey was e-mailed to all doctoral coordinators who did not respond to the full survey. The first set of questions covered (1) whether the program had a written comprehensive examination, and (2) if one was not used, what was done in its place and how long this procedure was in existence. The second set of questions was for programs using a written comprehensive examination and covered (1) how long this structure has been in use, (2) details regarding its structure, and (3) whether there were plans to change it.

### Procedure

The survey was conducted in April and May 2002 via an e-mail questionnaire. An e-mail containing a cover letter and the full survey instrument (as both an e-mail message and as a Microsoft Word attachment) was sent to all 97 marketing doctoral coordinators. The cover letter explained the purpose of the study, provided contact information if respondents had any questions, and requested their participation. To increase the response rate, respondents were assured confidentiality. Also, as an incentive, respondents were offered results of the study.

Reminder e-mails containing an additional copy of the full survey instrument were sent to coordinators who had not yet responded approximately 2 weeks and 4 weeks after the initial full-survey mailing. Six weeks after the full survey was first sent, the shortened survey instrument was e-mailed to all coordinators who had not responded to the full survey. Yet another reminder e-mail with the shortened survey instrument included was sent to coordinators who had not yet responded to either the full or the shortened survey instrument approximately 2 weeks later.

Of the 97 doctoral coordinators contacted, 48 individuals responded. A total of 32 full and 16 shortened surveys were received. These, along with the four pretest surveys, yielded an effective response rate of 53.6%. One doctoral coordinator indicated that his institution's program was new and that they had not yet made decisions regarding the written comprehensive exam. After removing this survey, the remaining 51 respondents represented a usable response rate of 52.6%. The findings of the study are therefore based on responses from 51 doctoral coordinators. This response rate is very good, especially given the small population of doctoral coordinators. We also conducted five telephone interviews after the

surveys were completed to get additional details on program approaches discussed here. Permission was received by these coordinators to reveal details about their programs' policies and procedures regarding the exam. There was one new school represented among these interviews, and one of the author's schools is represented when applicable, bringing the total to 53 respondents for the questions of interest.

Of the 32 respondents completing usable full surveys with classification questions, 56% represented doctoral programs that had been in existence for more than 10 years, 12% represented programs that had been in existence for 7-10 years, 16% represented programs in existence for 3-6 years, and 16% represented those in existence for fewer than 3 years. Ninety-two percent of the programs graduated between one to three doctoral students per year on average. The average number of years of doctoral coordinator experience was six. As coordinators have likely been involved with their program's written comprehensive exam process prior to their service as the doctoral coordinator, this experience level is likely understated. The degree of coordinator experience suggests that respondents were knowledgeable about their institution's/program's philosophy and procedures regarding the written comprehensive exam.

## RESULTS

### Purpose of the Exam

Respondents who completed the full survey were asked to describe what they felt is the purpose of the written comprehensive exam. These responses were content analyzed and grouped into the categories that appear in Table 1. It is interesting to note the differences in responses by those with and without closed-book exam structures.

Testing broad-based knowledge and comprehension of the marketing literature (lower order skills according to Bloom's taxonomy) emerged as the primary consideration for evaluating students' performance. Examples of this type of response are as follows:

[The purpose is] to encourage and motivate lots of reading . . . and to test the ability to demonstrate familiarity with the literature in marketing.

I think comps insure that the student has attained a broad-based knowledge of a particular area. You're never as knowledgeable as right after you've taken the comps.

A higher order objective, the ability to synthesize the literature and find common themes, was also an often-reported purpose of the exam. Being able to assemble literature from the various doctoral seminars and integrate the ideas so that the big picture is seen is essential to demonstrate that students have a broad perspective of the entire field:

The major goal, in my view, is to provide an opportunity/goal to integrating the literature in the field—i.e., getting the big picture. In many ways, studying for the exam is much more important than the answers themselves.

[The purpose is] to make sure the student has assimilated the key information from all his/her doctoral seminars and can integrate the ideas and findings thoughtfully and usefully.

Respondents also felt that synthesis was important because it helps the student to see the "holes" that exist in the literature. The ability of students to integrate literature across the functional areas of marketing as well as across disciplines is a valuable step in the process of developing independent research. Particularly as the marketing literature proliferates, the ability to combine the "parts" so that they produce a well-integrated structure is critical if students are to properly evaluate existing work, including the identification of gaps in the literature. This, in turn, is essential to students developing their own relevant research agendas.

The third most reported purpose of the exam was to test the student's ability to conduct independent research, including the design and development of original ideas. This purpose, historically reserved for the dissertation process (Isaac et al. 1992), fits with Bloom's (Bloom et al. 1956) emphasis on the generalizability of higher order thinking skills. One respondent stated:

[The purpose is] to test the student's ability to come up with original research ideas and models. Thus, the exam allows us to test the student's creativity.

It should be noted that this was the number one stated purpose for those programs that have adopted a more nontraditional structure to the exam.

Some other stated purposes include the following: to determine if students can think creatively, conceptually, and critically; to motivate and incite students to read/probe the literature; and to prepare students for scholarly academic life.

### Structure of the Exam

Table 2 shows the various exam structures currently in use. Of the 53 programs represented by the respondents, 28 have a traditional closed-book exam, whereas 4 others have a traditional format but allow for open books and open notes. Respondents with programs offering this type of exam structure agreed that it is a proven method of testing the student's knowledge of the extant literature. Specifically, the traditional-style comp is viewed as a way to motivate students to master the content of the field in specific areas outside of their own personal interests. By studying for this type of exam, students become knowledgeable about the entire body of literature in the marketing field, not just those articles discussed in doctoral seminars. One respondent summed up the positives and negatives of this approach as follows:

**TABLE 1**  
**PURPOSE OF DOCTORAL WRITTEN COMPREHENSIVE EXAM**

<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Answers from Programs with Closed-Book Exam</i>	<i>Answers from Programs with All Other Comp Exam Structures</i>	<i>Total</i>
To test broad-based knowledge, familiarity, and understanding of the literature/research done in the marketing field	15	8	23
To test students' ability to synthesize and integrate literature and find common themes	10	8	18
To test if students can conduct independent research, including the design of original ideas, original models, and dissertation research	4	10	14
To determine if students can think creatively, conceptually, and critically	4	1	5
To motivate and incite students to read/probe the literature	2	2	4
To prepare students for scholarly academic life	2	2	4
To weed out students not previously "caught" by coursework	1	2	3
To ensure that students are well-rounded methodologically	1	1	2
To test students' ability to solve marketing problems and move the field forward	2	0	2
Other			
Rite of passage	1		1
To have a standardized mechanism for evaluating students		1	1
Grand total <sup>a</sup>	42	35	77

a. Grand total exceeds sample size due to multiple responses from some doctoral coordinators.

**TABLE 2**  
**STRUCTURES OF DOCTORAL  
COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS**

<i>Type of Structure</i>	<i>Total</i>
Traditional	
Closed book	28
Open book	4
Total traditional	32
Nontraditional	
Original paper	7
Take home, extended time	2
Article critique	1
Combinations	
Open book with article critique	3
Original paper with article critique	2
Both open and closed book	2
Both open and closed book with article critique	1
Either closed or open book	1
Open book, original paper, and article critique	1
Total nontraditional	20
No exam	1
Grand total	53

Positives are it takes the evaluation of the student to a much higher level than the level at which they are tested in class. It also forces students to acquire a base-level knowledge that otherwise may not have happened. A negative is that it does not give any indication of publication potential of the student.

Another respondent agreed, but stated his or her feelings in a stronger manner:

Positives . . . it insures a general knowledge. Negatives . . . [i]s it necessary? Does it help candidates with their careers? It also takes time for the candidate to study and it is a close call as to whether that time would be better spent studying and attaining a general knowledge or writing papers on specific topics.

Therefore, the traditional-style comprehensive exam is given by the majority of respondents. Those administering this type of exam agreed that it is a good way to test general knowledge (a lower order learning objective), and many saw no negatives to the current structure or any reason to change it. Some, however, questioned how well this type of exam captures students' conceptualization skills and abilities to design original research projects.

Twenty programs offer some form of nontraditional exam structure. The most popular is the development of an original paper. Seven respondents stated that their program requires an original paper with the possibility that it could be further developed into a dissertation. With respect to the pros and cons of this nontraditional approach, one respondent summarized by stating the following:

The positive aspect is quite clear; it will help the student launch his [*sic*] thesis and hopefully a highly productive research career. A negative aspect may be that the student is not able to display knowledge in various topics other than the topics pursued in his thesis.

Thus, the positives and negatives of this type of structure are different than the positives and negatives associated with the traditional comp structure. By using an original paper

requirement, programs may be sacrificing the emphasis of lower order cognitive learning objectives (knowledge and comprehension) to emphasize higher order learning objectives.

Other nontraditional structures currently in use are a take-home exam with extended time for the students to complete it, a critique of an existing article found in the marketing literature, or some combination of formats. One program does not require any type of written comprehensive exam but rather is focused on greater student evaluation during their seminars.

### Changes in Exam Structures

Table 3 presents the nature of the structural change for the 16 respondents who have changed formats within the past 10 years. As might be expected, the changes reflect a shift from a closed-book traditional structure to something different, such as a focus on specialized topics, an open-book take-home exam, or an original paper. In addition to those who have already changed exam structures, four other respondents reported that they were contemplating a change in structure; two were considering moving from a closed- to open-book exam, one from a closed-book exam to writing an original paper, and one from an open-book to a take-home exam. The most consistent reasons for changing exam structures revolve around getting students better prepared for and thinking about their dissertations sooner.

With an original paper, students are typically expected to develop theoretical propositions that are empirically testable as well as provide implications and priorities for future research in the area. One respondent stated the reason for recently changing from a traditional structure to an original paper:

We wanted to emphasize original research more and sooner. We had people finishing comps with zero idea of what they wanted for a dissertation topic. This way, at least, they have done a significant research project from proposal to completion.

For this respondent's program, the oral presentation of the student's research to the faculty is, in effect, an oral exam. By requiring an original paper, it has reduced the amount of time that students spend in the program by about a year.

In addition to helping students focus on a dissertation topic sooner, some respondents suggested that this type of evaluation procedure also allows for greater publication potential:

Our original paper is designed as a pilot study for the dissertation. It does not always work out that way, but it is an excellent exercise. Over the past 5 to 10 years, almost all of these studies have been published in journals and/or presented at conferences.

Comprehensive exams based on a combination of structures may be an option for those programs that want to assess a variety of cognitive skills. One program recently changed from a traditional format to a combination approach, requiring both a take-home exam involving the critique and extension of an assigned article in either consumer behavior or strategy, and an original research proposal in the student's area of interest. The critique is assigned to address the breadth of the field, whereas the original paper is assigned to address the depth of the field. Positives seen with this combination approach are as follows:

Students progress more quickly through the program (don't stop their progress to study for memorization-based comp), are better prepared for interviewing at AMA, and develop skills that they'll actually use as academics.

Without exception, those who have changed structures within the past 10 years felt that the change was for the better; none was contemplating a change back to a more traditional structure. These respondents felt that students are now better prepared both for the dissertation process and for interviewing on the job market. Below, we provide a more in-depth discussion of four approaches that represent a movement away from traditional exam structures.

## HIGHLIGHTED NONTRADITIONAL STRUCTURES

### Approach 1: The "Original Papers" Exam

Seven respondents indicated that their institution requires students to write a paper rather than complete a written exam at the end of their coursework. One such school is the University of Florida. They have used this nontraditional approach for more than 10 years, and the faculty members feel that it is achieving their objectives. Their approach involves two papers (before the dissertation). The first paper is called the first-year summer research project. This is their first independent project and is empirical in nature. For behavioral students, an experiment or sets of experiments are typically used. Students are required to turn in a written report to the graduate coordinator by the first day of classes of the following fall semester. Faculty members review this paper just as they would review a journal article submission. If there are major problems in a student's first year of coursework or with the summer paper, that student may then be asked to leave the program.

In the summer of the student's second year, the second paper (called a written qualifier paper) is begun. Students meet with their committee that summer and decide on a topic. A conceptual, integrative piece is then written that includes preliminary hypotheses or a proposed research agenda. This

**TABLE 3**  
**NATURE OF COMPREHENSIVE EXAM STRUCTURE CHANGE**  
**(FOR THOSE WHO CHANGED STRUCTURES 10 OR FEWER YEARS AGO)**

<i>Number of Programs</i>	<i>Changed To</i>	<i>Changed From</i>	<i>When</i>	<i>Reason for Change</i>
5	Split into specialty and general, or focus on specialty	Single exam without split	1 changed < 3 years ago; 3 changed 3-6 years ago; 1 changed 7-10 years ago	Wanted to test students' in-depth knowledge of their primary interest area and better prepare them for dissertation work
3	Original paper	Closed book	1 changed < 3 years ago; 2 changed 7-10 years ago	Wanted to emphasize original research and get students thinking about their dissertations sooner
3	Open book	Closed book	All changed 3-6 years ago	Encourage integration skills and save students study time
2	Open-book take home, extended time	Closed book	1 changed < 3 years ago; 1 changed 3-6 years ago	Wanted to better prepare students for dissertation work and get publications and proceedings as a student
1	Original paper with article critique	Closed book	Changed < 3 years ago	Wanted to get students thinking about their dissertations sooner and save students study time
1	Open book with article critique	Literature review	Changed < 3 years ago	No diagnostic value to the literature review
1	No exam	Take home	Changed < 3 years ago	Felt they could achieve better assessment of students' skills through doctoral seminars

document is generally about 60 pages in length. It is due no later than the first day of classes of the following spring semester (January of their third year). Students who fail to submit a paper by this date are assigned a failing grade. They can receive an extension but must request this in writing at least 2 weeks prior to the official submission deadline. Following the assessment of the paper by at least four faculty members, there are three possible outcomes: pass, revise, or fail. When students are asked to revise, they have 1 month to prepare a version that adequately addresses the weaknesses specified by the original graders. Once students pass this exam, the oral exam is scheduled. This oral exam is devoted to approval of the topic as the student's dissertation research area.

A school with an approach similar to Florida's is the University of South Carolina. Their program requires students to write three papers in addition to taking a first-year qualifying exam. The first-year qualifying exam is a 1-day closed-book exam based on coursework taken in the first year. This exam is given 2 weeks after the end of classes to minimize study effort (any statistical formulas needed to complete the exam are provided, for example). Then, during their first summer, students write a conceptual paper under the guidance of an assigned faculty member who is chosen based on the research interests of the student. This occurs as part of a 3-hour independent study class. This paper is graded and used as the student's course grade.

During the second summer, there is another 3-hour course with an empirical paper assignment, again supervised by a faculty member and graded. Finally, there is a third paper,

called a comp paper, which serves as the comprehensive exam requirement by the university. Students begin this in the first semester of their third year while they are finishing coursework. In the middle of the spring semester of their third year, students submit a three-chapter paper to their program committee. If approved, students defend their work 2 weeks later in oral form to their committee and other faculty members. The intent is that they are well on their way to successfully defending a dissertation proposal by June of their third year. The faculty members are comfortable with this approach and continue to evaluate it and make adjustments as needed.

#### **Approach 2: The "Extended Take-Home" Exam**

A second alternative exam structure is the extended take-home exam, which is currently in use at the University of Alabama and the University of South Florida. Faculty members at the University of Alabama decided to make this change about 5 years ago because they were frustrated with how long students (especially international students) took to prepare for such an exam—up to 6 months. Furthermore, the process seemed to lead to a 5-year program rather than the desired 4-year program. Faculty members also felt that the exam process did little to prepare students for dissertation work or to get them publishing quickly. Thus, the changes made were designed to address the above concerns. The traditional 2-day, closed-book exam was discarded. In its place, a first-year summer paper and a second-year take-home exam were implemented. Currently, the first-year summer paper is a 20-page conceptual and empirical paper that is completed by the

end of the students' first summer. Evaluation of students' performance on this paper is useful in determining their ability to continue successfully in the program.

The second-year take-home exam is considered the primary field exam and is taken at the end of the student's second year in the program. Students are given 2 weeks to answer questions from four sections: (1) theory, (2) strategy, (3) measurement/models, and (4) the student's minor area. Questions are purposefully broad in nature and often encompass several of these topical areas. Each answer is limited to 10 pages of text, although this does not include any tables, figures, or references. Students are often given data to analyze as part of a question. If students do not pass all questions, they either are asked to do remedial work or fail the exam.

The objectives of this exam approach are to minimize preparation time and to maximize the quality of the answers. These objectives appear to be accomplished—there is no time to study or prepare prior to taking the exam. Faculty members are able to ask cutting-edge questions that could potentially produce manuscripts or even dissertations. In addition, the questions are often useful in helping students to consider initial dissertation ideas. Students and faculty are pleased with both the first-year summer paper and the second-year take-home exam.

### **Approach 3: The "Specialist" Comprehensive Exam**

The University of Arkansas moved to a specialist exam in 1998. Although outwardly the format is still traditional (a 1-day closed-book exam), it is unique in that the last 4-6 months of the students' activities before the exam are focused on a specialty area of their choice, and all exam questions are focused on this specialty area. The specialist exam serves to familiarize the student with the foundational theories and methods associated with a particular research community. Several months before the exam takes place, the student and his or her committee work together to compile a reading list designed to direct the student to relevant literature. The intent of the reading list is to provide direction, not limit exploration; as new relevant literature is published during the 4- to 6-week study period, this literature should be added to the list. The exam consists of five questions, all focused on the student's chosen specialty area. The purpose of this approach is to "clearly set the foundation for dissertation research and academic identity." By encouraging the specialist perspective, faculty members feel that students become better prepared for research within a specific area.

### **Approach 4: The "No Exam—No Paper" Exam**

The most radical nontraditional approach we encountered was that of the University of Wisconsin. Until this year, they gave a 1-week take-home written field exam. Recently, how-

ever, the faculty members asked themselves, "Why are we doing this?" They decided that neither the traditional closed-book exam nor the less traditional open-book extended take-home exam met their objectives. The faculty wanted a process that would help students more effectively transition from their coursework to the dissertation stage, which requires a high degree of independent scholarship. The doctoral coordinator discussed the need to focus on admissions, that is, getting the right students up front. Faculty members felt that it would be more useful to strengthen the doctoral seminars and the evaluation occurring during these seminars rather than to concentrate on a screening effort outside of this format. They plan to add up to a semester of courses in the program, including several seminars that focus on research methods or modeling. It is felt that courses such as these will better prepare students for independent research and especially for their dissertation work.

## **DISCUSSION**

Evaluation procedures in the doctoral program have seen some major changes in the recent past. If prior studies on the subject (Franke and Kahn 1992; Jackson et al. 1986) accurately ascertained educational practices at the time, we now can see that a number of programs nationwide have shifted away from the traditional structure of closed-book exams to more nontraditional approaches. Studies by Franke and Kahn (1992) and Jackson et al. (1986) found 89% and 88% of programs used a traditional comprehensive exam, respectively. Our findings indicate that only 60% do so presently, which represents a strong shift toward nontraditional structures. That most of this change has occurred recently is also evidenced in Table 3; 16 respondents indicated that they changed the nature of their comprehensive exam structure within the past 10 years. Also, four additional programs are considering such structure changes. These are clear indications that this trend is likely to continue in the years to come.

There has also been an evolution in philosophy regarding the purpose of the comprehensive exam. Whereas comprehensive exams were once used as a screen to weed out deficient students at some schools, our study, as well as Franke and Kahn's (1992), indicate that this is no longer a major objective. Our findings relative to the purpose of the comprehensive exam fit closely with those of Franke and Kahn (1992). Although the categories are slightly different, both studies indicate that two primary purposes for the comp exam are (1) to test a broad base of marketing knowledge, and (2) to determine students' abilities to synthesize, integrate, and apply this understanding. Our study indicates an additional purpose of great importance (particularly to programs using nontraditional approaches): to test students' abilities to conduct original, independent research. Furthermore, for programs with nontraditional structures, comprehensive exams

are viewed more as a mechanism to ensure that students can apply the higher order cognitive skills (synthesis, evaluation, and originality) that are needed to conduct dissertation research and beyond.

Bloom and his colleagues (1956) proposed their Taxonomy of Educational Objectives to facilitate communication between educators. They wanted those involved in curriculum development to be able to compare and exchange evaluative devices aimed at achieving the various objectives outlined in the taxonomy. Marketing doctoral educators may also adopt this taxonomy to reexamine the goals and objectives of their programs. Specifically, what objectives should students be expected to accomplish in their seminars? What objectives should be met from the comprehensive exam process? What objectives should be demonstrated in the dissertation process? Those faculty members specifically involved with doctoral education need to continually evaluate their comprehensive exam structure—does it fit with the mission and objectives of the program? What purposes is the written comprehensive exam fulfilling? What exactly are students gaining from this experience?

We think it is a positive sign that marketing faculty are asking questions about the purposes of their exams and about the best way to achieve their program's mission and objectives. Many are finding that take-home exams, original papers, article critiques, or combinations of evaluation tools are working better than the previous approaches. We did not find one school that moved to a less traditional structure and then decided to return to its traditional structure after trying something else. Instead, the movement has been one way—away from the traditional. As Table 3 indicates, it appears that programs with less traditional structures believe that these approaches allow for a better usage and assessment of the higher order skills of analysis (synthesis, evaluation, and originality) that are needed to conduct dissertations and establish research programs. Furthermore, it appears that faculty members are satisfied enough with these changes not to move back to the more traditional approaches. When asked about their new exam structure relative to the dissertation process, 75% of those respondents who changed formats 10 or fewer years ago stated that the new format made students better prepared for dissertation work, whereas 25% felt the new format had no effect on the dissertation process. In addition, 67% felt that the new exam format has helped students to better prepare for going on the job market, whereas 33% felt the new format had no effect on the job-search process.

Many of the programs that have implemented changes are still fine-tuning them. That is, the more nontraditional exam processes now being used by programs are continuing to evolve. One disadvantage to these nontraditional approaches is that a number of programs seem to keep "tinkering" with them once they have begun this process. This means that more uncertainty and disagreement can arise in departments as to the most appropriate method to assess students. Also, in

some cases there may be resistance to the changes at other levels, such as the dean's office or other departments, which must be contended with. For example, when the University of South Florida went to a take-home exam structure a few years ago, there was some opposition from the faculty both within and outside the department, as well as from the dean. It was necessary for the doctoral coordinator to champion the new procedure by clearly delineating the rationale behind the changes. There is now general satisfaction with the change.

There may be other disadvantages to moving to nontraditional exam structures. Besides the potential opposition within the department or college, faculty members may ask if they are depriving students of the opportunity to integrate a broad range of knowledge at a deeper level than they will ever have an opportunity to achieve again. Will this specialization orientation lead to less well-informed individuals who know less about other areas of marketing and more about only specific areas? Will this give them an advantage or disadvantage in the job market? Do these nontraditional approaches suggest that the job market will dictate exam structures more than the desired learning objectives, and if so, is this worth the price? Will there be concerns by some faculty members and other departments that the revised format is not rigorous enough and, thereby, the value of the degree from that program becomes denigrated? Or could it even hinder the ability to weed out students not likely to succeed? Finally, from a faculty perspective, will the evaluation procedures be more subjective, more uncertain, and perhaps even more difficult?

## CONCLUSION

We certainly do not have answers to the above questions. We do believe that more marketing departments across the country that offer doctoral degrees will be asking some difficult questions of themselves in regard to student evaluation during the next few years and that more programs will be seriously considering alternatives to the traditional closed-book written comprehensive exam. This seems especially true given the stronger emphasis now placed on publishing by students. This emphasis is likely to increase in the future; thus, it is likely that the competitiveness of the marketplace has produced and will continue to produce changes in comprehensive exam structures. Programs must examine both changing market demands and their desire to effectively evaluate students in making comprehensive exam decisions that are right for their situation. We hope that our study will contribute to the continuing consideration as to the best methods to assess and evaluate doctoral students' progress in their programs.

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