

Motion to request to DISE Graduate Program Director for clarification of the Department's policy regarding the completion of comprehensive examinations

Background & Rationale

Since the fall of 2011, the Graduate Program Director of the Department of Integrated Studies in Education (DISE) has informed PhD students on several occasions that they should complete their comprehensive exams (comps) before the beginning of their third year, unless they are enrolled in either the Language Acquisition or Gender and Women's Studies option or have "an exceptionally heavy course load." In order to encourage students to complete their comps within this time frame, a monetary award (called the ABDULs) was created for those who successfully do so.

It has been explained to students that this newly established deadline to complete comps and award for doing so, are intended to help them to move through their PhD program within a six-year time limit. Comps have been assessed as presenting something of a 'roadblock' for some students in the past, with some becoming stalled in their progress at this stage, delaying their research and dissertation.

The language used in relation to the completion of comps has varied, and in recent months has seemed to escalate in tone.

- The requirements of the PhD program in Educational Studies presented on the DISE website state that "EDEC 701 [Comprehensive Examination] is **normally** taken at the end of the second year for Ph.D. 2 program entrants and at the end of the third year for Ph.D. 1 entrants;"
- A document available on the DISE website dated October 2012 and titled "FAQ: What are the Roles of Members of the Doctoral Advisory Committee (DAC)?" explains comps as a **process** that is "**expected to be complete before the beginning of the student's third year in the program;**"
- In a February 1st, 2013 memo sent from the Graduate Program Director to several students enrolled in the PhD Educational Studies program (no option), the GPD stated that the "program **requires** that [students] pass [their] comprehensive exams by the end of [their] second year;"
- On February 10th (6 working days later) the GPD sent several students in the PhD Educational Studies program (no option) another email, cc'd to their supervisors, reiterating the deadline by which they "need to" pass their comprehensive exams; and finally,
- Within the past two weeks the GPD has also asserted that students entering the PhD program in Educational Studies (no option) during the fall 2011 semester and thereafter will be **expelled from the program** if they have not completed their comprehensive examinations by the end of their second year.

While appreciating the importance of supporting students toward the successful completion of their program, it should also be observed that all students are not equally situated in relation to how much time they can devote to their studies. (Particularly single) parents and students who work, for example, are likely to require more time than those who do not have children to care for or who do not need to work in order to financially support themselves or others. Especially in the absence of need-based funding, less privileged students can thus be understood as less likely to benefit from awards such as the ABDULs that build on pre-existing privileges. It is difficult to imagine that it is the DISE's intention to further disadvantage these students with deadlines so rigid that they are bound to threats of expulsion from a PhD program. Furthermore, regardless of privilege, a PhD program is a highly stressful and demanding journey and it is not uncommon for students to change supervisors and programs of study for any number of reasons as they learn and grow.

Motion-

Whereas the mission of the EGSS includes a commitment to augmenting the graduate student experience and working with an anti-oppression framework¹;

Whereas the EGSS represents the interests of more than three hundred graduate students studying in DISE, including 120 doctoral students², “in all matters pertaining to education and the welfare of graduate students”³;

Whereas a number of students in the PhD program have expressed confusion about the existing policy surrounding the comprehensive exams and what, if any, consequences exist for not adhering to said policy;

Resolved the EGSS council calls on the DISE Graduate Program Committee to issue a clear statement to all graduate students concerning the Department’s policy in relation to the completion of comprehensive exams;

Resolved the EGSS council calls on the DISE Graduate Program Committee to put forward a policy that does not impose any punitive measures on students;

Resolved the EGSS council requests that the DISE makes the above noted policy available on its website;

Resolved the EGSS DISE representative bring this issue before the DISE departmental meeting;

Resolved the EGSS council calls on the DISE to continue to work to understand and respond productively to graduate student experiences, particularly doctoral students’ experiences of comprehensive exams.

Motion passed unanimously

¹ EGSS (n.d.) “Our Mission.” Retrieved from <http://egss.mcgill.ca/about.html>

² enrollment numbers provided to the EGSS as of September 20th, 2012

³ EGSS (2012). Article 2.24, EGSS Constitution (approved September 24th, 2012), p.3