

Tips to Prepare for Candidacy Notes

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These notes were collected during the FGSR "Tips to Prepare for Candidacy" session on August 10th, 2010. Much of the credit goes to the four presenters - Dr. Carlos Flores-Mir, Dr. Heather Mcdermid, Dr. George Buck, and Dr. Alan Wilman.

Outcomes of Candidacy Exam:

- Pass
- Conditional Pass
 - very specific
 - course/essay/books
 - deadline for completing assigned tasks
- Fail (this is very rare)
 - repeat the candidacy
 - change to a Masters
 - termination of program

1 Preparing

- Know who the examiners will be. Know their areas of expertise/interests.
- Talk to your examiners in advance and listen carefully to their advice
 - they may give hints towards the types of questions they will ask

- Practice sessions are critical
- Enjoy the chance to read in depth about your field
- Prepare an excellent presentation - this will set the tone
- If you haven't had oral exams before, or get incredibly nervous by them, then you need to learn how to be more comfortable
 - Take a course on public speaking (Toastmasters, etc)
 - Have friends/Supervisor quiz you so you get use to oral answers
 - Take every opportunity to stand up and talk before others
- Listen to your supervisor if they say you aren't ready.
- While there's usually no dress code, it's better to err on the side of being overdressed

2 In the exam

- A good start is important, thus have a great presentation
 - Some of your committee will have read your document carefully, if your presentation is an exact repeat, they will be bored
 - Some of the committee will not have had time and read the document briefly, your presentation can help bring them up to speed.
 - Try to balance between the two above
 - **Remember** "If you show it, you have to know it." Anything "new" in your presentation can be used for questioning
 - While you aren't be judged on your presentation skills, you should still aim to have as polished a presentation as possible
 - Do not use notes during your talk. It's about your work, you should know it.
- While try to keep your answers concise, make sure you **do** say something. It's important to tell them what you do know, but don't keep talking for the sake of talking.
- Nerves are to be expected.

- You may be asked what you're areas of expertise are. If you state area x, then make sure you really are an expert in area x.
- If you are unsure about what the question is asking, try rephrasing it back to them. "If I'm understanding you correctly, you're asking ..."
- Make sure they've finished asking the question before you start answering
- Take time to think before answering. It's fine to be quiet for 10-15 seconds.
- If the committee members starting arguing/discussing between themselves, stay out of it. But in your head, prepare an answer if they turn to you and ask where you sit
- On the same hand, never take extreme sides. If asked to specifically choose between two, can say "I prefer A, but B is useful in scenario/situation x"
- If you don't know, say "I don't know."
- You won't be able to know everything - so don't try
- They are trying to see the limit of your knowledge. Not being able to answer their last question is okay - the questions will likely get harder as they go and the one that signifies a "pass" level will be earlier.
- There should be a reason each question is asked. If there isn't, the chair is there to keep the exam from going off topic
- Take time to think and use the whiteboard/blackboard if it'll help explain
- Synthesize - put your ideas together, mesh facts, and critique
- Know "what's hot" and who's who
- Know how to answer "how did you decide on your topic?" - "my supervisor wanted me too" is **not** a good answer
- When asked for a final comment, say "Thank you." Anything else you say can lead to more questions.
- Remember the committee wants you to succeed. They are looking to see that

- Your topic is publishable
- Your plan has a good chance of success
- You are appropriately trained for the tasks ahead
- You have fully understanding of the topic you're going to re-search

3 After the exam

- Party!
- Be proud of yourself - Everyone thinks they did worse than they did.
- Don't agonize about questions that you didn't get - take it as an opportunity to learn
- Most people have "Post-Candidacy Slump" - take the rest of the day off and don't expect to be very productive right after. You need time to relax.