

Doctoral Comprehensive Exam

Purpose: The purpose of doctoral comprehensive exams (“comps”) is to certify that the successful candidate demonstrates a level of mastery of the essential academic material required to proceed to internship. Students are not allowed to apply for internship unless they have passed doctoral comps or completed a Major Area Paper. Each student will be expected to demonstrate a threshold level of competence by answering required questions.

Format: Doctoral comps is a “take-home” examination. Students are encouraged to consult published professional documents when forming their answers (e.g., research articles, textbooks, diagnostic manuals, treatment manuals). Students have 24 hours to complete the exam. The general structure of the doctoral *comps* will be as follows:

Section 1 Students will be given a detailed clinical vignette and asked to assume that they are actually seeing the patient described in the vignette. The vignette will be followed by a number of questions covering topics such as assessment, diagnosis, treatment planning and provision, diversity, legal and ethical issues.

Section 2. Students are given a published research article and asked to thoroughly evaluate and critique the study’s research methodology, results and discussion. Responses should discuss both strengths and weaknesses of the study. If something is a strength, why is it a strength? If something is a weakness, why is it a weakness? Topics that students should address include the study hypotheses, design, procedure, measures, psychometrics, selection of participants, statistics, reporting of data, and appropriateness of data interpretation. If there is a weakness, do not simply say there is a problem; rather, go on to explain how an ideal study could avoid the problem.

Time: *Comps* will be offered during the first week of the Summer I semester each year. Specific dates and recommended readings will be provided during the Spring semester prior to the exam. If students fail the doctoral *comps* they will have the opportunity to retake them in September.

Some General Advice about Answering Comps Questions: The questions you will be asked to answer on the comps exam will not always have a clearly right or wrong answer. Psychologists often have to think through many complicated issues when making decisions about clients or designing research studies, but they ultimately have to make well-reasoned choices based on their knowledge, experience, and training. Your answers on the comps exam should show that you a) can identify key issues, b) recognize that there may be varying perspectives about the issue and what should be done, c) understand the advantages and disadvantages of different decisions or courses of action, and d) come to a reasoned decision/answer based on a, b, and c.

Grading: Two faculty members independently grade Section 1 of comps, and two additional faculty members grade Section 2. For each section, if both graders agree to pass or fail, that is the final decision. If there is a split on a particular section a third faculty member will grade the section. The pass or fail vote of this third grader will determine whether the student passes or fails that section. All grading will be completed within two weeks of the comps examination date. If a student passes one section of the comps but fails the other part, the student will be required to take the section that was failed the next time *comps* are offered. If both sections are failed, the student will be required to take the entire exam the next time it is offered.

Students failing a section or the entire exam will be given detailed feedback about their performance by the faculty members who graded their examination. If the faculty have concerns over a specific portion of a student's answer and would like further explanation, the student involved may be called before a faculty subcommittee for clarification or an oral defense. If a student fails any section of Doctoral Comps twice, the student will need to petition the Dean of CHSS in writing for permission to take Doctoral Comps a third time. The Dean may or may not grant permission. If the Dean does not grant permission, the student will be dismissed from the Program. If the Dean does allow a third examination s/he also usually requires the student to complete remedial course work before granting such a petition. If a student fails Doctoral Comps a third time, outright dismissal from the Program is very likely.