

## THE MAJOR AREA PAPER

Students who are in good standing in the Program may be allowed to write a Major Area Paper (MAP) in lieu of the comprehensive examination (comps). The MAP is an alternative to doctoral comps. Passage of doctoral comps is the default mechanism for certifying that a student demonstrates a level of mastery of the essential academic material required to proceed to internship comps. The MAP option is an *excellent, highly recommended choice* for students who want the opportunity to pursue an in-depth analysis of a particular topic of interest. It should not be viewed as a simple requirement that requires a time commitment similar to the comprehensive exams. Completing a MAP is a time-intensive process that involves months of planning and writing, and usually requires several post-proposal meetings with faculty members to incorporate the committee's recommendations.

A student can only complete a MAP if s/he can find a faculty member willing to chair the MAP committee and the MAP topic is approved by the entire Program faculty. The best method for identifying an appropriate MAP topic is for the student to work together with a faculty member or members to identify a professional area in need of a thorough review, as opposed to the student becoming whetted to and "shopping around" a MAP idea that none of the faculty are able to chair. The MAP is not an alternative for students who fail doctoral comps. Students who fail any section of doctoral comps will not be allowed to undertake a MAP. The approval process for a MAP is detailed below, after the scope and goals of the MAP are discussed.

**Scope and Goals of the MAP.** The MAP should represent a focused and critical review of a topic, concept, or research area in the field of psychology. It must fill a gap in the literature, and a sophisticated, critical analysis of the literature is expected. The review should integrate information from within the particular subject area, incorporate material from other relevant areas, and establish implications for the field. The manuscript should reflect a synthesis – not merely a list or description of studies, but a perspective that is greater, more meaningful, and more parsimonious than the sum of its parts. Use of meta-analytic methods is legitimate and may be a desirable option. The MAP manuscript should demonstrate the student's expertise and an advanced awareness of pertinent theoretical and methodological issues. We recommend that students closely examine various high quality review journals (e.g., *Psychological Bulletin*,

*Clinical Psychology Review, Clinical Psychology Science and Practice*) for models of successful papers. It is anticipated that completing a MAP will take between four and eight months.

Although each MAP must be a focused review of one general topic, concept, or research area, a successful MAP requires the student to demonstrate proficient skills and/or knowledge in at least three broad areas of psychology. The student and the selected MAP advisor should work together to identify both the general topic of the MAP and the three broad areas in which the student will demonstrate proficient skills. For example, one recent MAP was a critical review of the psychometric properties of psychopathology assessment instruments translated from English into Spanish. The goal of the MAP was to provide a critical review of the existing research on these measures. The three broad skills identified by the student and advisor for this MAP were: (1) multicultural diversity, (2) psychometrics, and (3) psychopathology assessment. The identification of these skill areas is crucial because each skill area receives a grade. The student must receive a passing grade in all three areas to pass the MAP.

**Approval.** The sequence for the approval process for the MAP is as follows:

(1) The student first contacts a psychology department faculty member to serve as chair of the MAP committee. If the department member is not part of the doctoral Program faculty, the second MAP committee member **MUST** be a member of the Program faculty.

(2) The student writes a brief proposal for the MAP. This proposal should be 1-2 pages long. The proposal should start with 1-2 paragraphs describing the rationale for the MAP and how the completed MAP will represent an improvement to the current state of knowledge in the field. The proposal must also identify the three skill areas in which the student will demonstrate proficiency. For each skill area, the student must explain how the completed MAP will demonstrate the student's proficiency. At least two of these skill areas must be clearly related to practice or research in the area of clinical psychology. Here is an example of one skill area description from a recent MAP:

Multicultural diversity: The student will demonstrate knowledge concerning the cultural and linguistic issues that should be considered when using psychological assessment instruments with Spanish-speaking clients. Specifically, the student will provide a critical review of how

the inappropriate use of translated tests may lead to biased test results and inappropriate diagnostic conclusions. Although this review focuses on one specific cultural group, the review will reflect a general knowledge of multicultural assessment issues that should be considered when evaluating clients from other cultural groups.

(3) The student and chair then invite a second faculty member from the Department of Psychology or Program faculty to serve on the committee. If the MAP advisor is a member of the doctoral Program faculty, the student may ask the Program faculty for permission to have the second committee member be someone from outside the department (e.g., a psychologist in another department). The second committee member should be consulted regarding the topic of the MAP and the specific skill areas covered.

(4) Once the two MAP committee members agree about the MAP topic and goals, the Program faculty review the written proposal and decide whether to approve it. This approval must be obtained by September 1<sup>st</sup> of the year in which the student would otherwise take doctoral level comprehensive exams. Proposals are made at regularly scheduled doctoral Program faculty meetings. A copy of the proposal should be provided for each doctoral Program faculty member. If at all possible, the student should attend the Program faculty meeting to make the proposal in person. Attending the meeting will allow faculty members to ask questions and seek clarifying information. The student does not need to make a formal oral presentation. If the student cannot attend the meeting, the student's MAP advisor can make the proposal to the doctoral Program faculty. The proposal is officially approved when a majority of the doctoral Program faculty vote that the proposal should be approved.

(5) If approved, the two-member committee then helps the student develop a plan for completing the MAP.

**Evaluation.** A defensible draft of the MAP must be submitted to the student's two-person committee by April 1<sup>st</sup> of the year in which the student would otherwise take doctoral level comprehensive examinations. A defensible draft is equivalent to a manuscript that could be submitted for publication. In other words, it is expected to be a complete document that the student feels has demonstrated proficiency in the three skill areas.

The committee's task is to provide an evaluative grade for each skill area. The committee's evaluation goal is not to simply decide whether the paper meets a minimal "satisfactory" level of performance. Rather, the committee's approach and evaluative responses are modeled after the journal review process. Evaluative grades assigned by committee members will include: "pass," "pass with minor revisions," "revise and resubmit," and "fail." The committee must provide this feedback within one week of the submission date for the MAP. No feedback will be given to the student until both committee members have completed their evaluations. All evaluative information should be collected by the MAP committee chair, who will pass the information to the student once the MAP has been evaluated by both committee members.

The MAP is considered to be passed when the student receives a grade of "pass" by both committee members in all three areas. If a grade of less than "pass" is given in an area by a committee member, the committee member must provide feedback about (a) whether the MAP can be revised to meet passing criteria in a timely manner, and (b) exactly what the student must demonstrate to achieve a passing grade. If the committee agrees that the MAP could be revised to achieve a passing evaluation, the student will have two weeks to revise the MAP for a second review. The revised MAP will then be re-evaluated by the committee, with a second set of evaluative grades being assigned. The committee will have one week to complete this review.

If the student has not received a grade of pass in all areas after this second review, the MAP committee will meet with the student to discuss what will happen next. The committee might decide that only minor revisions are needed and that the student should be given additional time to complete these revisions; however, the last day to turn in a completed MAP is the last day of classes in the Spring semester of the year that the student would otherwise take doctoral comps. The committee might also decide that the student has failed the MAP and must take comprehensive doctoral examinations in order to apply for internship in the Fall semester. This decision must be made by the last day of classes in the Spring semester of the year that the student would otherwise take doctoral comps. The reason for this deadline is to allow students who fail the MAP to take doctoral comprehensive exams. Students who fail the MAP will need to take doctoral comps just like any other student, and will still have two chances to pass comps.

**Writing the MAP.** The expected length and scope of the MAP should be discussed by the

student and committee at the beginning of the writing process. These issues should be revisited throughout the writing process to ensure that the student and committee are in agreement throughout the writing process. The ultimate length of the paper is to be determined by the MAP committee, and may vary from student to student depending on the recommendation of the MAP committee. MAPs typically range in length from 30-50 pages, but may need to be longer depending on the recommendations of the MAP committee. We encourage students to consult the following resources to assist them in completing well-written MAPs:

Bem, D.J. (1995). Writing a review article for Psychological Bulletin. *Psychological Bulletin*, 118, 172-177.

Sternberg, R.J. (2003). How to win acceptances from psychology journals: 29 tips for better writing. In R.J. Sternberg (Ed.). *The psychologist's companion : A guide to scientific writing for students and researchers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.