

Frequently Asked Questions about SOHA Graduate Comps

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1) What is the comprehensive exam?

The comprehensive exam is an integrative experience that occurs in the last long semester of course work, BEFORE starting a field experience or a thesis. All candidates for graduate degrees at Texas State University must pass a comprehensive exam. All majors in the School of Health Administration seeking a graduate degree will complete a comprehensive exam in accordance with this description. Variations among the majors that do occur are noted within each question. The most obvious variation is the difference in curriculum. This leads to a slightly different form for students who have passed the comprehensive exams and proceed to the exit interview.

University policy for the Graduate College states the requirement as follows:

All candidates for graduate degrees must pass one or more comprehensive examinations, either written, oral, or both, covering at least the field of concentration and the thesis or dissertation if one is written. Students with a double major must take a comprehensive examination in each major. The examination for a master's degree may not be taken until the student has completed at least 18 semester hours of graduate degree credit and may not be taken before the final term or semester if the student has a grade deficiency. Master's degree students may take the comprehensive exam without being enrolled in coursework. However, an international student holding an F-1 Visa must contact the International Office at 512-245-7966 to verify being in status with the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Arrangements for the examination may be made with the student's graduate advisor or the department chair. The results of the master's comprehensive examination or the Dissertation Defense Report form must be filed in the Office of the Graduate College **at least ten days before the commencement** at which the degree is to be conferred. The department is responsible for submitting the report to the Office of the Graduate College.¹

The format and mechanism for the comprehensive exam is at the discretion of the academic unit. In the School of Health Administration the comprehensive exam consists of three components:

- One multiple-choice objective component, called the objectives,
- One written essay component, called the essays,
- One oral component, called the orals.

The objectives and the essays occur on the same day and are collectively referred to in this document as the "writtens." The Director of the School of Health Administration (hereafter referred to as Director) schedules the writtens on a Saturday (typically the 3rd weekend prior to the start of finals). The first portion of the writtens consists of the objectives which includes approximately 100 multiple choice questions. This is followed immediately by the essays consisting of four questions, of which you must select three to answer. You will have five hours to complete the writtens.

You must pass both the objectives and the essays; therefore, if you fail the objectives, then the essays are not evaluated. In the event that you fail the objectives, you will be notified by the Director via email on the Monday after you have taken the writtens and you will not be permitted to begin your field experience or thesis. You may take the

¹ See Texas State Graduate College Catalog, 2007-2009, degree information, at http://www.gradcollege.txstate.edu/Grad_Cats/2007-2009/Degree_Info.html#Compre_Exam, retrieved on January 26, 2008.

writtens the next time they are scheduled (you will be required to retake both the objectives and essays).

In the event that you pass the objectives, you will be notified by the Director via email on the Monday after you have taken the writtens. Your essays will be forwarded to your committee for evaluation. Within seven (7) days of the Monday notification, your committee chair will notify you via email of the results of the evaluation.

In the event that you pass the essays, you will be exempted from the orals and your committee chair will schedule an exit interview. In the event that you fail the essay portion, your committee chair will give you the option to schedule your orals within five days. The orals will be your last opportunity to prove to your committee that you have mastered the material. The orals will be moderated by your committee chair and can include material that the committee thought you missed on the essays, the questions you did not answer on the essays, or other material that the committee thinks is pertinent in giving you a thorough examination. If you pass the orals, your chair will proceed with an exit interview. If you fail the orals, you will not be permitted to begin your field experience or thesis. You may take the writtens the next time they are scheduled.

- For more information on the evaluation methods see questions #18) What decisions can be made relative to passing or failing the exam?, and #19) What if I fail the exam?
- For more information on the difference between the multiple-choice questions and the essay questions see question #12) What is the nature of the questions?

2) Why is there a comprehensive exam?

As already noted, a comprehensive exam of some form is required for all graduate majors. In the School of Health Administration the exam functions as an integrative tool. The comprehensive exam ensures that the knowledge gained in classes is both retained and synthesized.

The University, including our three graduate majors in the School of Health Administration, is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).² The Masters in Health Administration (MHA) has an additional accreditation. There is no external accrediting body for Health Services Research or Healthcare Human Resources.

As a marketing tool for health administration students, the comprehensive exam ensures a level of rigor and retention that contributes to accreditation by the Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Management Education (CAHME).³ The CAHME accreditation and the skills of our MHA students and alumni enable our MHA graduates to compete more successfully in the marketplace for jobs. To many employers of MHA students,



² See <http://www.sacscoc.org/details.asp?instid=67120> for information on the accreditation by this agency for Texas State. Retrieved on January 26, 2008.

³ See <http://www.cahmeweb.org/info.htm> for further information on CAHME. Retrieved Wednesday, May 04, 2005.

graduation from an accredited program carries as much significance as participation in professional associations such as the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE), Healthcare Financial Management Association (HFMA), or Medical Group Management Association (MGMA).

The extra expense of obtaining the MHA accreditation from CAHME is a significant investment the School makes to ensure that your MHA degree has value in the marketplace. Accreditation by CAHME is voluntary. A large number of programs offer degrees that are an "MHA," but are not accredited by CAHME.

3) How is the graduate committee for the exam formed?

The graduate committee for the comprehensive exam consists of three faculty members. One serves as the chair of the committee, while the other two are members. You select the chair with his/her permission. The Director selects the other two members of your committee based on a variety of factors including availability and expertise.

4) When should I select a graduate committee chair?

You should select your graduate committee chair in the first few weeks of the semester in which you are taking the exam, although contacting faculty members for this purpose late in the prior semester is common as well. Students taking HA 5191 will receive a committee selection form in the first class meeting and will be asked to select a graduate committee chair and have the graduate committee chair sign the form indicating agreement to serve. Depending on workload, faculty have the prerogative to decline a student request to be a graduate committee chair.

5) Does it make a difference who is on the graduate committee?

It should not make a difference as to who is on your graduate committee. Faculty have provided the committee a sample or model answer for the questions they wrote. If a question is exceedingly specialized and none of the members of the committee are particularly expert in that area and did not write the question the committee will rely on the model answer. If controversy remains concerning your response the committee chair will ask the person who wrote the question to review your response. This method should obviate issues that may occur when a committee has members from different areas of expertise than your major. However, in most cases the faculty can properly evaluate responses from a wide range of subject areas. Thus, the fact you may have received instruction on a topic from one faculty should not lead you to believe that only one faculty member will know the correct answer to a technical question. The same would be true if the faculty member teaches primarily in another major.

In many cases faculty who did not teach you a particular section of a course may well have taught the course previously or have an interest or expertise in the area. Many of the faculty have taught several of the courses. All of the faculty have a solid comprehension of the field and often many years of experience in the field. Thus, advantages or disadvantages owing to the composition of your committee are going to be minor.

6) What are the roles of the committee members during the examination process?

Your committee is not the sole source of evaluation of your responses. The committee members typically do not have a role in the evaluation until verification that you have successfully completed the objectives. If the scores for the objectives are satisfactory, the Director notifies the graduate committee chair to proceed in grading the essays.

If the grades for the objective portions fall below the Director-specified minimum and no problems are detected with the questions, then you failed the objectives. You would be notified by the Director and the chair of your committee directs the rest of the committee not to grade your essay portion. You will retake the entire examination at the next offering. What will count as a failing score is determined by the Director.

Once you successfully complete the objective, the grading of the essay portion commences. Your graduate committee chair reviews the answers with the committee members and arrives at a determination of a pass/fail grade on each essay. Should the committee judge that you failed the essays, the chair of your graduate committee will notify you that you have failed the essays and will give you the opportunity to schedule an oral examination.

7) What is the exit interview?

Once you pass the comprehensive examination, the chair of your graduate committee will conduct an **exit interview** (sample provided on the School website under Student Resources) to determine your opinion of the strengths and weaknesses of your major. There is a different form for each graduate major.

The chair of your graduate committee will ask you to comment on strengths and weakness of the major, on the curriculum as to appropriateness of the sequencing of courses, the extent to which excessive redundancy exists, and whether there are subject areas you think were not covered adequately, or at all. Next you will be asked whether you had trouble getting the courses scheduled and whether the resources available to you as a student were adequate, both for the School, the College, and the University overall. You will then be asked to comment on the faculty, in general or by name. Those comments may address good or bad performance. You will then be asked if there are any recommendations for improvement you would like to make.

8) When is the comprehensive exam?

The comprehensive exam is given towards the end of each long semester (the exam is never scheduled during the summer sessions). The writtens are scheduled on a Saturday about three weeks prior to the start of final exams. The orals, if necessary, are scheduled about two weeks after the writtens. The exact dates of the written comprehensive exam will be provided to you and is available on the School website at the beginning of each long semester.

9) Who is required to take the comprehensive exam?

All students seeking a masters degree in the School of Health Administration must take and successfully complete the comprehensive exam in order to start their field placements or theses, and ultimately, to graduate.

10) When am I eligible to take the comprehensive exam?

All graduate students seeking a degree are required to pass the comprehensive exam BEFORE entering either field experience or formally commencing the thesis. Typically the exam is taken in the last long semester of course work.

11) How do I know when I should take the comprehensive exam?

You are responsible for knowing when to take the final exam and for notifying the Director of your intent to take the exam by completing the form naming your graduate committee chair (the form is available on the School website under student resources). In certain cases, you may take your comprehensive exams in the Spring prior to completing coursework scheduled for the Summer; however, you are still responsible for all coursework.

12) What is the nature of the questions?

The questions on the writtens are in two forms: multiple-choice questions and essay questions. You can expect about 100 multiple-choice questions from the coursework in your major. The multiple-choice questions are intended to test basic knowledge.

Unlike the multiple choice questions, the essay questions probe more deeply for application, synthesis, problem solving skills, and creative thinking. A correct answer to a particular question may require you to draw upon materials from several different content areas. An essay question may not clearly relate to any specific course, but require you to apply knowledge to subjects in the health care field. This is the expected nature of work in the field. The job of the faculty is to prepare you to apply the skills, attitudes, and knowledge to new situations, as opposed to simply being able to tell your committee what you have learned. Nonetheless, expect questions about the concepts as well as application.

13) Where do the questions come from?

The Coordinator of Comprehensive Examinations for the School of Health Administration (hereafter referred to as Coordinator) is in charge of development and coordination of the comprehensive exam process. The Coordinator maintains a database of questions categorized into essay questions and multiple-choice objective questions. The multiple-choice questions are organized by course (where appropriate); the essay questions are classified by general themes.

The essay questions are quite different from the multiple-choice questions. Several weeks before each scheduled exam the Coordinator seeks new essay questions from the faculty. When new questions come in the Coordinator makes a judgment as to the appropriateness of the question. If it is acceptable it is added to the current essay exam.


Once a question makes it onto the exam it goes into the database in the appropriate category for use in subsequent semesters. Often the questions relate to current events and are only useful for one semester.

14) Are there specific answers to the questions?

The multiple-choice questions will have an unequivocally correct answer or the question is defective. The essay questions are very different.

Some of the essay questions have a relatively small range of correct responses, but there is leeway in how they are addressed. In those situations what your committee is seeking is demonstration of your ability to take a set of principles and apply it logically and consistently to a situation. This would pertain to applications of management, legal, human resources, and marketing principles, and quantitative methods, for example. Sometimes these would be cases or queries about the value of a theory or tool.

Some essay questions will have answers that vary considerably owing to differences in beliefs or values. This may be particularly true in the policy and ethics area. Your graduate committee's expectation is that you capably defend your position while being able to explain the thinking behind alternative or opposing positions. Seeking to please the members of your graduate committee by saying what you think they want to hear is a sure sign you have not learned how to manage or lead. Nor is it often possible to say what the entire committee wants to hear, since many of faculty disagree with each other in very fundamental ways.



You think always agreeing is leadership? Think again.

15) What examination methods are allowed during the comprehensive exam?

The objectives are taken using a scantron provided by the proctor. You will not be able to keep a copy of the objective questions nor can you make a copy of the scantron.

For the essays you will take the exam in blue books. Please write legibly.

16) How do I prepare for the written portions of the comprehensive exam?

Traditionally HA/HR/HHR 5191 has assisted graduate students in preparation for the comprehensive exam. You may also discuss preparation with your graduate committee chair.

**17) How do I prepare for the oral portion of the comprehensive exam?
[Remember--you are exempt from the oral portion if you pass the essay portion]**

At no time should you expect your graduate committee chair or any committee member to give you specifics as to the precise nature of any problems encountered during the grading of your writings. Nor prior to the orals should you expect any faculty member,

whether on the committee or not, to give you detailed answers to questions on the writtens.

It is legitimate for a faculty member, on or off your committee, to fill in gaps in your knowledge by directing you to resources to help you understand certain material. At this stage of your career as a graduate student the faculty fully expects that if you know or are told about a deficiency in your knowledge you would know how to access other resources besides faculty to get the answers. You would not call faculty when you are on the job. Problem-solve the same way here. Primarily, the job of learning increasingly falls on you. You should be walking into the orals having prepared yourself following a self-assessment of your performance on the writtens.

We hope that each course in the graduate curriculum has prepared you to excel in defending your positions, speaking extemporaneously, and problem solving.

18) What decisions can be made relative to passing or failing the exam?

Effective Fall 2006 the writtens have been divided into two portions. If you fail the objectives, your graduate committee will not grade the essays and you may take the comprehensive exam the next time it is scheduled [Remember that comprehensive exams are never scheduled during the Summer]. The Director will notify you of your results on the objectives on the Monday following the Saturday of the writtens.

In the event that you pass the objectives, your essays of the writtens will be forwarded to your committee for evaluation. Within seven (7) days of the Monday notification, your committee chair will notify you via email of the results of the evaluation.

In the event that you pass the essays, you will be exempted from the orals and your committee chair will schedule an exit interview. In the event that you fail the essays, your committee chair will give you the option to schedule your orals within five days. The orals will be your last opportunity to prove to your committee that you have mastered the material. The orals will be moderated by your committee chair and can include material that the committee thought you missed on the essay portion, the questions you did not answer on the essay portion, or other material that the committee thinks is pertinent in giving you a thorough examination. If you pass the orals, your chair will proceed with an exit interview. If you fail the orals, you will not be permitted to begin your field experience or thesis. You may take the writtens the next time they are scheduled.

a. Objective question evaluations

Scoring for the objectives is “pass/fail.” A grade below 70 is a failing exam.

If you fail the objectives, you fail the exam and the committee is not expected to read the essays. You may retake the entire exam the next time it is scheduled.

After the objectives have been graded, if the Director determines the objective questions are appropriate and keyed correctly the grades are certified. At that point the Director emails you and copies the chair of your graduate committee and tells you whether you passed or failed the objectives. If you pass the committee proceeds to grade the essays.

b. Essay question evaluations

Scoring for the essays is pass/fail based on a majority rule of your committee.

19) What if I fail the exam?

If you fail you typically repeat the exam the next time it is offered by the School.

If you have to take the exam the following semester and would have otherwise been eligible for starting a field experience the upcoming semester you are now delayed for a semester from starting the field experience. The chair of your graduate committee must notify the Director, and the Coordinator of Graduate Field Placements of the change in plans. If you are intending to work on a thesis, you will not be permitted to register or formally work on the thesis until you pass your comprehensive exam.

20) Is there an appeal process?

Traditionally the judgment of the committee has ruled. Should you believe the committee has acted unfairly the appeal process would go to the Director of the School of Health Administration.

21) How many times can I take the comprehensive exam if I fail it?

The typical remedies are more proactive than simply repeating the exam over and over. However, there is no limit to the number of times you can take the comprehensive exam (there is a six-year limit to finish the degree).

22) How do I prepare for the comprehensive exam?

During the course of the major you should retain your books, papers, and notes and protect your memories.

You should follow traditional study methods on your own and with groups, sometimes drawing upon study preparation materials from students who have already completed the exam. Clearly, the key is to consider the key ideas from each course and to be cognizant of the current events taking place that relate to health care.

Part of the faculty expectations and those of most employers is that you are staying current with what is taking place in the world at large and in health care as well. We reserve the right to ask questions about current events that may not have been discussed in classes. Faculty expectation is that you will attend educational programs such as those offered locally by the student Healthcare Leadership Coalition, the HFMA and ACHE chapter meetings which occur in San Antonio and Austin, the School's October educational conference as well as other opportunities which may come up during your time here.

Other ways to keep up include reading the ACHE publications, the HFM journal, Modern Healthcare, Hospitals and Health Systems magazine and the like. Good list-serves to be on including the Kaiser Family Foundation, at <http://www.Kff.org>. You can subscribe free to a variety of policy mailings. [Http://www.kaiseredu.org/](http://www.kaiseredu.org/) provides helpful study guides for current events. The Rand Corporate has a health division that offers excellent

current research; see <http://www.rand.org/health/>. You can subscribe to the Institutes of Medicine newsletter for free at <http://www.iom.edu/>.

You can get major news stories for free from the New York Times sent to you daily to help keep up with national and world events. They often have health care stories. More in-depth but general press includes Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News and World Report. While this is a short list, you will know many other sources of value as well. We assume you already know how to access health care specific literature through the Texas State library portal, which provides access to many publications you will be unable to access once you are no longer a student.

23) Who may I contact for help on the comprehensive exam (before the exam)?

You should feel free to contact individual faculty members concerning questions about their course materials or any study methods appropriate to their courses. Those faculty are likely to be more receptive if you show up with a list of the top things you think you should have learned from the course than if you simply show up asking them what to study. However, most essay questions on the comprehensive exam are not at all course specific. Faculty will not give you specifics about what to study for the exam.

The contact person for questions about the schedule of the exam and other details is Julie Carroll, the School Administrative Assistant, at 512 245-3556 or jc05@txstate.edu. Dr. Michael Nowicki can answer most questions related to these FAQs. Contact him at nowicki@txstate.edu or 512-245-3556.

24) What if I had a different instructor than the instructor who developed the questions for the comprehensive exam?

Having a different instructor from the one who wrote the questions should not constitute a problem. The body of knowledge taught should be comparable across instructors. In many cases it may be unclear as to who wrote the question or what course the question comes from. We are not seeking instructor-specific responses but an ability to synthesize and apply. The multiple-choice questions are intended to be so basic to the subject area that any instructor should cover those materials.

25) Why is the comprehensive exam neither listed in the catalog description of the major nor tied to any particular course?

The comprehensive exam is a Graduate College requirement and is stated as such in the GRADUATE CATALOG.