1) What is the comprehensive exam?

The comprehensive exam is one of several integrative experiences that occurs in the last long semester of coursework, 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 do occur 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. See Texas State Graduate College Catalog degree information available online at Texas State University website.

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;
- One written essay component;
- One oral component if necessary.

The Director, Graduate Studies of the School of Health Administration (hereafter referred to as Director) schedules the comprehensive exams near the end of the last didactic semester for students prior to beginning Field Placements.

You must pass both the objectives and the essays; therefore, if you fail the objectives, then the essays are not administered and you will have to retake the comprehensive exam the next time it is offered. It is not offered over the summer. In the event that you fail the objectives, you will be notified by the Director via email, on Friday after you have taken the objectives on Thursday and told to not show up Saturday for the essays, and you will not be permitted to begin your field experience or thesis. You may
take the written exams 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, and are notified by the Director via email on the Friday to come in Saturday to complete the essays, your essays will be forwarded to your committee for evaluation. Within seven (7) days of essays being sent to your Committee, 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 written exams 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 one of the integrative tools to assess your competency to begin the Field Placement and earn the degree. The comprehensive exam ensures that the knowledge gained in classes is both retained and synthesized, and you can apply this material in an integrative manner.

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

See [http://www.sacscoc.org/](http://www.sacscoc.org/) for information on the accreditation by this agency for Texas State. See [http://www.cahmeweb.org/info.htm](http://www.cahmeweb.org/info.htm) for further information on CAHME.

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). 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, 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 faculty 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. You will be given the form to request your Committee Chair in the first week of HA 5191.

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 rubric. 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?

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) 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.

9) 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. All coursework except the Field Placement must be completed or concurrently being completed in the semester you 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.

10) 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 will 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.
11) Where do the questions come from?

The Director, Graduate Studies 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 Director seeks new essay questions from the faculty. When new questions come in the Director 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.

12) 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.

13) 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 HPB computer lab and print out three copies.

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

Traditionally HA/HHR 5191 has assisted graduate students in preparation for the comprehensive exam. You may also discuss preparation with your graduate committee chair and alumni.
15) 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 written exams. 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 written exams.

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 written exams.

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

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

In the event that you pass the objectives (attain a minimum score of 70%), your will complete the essays portion and they will be forwarded to your committee for evaluation. Within seven (7) days of the notification, your committee chair will notify you via email of the results of the evaluation.

In the event that you pass the essays (2/3rds of the committee agree you passed 2 out of 3 essay questions answered), 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 written exams the next time they are scheduled (not offered over the summer)

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 will not complete 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.
b. Essay question evaluations

Scoring for the essays is pass/fail based on a majority rule of your committee. You will be give four essay questions, and you must chose and answer three. You must successfully pass 2 out of the three questions as assessed by the majority of your committee’s evaluation.

17) 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.

18) 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, Graduate Studies.

19) 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).

20) 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/ provides helpful study guides for current events. The Rand Corporate has a

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.

21) 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. Matthew Brooks can answer most questions related to these FAQs. Contact him at mbrooks@txstate.edu or 512-245-2238.

22) 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 will 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.

23) 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.