COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION


All students are required to successfully complete the Comprehensive Examination. The examination consists of two parts: written and oral. The examination should occur no later than six months after completion of course work requirements as represented in the Plan of Study, and prior to the defense of the dissertation proposal.

The purpose of the comprehensive examination is to:

1. Summarize and synthesize the current state of knowledge related to the areas of inquiry in which the student is developing expertise.
2. Demonstrate evidence of ability to select, organize, synthesize, and critically appraise supporting literature relevant to a problem or issue.
3. Demonstrate capacity for original thought, in-depth knowledge of theory, and expertise in research methodology related to nursing phenomenon of interest.
4. Demonstrate ability to analyze theoretical formulations and strategies for theory development.

PROCEDURE

Preparing for the Comprehensive Exams

The procedure is as follows:

1. The faculty advisor will review the student’s transcript to verify that all required coursework has been completed.

2. The student shall identify a substantive area in which he or she is developing an expertise. A comprehensive outline of the topic shall be drawn up by the student and shared with the advisor.

3. With the student’s input, the faculty-student pair should:
   - Confirm the topic for the comprehensive exam.
   - Confirm the appropriateness and adequacy of the student’s outline for the comprehensive exam paper.
   - Identify two other members of the comprehensive examination committee (see below).
   - Clarify the role of committee members in the written and oral examination process.
   - Clarify expectations of the student regarding content, process, and timely completion of the written and oral examination portions.
   - Tentatively select the oral and written exam dates.
4. The examination committee: The examining committee consists of three faculty members holding appointments in the College of Nursing and/or having at least Associate Member status in the College of Graduate Studies (can include an external mentor with approved temporary CGS status). The process for approval of an external mentor is found in Section V. Application for Graduate Faculty Status: External Mentors of the PhD Student Handbook. The three faculty members include the student’s advisor and two others, one being knowledgeable in the student’s subject area. The student’s advisor shall chair the committee and in collaboration with the student, select the two other members. The faculty advisor should ensure understanding and agreement among committee members of the expected outcomes of the comprehensive examination and ability to adhere to time constraints.

5. The faculty advisor should complete the form, PhD in Nursing-Comprehensive Examination Application, and send the form to Office of Doctoral Program for Director’s approval and record keeping.

**Written Examination: The Content**

The written component shall be a paper which synthesizes mastery of knowledge gained through the student’s program of study. The paper should reflect the current state of the knowledge of the topic. The written paper should follow American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines, or the manuscript guidelines of the journal in which the paper will be submitted for publication, and shall be no more than 25 pages in length, excluding references and appendices. Appendices are not required, but can be included in support of the narrative.

The paper shall be an original document and may build on previous work, however, papers from previous courses may not be used solely as a substitute for writing the examination. Because the emphasis is on scholarly synthesis, the student may consult published material, notes, and the like. Students are encouraged to confer with the advisor in the preparation for this examination for general advice about procedures, format, and guidelines. Examining committee members shall not read the written examination paper in draft form before the examination. No faculty is to edit, review, or help in any way with the student’s written or oral examination work. The student may seek assistance from The Center for Academic Excellence. (Revised August, 2008, PhD Committee Minutes)

**Examples of types of papers**

- Concept analysis
- Theoretical/conceptual framework
- Methodology
- Systematic or integrative review of the literature

The written examination shall be scored by each committee member on the Written Examination Scoring Sheet based on the following general and specific evaluation
criteria. A total score of 27 or above on the Conceptual Merit criteria is required for a passing paper.

**General criteria:**

- Clarity and logic of the student’s presentation
- Ability to conceptualize, analyze, and synthesize knowledge from a nursing perspective
- Capacity for original thought, theoretical and professional sophistication, research expertise, and substantive knowledge
- Depth of understanding of the phenomena of interest
- Competence in communicating (parsimony, clarity, and accuracy of language) and defending ideas and/or positions

**Specific criteria:**

1. **Clarity of topic and purpose** – Clearly states in the introduction to the paper the topic or issue and the reason(s) for its selection. The purpose of the paper is well defined, concisely stated, and congruent with the selected topic or issue.

2. **Significance** – States significance of the topic for nursing (practice and research). The history and importance of the topic or issues are described.

3. **Quality of literature review** – Comprehensive coverage of the literature related to the topic. Literature is synthesized and logically presented.
   - Non-research literature (theory and issues) – Clearly articulates main point(s) of article; established credibility of author/content
   - Research literature – Sample: subjects and selection criteria; procedure: description of procedural steps; measures: reliability and validity, description/definition of measurement; results: data analyses described, data fully presented, findings logically presented; conclusions: author’s interpretation of findings, author’s discussion of limitations, author’s discussion of generalization

4. **Quality of references** – Selects significant literature, including classic and current articles.

5. **Quality of theoretical discussion** – Clearly discusses a relevant theory that demonstrates an enhanced understanding of the topic or issue. In some cases, theory may more directly related to another section, such as practice implications.

6. **Critical appraisal of literature** – Analyzes the body of literature. Summarizes the significant accomplishments in the literature, presents discussion congruent with the reviewed articles and appropriate to the topic and purpose. Selects and applies appropriate appraisal criteria.
7. **Implications** - Discusses the relationship between major findings and identifies gaps in literature, the implications for practice, and further research. Formulates pertinent, researchable questions, propositions, and hypotheses based on the synthesis of findings/gaps. Describes the application and significance to nursing.

**Writing the Exam**

Once the initial outline for the paper is approved by faculty, the student can begin to independently work on developing the written paper. The student may continue to consult with faculty for technical questions about the written paper—(examples--what can be excluded or included in the paper text versus appendices, choices about limiting or expanding the topic in breadth or depth or detail, clarity about expectations for the scope of the paper). Most of these issues should have been discussed in the preliminary discussion between the student and advisor or addressed in the paper outline, but sometimes students continue to have technical questions once writing is started.

Students may use the writing center and/or library services for assistance with paper editing or searching for literature. Conversely, consultation from any resource regarding the content of the paper or help with critical appraisal or synthesis skills is considered cheating on this exam. Faculty should not be providing preliminary editing of drafts or conceptual or substantive support for the written paper once writing has started. It is considered cheating for the student to use professional scientific writers to develop the paper. Professional scientific editors or writers often provide more than just technical help.

**Written Exam: Evaluation**

The advisor is responsible for this communication and all other procedural communications appropriate to the comprehensive examination process and the evaluation.

1. Within **one** week of receipt of the written exam paper, the faculty advisor collects committee consensus about the paper.
   - First, there must be agreement that the student’s paper meets acceptable technical merit (grammar and spelling, logical flow, and APA format) and thus can be scored on content.
   - If the paper is **not** technically acceptable, the advisor stops any further scoring process and returns the paper to the student, allowing the student two weeks to make technical writing improvements and resubmit to the committee for rereading. Feedback on the paper should be limited to the weaknesses regarding technical portions of the paper, not content related.
   - If the paper **is** technically acceptable, the faculty advisor collaborates with the committee members to evaluate whether the paper is a Pass or No Pass. If members significantly disagree on the scoring of a criterion, the advisor should organize and facilitate discussion among the committee members until consensus is reached in evaluation of the student’s paper.
   - A note about scoring: A total score of 27 is required on the seven conceptual merit criteria. Faculty should remember that the purpose of this paper is for
the student to summarize and synthesize the current state of knowledge related to the areas of inquiry in which the student is developing expertise. The student is asked to apply knowledge of theory, methods, policy, and ethics in a paper limited to 25 pages. Thus, the paper will most likely not be ready for journal submission without modification. Further, the flow of the paper may not be as smooth as expected for publication because the student is asked to address a variety of points. If a student fails to sufficiently cover an aspect in written exam, that topic should be further explored during the oral exam to demonstrate command of knowledge.

- The advisor immediately communicates to the student a “Pass” or “Not-Pass” for the written portion of the exam. The student will receive the scores and evaluative comments of the faculty on the written work as soon as possible before the oral exam. **Rationale:** Although not failing, unclear or inadequately addressed portions of the written exam will be explored by faculty during the student’s oral examination, offering a second venue for demonstration of the student’s knowledge base, critical thinking, ability to synthesize, and chosen rationale.

  - If “Pass” (or a score of 27 or above), the student will conduct the oral exam within two (2) weeks of passing the written comprehensive.
  - If “Not Pass” (or a score less than 27), the advisor:
    - Will send the reviewers’ scores and comments to the student. (October, 2010, PhD Committee)
    - Reviews the student’s options to either withdraw from the program or resubmit the written re-examination within three months of the “Not Pass”.
    - Develops a plan with the student to be successful in the rewrite of the comprehensive exams, addressing the issues that will make the comprehensive paper successful (October, 2010, PhD Committee)
    - Resubmits the form: *PhD in Nursing-Comprehensive Examination Application*, sending the form to Office of Doctoral Program for Director’s approval and record keeping.
    - A re-examination will be conducted by the same committee.
    - “Not pass” on the second written re-examination will mark the end of the student’s progression and the student shall withdraw from the program. (Approved by PhD Committee, November, 2008)
    - Faculty are reminded that students must pass the written component before they can advance to the oral defense. There are no “conditional” passes. (Approved in Committee, March, 2006)

2. The Advisor shall maintain copies of the Written Exam Scoring Sheets and
Faculty Comment Sheets until the student’s graduation. Copies will be shared with the student after the oral examination is successfully passed to help with manuscript preparation.

**Oral examination**

**Oral Exam**

1. Within two weeks of the successful written exam, the student will conduct the oral exam.
2. Using the Faculty Comment Sheets, the Advisor leads the Committee in summarizing comments and determining a “Pass” or “Not-Pass”.
3. The Advisor usually immediately notifies the student of the outcome, but has one week to notify the student of the results.
   - If “Pass”, the student makes an appointment to meet with the Faculty Advisor to plan for manuscript submission to a journal. Notification of the “Pass” is given to the Office of the Doctoral Program.
   - If “Not Pass”, the Advisor will:
     - Counsel the student of options to either withdraw from the program or take the oral examination one additional time.
     - Schedule a second oral exam within three (3) months of the first oral exam attempt, if that option is chosen.
     - Develop a plan to support the student’s abilities to be successful on the second attempt of the oral exam.
     - Ensure the student’s understanding that a “Not Pass” on the second oral exam will mark the end of the student’s progression.
     - Notify the Office of the Doctoral Program of the “Not Pass” and the date of the rescheduled oral exam.

The oral component of the comprehensive examination is conducted by the student’s examining committee upon successful completion of the written component of the examination. The oral examination is attended only by the examination committee and the student.

Typically, the student begins the oral component of the comprehensive examination with a twenty- to thirty-minute oral synthesis that summarizes the paper and should include, but is not limited to: topic; problem; significance; literature utilized; methods; limitations; implications; and salient content related to the student’s program of study. In the ensuing discussion, committee members may question the student about aspects of the paper including alternative potential methodologies to study the nursing phenomenon; alternative conceptual and theoretical frameworks; clarification of statistical information; the potential for further study; and application to practice or significance to nursing. The entire oral examination shall not exceed two hours in length of time.

The oral examination shall be evaluated by the standards established for the written examination, but modified by the following criteria:
• Organization of information
• Delivery of presentation (clarity and voice projection)
• Logical sequence of discussion
• Choice of visual aids

Each committee member shall write a brief description and evaluation of the student’s performance on oral examination on the Faculty Comment Sheet (attached) and submit the comment sheet to the advisor, who with the committee, shall then determine whether the student passed or did not pass the oral component of the examination. A copy of committee members’ Score Sheets and Comments Sheets will be given to the student. The advisor shall then submit a recommendation of “pass” or “not pass” to the Director of the PhD Program. An initial finding of “not pass” will mean that the student will be given the option either to drop out of the program or to take the oral examination one additional time.

If the second option is chosen, a time will be established within three months of the “not pass” for a second attempt at the oral component of the comprehensive examination. The student and advisor will work together to formulate a plan. “Not pass” on the second oral re-examination will mark the end of the student’s progression and the student shall withdraw from the program.

The results of the oral component shall be communicated to the student immediately. The advisor is responsible for this communication and all other procedural communications appropriate to the comprehensive examination process. Students shall successfully complete both components of the comprehensive examination in order to be admitted to candidacy for the PhD degree.

**Faculty Guidelines and Procedures**

All committee members are required to:

• Record their evaluation on the *PhD Comprehensive Exam Scoring Sheet* Form found in the PhD Student Handbook.
• Comment either directly on the comprehensive examination paper or on the Faculty Comment Sheet section of the Scoring Sheet, which should be signed. The examining committee member will fill out two Faculty Comment Sheets, one for the written examination and another for the oral examination.
• Comment on the positive as well as on the negative aspects of the examination, specifically remarking upon items rated two or below and identifying them by number (written examination only).
• Return the student’s examination, Scoring Sheet, and Faculty Comment Sheets to the advisor within the one week deadline for the written examination and immediately after the oral examination (all sheets are retained by the advisor and a copy will be provided to the student).
Prior to scoring the examination, the examining committee shall decide on the technical merit of the paper based on the following criteria:

- Grammar and spelling
- Organization of paper (clear and logical sentence structure)

In the event that the technical merit of the paper is deemed unacceptable by the examining committee, the paper shall not be scored, and returned to the student. The student shall have two weeks to make improvements and resubmit the paper to the advisor.

The scoring system provides an objective way to indicate whether the student has addressed the stated areas of evaluation. Each criterion needs to be considered separately so that performance on one does not affect the assessment of another. If a committee member’s opinion regarding a more effective approach is based on the literature or course work to which the student has been exposed, then such an opinion is reason for deducting points. However, a faculty member’s greater expertise and practice knowledge should not be grounds for deducting points but serve as useful comments without penalty.

Scores of three (3) or below on the written examination should be addressed on the Scoring Sheet in an objective tone and instruct the student by giving examples of what should have met the criterion for a higher score. Penalties for omissions should be accompanied by suggestions on how to condense elsewhere or better focus the content. The “not pass” examination requires clear comment on problem areas, distinguishing between those that are major and minor.

Positive comments should identify the strengths of the written and oral components of the comprehensive examination. It may not reflect the capability of the student, who may have concentrated on specific criteria and not always addressed broader areas. An offer to discuss the examination in person would be especially beneficial if a committee member has recognized flaws attributable to haste or touched on questions that the student may not have considered. Informative and considerate comments are helpful to passing and not passing students alike.

**Sample statements identifying strengths in the comprehensive examination**

- Ideas are logically expressed and paper is well organized.
- Problem is clearly and concisely stated.
- Relevant research has been succinctly and critically reviewed.
- Creative approach to problem is demonstrated, as well as an adequate synthesis of theory/clinical data to arrive at appropriate solutions.
- Valid evaluation measures have been identified.

**Sample statements identifying weaknesses in the comprehensive examination**
The main problem is not identified or poorly described.
- The setting is not defined.
- The discussion of whether the research instruments were reliable and valid needs to be expanded.
- It is not clear what impact the proposed intervention will have on the defined population. Desired outcomes described are too broad in nature and not measurable. The outcomes are not reflective of research/literature presented in the paper.
- The rationale for selected methods or theoretical perspective is questionable.
- There is a lack of application of the selected theoretical framework to other components of the paper.

**Notification of Successful Completion of Comprehensive Exams**

Upon successful completion of the comprehensive exam, the advisor and other faculty will sign the *Admission to Candidacy* Form. The Faculty Advisor should initiate this process and should forward the signed form to the Director of the PhD Program. The form can be found at the CON website under “Current Students” then “Forms” then “PhD Student Forms”.

The Advisor should publicize successful defense completion to the PhD Program Faculty and PhD Students via eConnections, citing the date and title of the presentation.

**Post Comprehensive Exam Advisement**

1. The Advisor will share with the student the faculty comments and scoring sheets from the Written and Oral Comprehensive Exam.
2. Review the written comprehensive examination for revisions for journal publication.
3. Select the journal for manuscript submission of the written portion of the exam (once successfully passed).
4. Mentor the student to submit the manuscript for journal submission within one month of the oral exam completion. This paper, if supportive of the student’s final dissertation research question, may be approved by the student’s committee for inclusion in the published dissertation compendium.
5. Notify the Office of the Doctoral Program when submission is complete using the “Admission to Candidacy Form”.

**At a Glance—Summary of Comprehensive Examination Procedure**

The written and oral components of the comprehensive examination are to be conducted within six months of completion of course work according to Plan of Study.

- During the final semester of course work or thereafter, meet with advisor to review the examination process and initiate arrangements for examination procedures:
  - Discuss ideas for topic
  - Discuss ideas for type of paper
Identify potential committee members
Identify potential dates for written and oral examination

After successful completion of course work, meet with advisor to:
- Confirm topic and submit outline of paper
- Determine type paper
- Select committee members. Seek CGS approval for external mentors.
- Develop the outline for the paper
- Set dates for written and oral examination. The oral examination must be conducted within two weeks after successful completion of written examination.
- Fill out and submit the PhD in Nursing Comprehensive Examination Application Form. Reserve room for oral exam, with AV and distance communication. Upon successful completion of the comprehensive exam, the advisor and other faculty will sign the Admission to Candidacy Form.