

105 COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

Updated 2021

105.1 – Overview

The purpose of the Comprehensive Exam is to assess the student's ability to apply, in an integrative fashion, knowledge from two or more areas of the curriculum (clinical theory, practice, policy, research or field) to an issue of significance to clinical social work (theory, practice, policy, research or field). The issue selected is optimally, but not necessarily, one that will have a direct connection to the student's dissertation.

The Comprehensive Exam is a first authored peer reviewed publication-quality manuscript based on new work. Paper topics should be relevant to clinical social work and include implications for future practice and research. No previously published or presented work may be used for the Comprehensive Exam. Acceptable types of Comprehensive Exams include but not limited to:

- Conceptual article that draws from existing research and theoretical literature to advance understanding of issues related to clinical social work. A conceptual paper typically integrates two theoretical lenses to deepen understanding of a clinically relevant concept as well as include a case illustration.
- Research report of qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods findings that are preliminary and advance knowledge in clinical social work.
- Review article that summarizes previously published research. Such articles support conclusions of potential theoretical, clinical, or practical importance to clinical social work.

105.2 – Educational Objectives

- Engage and take a leadership role in scholarship advancing the knowledge relevant to clinical social work
- Work closely with a Research Advisor in developing a research idea that results in peer reviewed publication
- Discover and gain experience in the process to publish a first-authored, peer-reviewed publication
- Reflect on the writing process and act on said reflection by producing a paper of significance for the social work community

105.3 – Mentoring for the Comprehensive Exam

Advising for the preparation of the Comprehensive Exam manuscript will be led by the student's Research Adviser (RA) assigned by the Program Director in consultation with the student, during the second summer of classes.

Research Advisor, who is usually a member of the School's resident faculty or long term adjunct faculty, will:

1. assist the student in developing a research internship plan;
2. assist the student in identifying and refining a preliminary area of study and preliminary plan for the Comprehensive Exam; and
3. oversee completion of the Comprehensive Exam manuscript.

During the Research Internship the RA will meet regularly with the student (weekly or bi-weekly). The RA is required to send periodic reports to the Ph.D. Program Director to document student progress. Monitoring of progress toward completion of the Comprehensive Exam is part of the RA's role. Overall administration of the Comprehensive Exam and approval and grading of the final Comprehensive Exam manuscript is the responsibility of the Ph.D. Program Director.

Students will also participate in an "Independent Study" course during the second and third summers that is designed to support their work on the Comprehensive Exam. Additionally, second year students are required to participate in a Comprehensive Exam Seminar during their second year designed to support students' completion of the exam. The small group seminar meets online 6 times a year. Post-Resident students are also encouraged to participate in the Comprehensive Exam Seminar.

105.4 – Comprehensive Exam Process

Each student will work with a Research Advisor in the development of the Comprehensive Exam. Students are expected to meet regularly with their Research Advisor (weekly or every other week) as they advance in the development of the paper. Typical steps in developing a Comprehensive Exam include:

- Identify and articulate a topic of relevance and importance to clinical social work knowledge and practice
- Conduct a formal review and critique of both the theoretical and empirical literature pertaining to the topic of study
- Plan and report a conceptual framework orienting the proposed study
- Identify and critique the limitations of the relevant literature and articulate the research implications inherent in the literature
- Complete a clearly written and well-organized manuscript ready for publication conforming to the standard publication expectations of the target journal.

The final version of the comprehensive exam should follow submission instructions of the targeted journal and will typically include:

- Clearly identified research question or topic in the Title
- An abstract of 200 words or fewer, clearly stating the core thesis or argument of the manuscript, and 3-5 keywords
- A conceptual framework for the study. A conceptual framework provides one or more lenses through which the research problem is viewed. The lens can be one or more psychological such as psychodynamic theories (e.g., Winnicott, Kohut, Intersubjectivity) or sociological theories such as Neoliberalism or Intersectionality that explain certain phenomena in considerable detail; it can be research perspectives such as those of social psychologists or cognitive scientists; and it can be constructs used to conceptualize the phenomenon of interest (such as social isolation). Note how this conceptual framework will add to existing knowledge
- Review of the relevant theoretical and recent empirical literature pertinent to the topic
- Identification of the limitations of prior theoretical and empirical literature
- Articulations of the relevance and importance of the study to clinical social work
- Description of methodology, including the data sources employed (case materials, qualitative and/or quantitative data) and measure utilized if relevant
- Description of analysis and findings

- Discussion that integrates new data or findings with prior literature and/or empirical findings and addresses implications for clinical social work practice research, and/or policy
- A complete reference list. A minimum of twenty citations should be included. Use APA 7 citation and language format (or citation required by target journal), using inclusive language that is non-stigmatizing
- Clearly identify the journal to which the Comprehensive Exam will be submitted.
- Complete a well organized and clearly written manuscript that should typically be 20 double-spaced pages in length, excluding abstract, figures/tables and references (length may differ based on the requirement of the student's selected target journal)

It is expected that students will work on the Comprehensive Exam during their research internship and complete the Comprehensive Exam by the end of December following their third summer.

Manuscript due date for independent review: December 31 following the third summer.

105.5 – Evaluation of the Comprehensive Exam

When the student has completed the Comprehensive Exam paper and the Research Advisor approves of its completion, the student will then submit the final, revised manuscript to the Ph.D. Program Coordinator (sswphd@smith.edu) for an independent peer review process by a faculty member, other than the Research Advisor. Evaluation of the Comprehensive Exam by an independent reviewer is the responsibility of the SSW faculty and will be completed within 4 weeks from the time of submission. Review time during summer months may be longer.

The independent reviewer will read a student's Comprehensive Exam and evaluate the manuscript with the purpose of strengthening the manuscript for its submission to a journal. The evaluation will be structured and based on a rubric that assess each part of the manuscript (e.g., abstract, introduction and literature review, methodology and analysis, findings and/or discussion, values and ethics, and format). The following criteria are considered when evaluating the Exam:

- Clarity, timeliness and importance of the study question or topic to clinical social work
- Quality of the review of prior theoretical and empirical literature, including explicit attention to recent highly regarded publications in this area of study
- Clarity and appropriateness of the conceptual framework of the study
- Appropriateness and quality of data sources employed
- Quality of data analysis employed
- Coherence and quality of the discussion of the study
- Clear statement of implications for clinical practice, policy and research
- Quality of recommendations offered and their clear linkage to study data or findings
- Overall organization and coherence of the manuscript including clarity of writing
- Consistency with social work values and ethics
- Fit of manuscript to APA formatting conventions (or the conventions of the target journal, if other than APA).

The Comprehensive Exam paper is graded on a Pass, Marginal Pass, or Fail basis. The rubric is included in Appendix E of this PhD Program Handbook. If a student receives a Pass, the independent reviewer may still provide recommendations to strengthen the manuscript. If a student receives a "Marginal Pass" or "Fail", the Research Advisor will support the student in making revisions (clarifying reviewer comments, reading revisions based on written feedback, etc.). Final versions of the Comprehensive Exam manuscript that received a "Pass" or "Marginal Pass" grade will be approved by the Research Advisor. An exam that received a "Fail" grade will be sent out for an additional independent review by another faculty member before it can be approved. The Comprehensive Exam manuscript may be submitted for approval up to three times. If a failing grade is assigned upon the third submission, the student will be dismissed from the program.

Finally, to receive a passing grade and transcript credit for this requirement, each student must document proof of submission of the Comprehensive Exam manuscript to the peer reviewed journal of their choosing after it has received a passing grade. This may take the form of a return receipt for post or an email message from the journal documenting receipt of the manuscript. The name and contact information for the target journal must be included along with a receipt date. These materials are to be submitted to the Ph.D. Program Coordinator (sswphd@smith.edu). Final approval of the Comprehensive Exam manuscript is the responsibility of the Ph.D. Program Director.