Social-Personality Area (SP) Comprehensive Exams

The comprehensive exam must be completed after the M.A. and after advancement to candidacy for the Ph.D. Students can choose one of three avenues to complete their Comprehensive Exams:
1. Take a traditional essay exam
2. Write a Psych Bulletin style review (narrative review or meta-analysis)
3. Write AND submit a full grant (e.g., NRSA F31 or equivalent)

After completion of the M.A. and advancement to candidacy, students, in consultation with their major advisor, should form a committee for the Comprehensive examination. The committee must consist of five members (one of whom must be an outside member).

Guidelines for Option 1: traditional written essay exam

Students may take their examination in any three of the traditional areas of social psychology (e.g., attraction, altruism, aggression, attitudes and behavior, conformity, emotions, cultural and social influence, group processes, persuasion, prejudice, scientific methodology, and so forth) and/or in any of the social psychological topics of special interest to our SP faculty and students. For example, Elaine Hatfield’s students may especially be interested in love, sexual desire, or emotion; Chuck Mueller’s students in aggression or more applied areas; Kristin Pauker’s students in prejudice and intergroup relations. Students and their advisors will select the three topics to be covered.

1. The committee is responsible for constructing and grading the examination. They will write seven questions designed to test the candidate’s knowledge of social-personality psychology as described in the introduction above. The questions should be designed to test the student’s knowledge of the material typically covered in traditional Social Psychology texts and journals and in the students’ special interests within the SP program.
2. The chair and the candidate will select a time for the examination and arrange for the specific place, hours, and proctoring of the examination. The examination will generally be scheduled for a time during the regular fall or spring semester.
3. The candidate will not see the questions until the time of the exam. They may write for two hours on Day 1 (selecting 2 out of 3 questions) and for three hours on Day 2 (selecting 3 out of 4 questions). The exam may be handwritten or typed on a computer.
4. The examination shall be written by the candidate without books, notes, or reference materials, and without collaboration of any kind.
5. Generally, committee members will grade the entire examination. On occasion, if a candidate has selected an extremely specialized area, all committee members may not feel qualified to evaluate every question. However, it is expected that topics will be sufficiently broad so that at least two committee members will be able to grade each question. Members may, of course, consult with experts in the area under consideration to make sure their knowledge is up-to-date in these specialized areas.

Guidelines for Option 2: Write a Psych Bulletin style review (narrative review or meta-analysis)

1. The student must submit their proposed topic (2-3 pages of text describing the goals of the paper) and a list of references for approval by the committee.
2. The committee will assess whether the proposal has the potential to make a valuable contribution to the field. If not approved, the student will receive feedback in order to create a more acceptable proposal and resubmit until approved.
3. Once approved, the student writes the paper independently without feedback.
4. In general, the paper should provide a thorough, comprehensive, and integrated review of the theoretical and empirical literature on some important social psychological problem. The paper should offer original insights, perspectives, or new critiques of the area.
5. There is no formal limit on the length of the paper, but the recommended length is no more than 50 pages. The paper must be written in APA format.

Guidelines for Option 3: Write AND submit a full grant (e.g., NRSA F31 or equivalent)

1. The student must submit their specific aims and a list of references for approval by the committee. The student must also solicit one committee member (normally their advisor) to agree to mentor them through the grant submission process.
2. The committee will assess whether the proposal has the potential to make a valuable contribution to the field. If not approved, the student will receive feedback in order to create a more acceptable proposal and resubmit until approved.
3. Once approved, the student writes the grant independently without feedback.
4. The written product to be evaluated will be the specific aims, main research proposal, and training plan (if applicable). The student should follow the funding agencies’ requirements for length, font, formatting, etc.
5. Once the written portion has been graded by the committee, the student must submit the grant to officially pass their comprehensive exam. This will take planning, as grant deadlines are normally set dates throughout the year. It is highly encouraged that the student solicit feedback and guidance from their advisor before submitting the grant.

Grading for all comprehensive exams

The examination shall be graded on the following scale (using fractional scale values as appropriate):

5: Outstanding: Unusual in a graduate student.
4: Very good: Better than average.
3: Average performance: Passing although deficient in minor details.
2: Inadequate: Clearly below average performance.
1: Very inadequate: Clearly inferior performance.

1. If the student’s examination grade is 4.0 or higher (on the average), the candidate passes with distinction; if 3.0 or higher, the examination is passed; if 2.99 or below, the examination is failed.
2. Unless unavoidable delays occur, the graders shall report results to the committee chair within two weeks of the receipt of the written product. The committee chair shall inform the candidate and committee members of the results of the examination within three weeks of its completion.
3. Students are allowed to take the traditional comprehensive examination two times, whereas a failed comprehensive review paper or grant proposal may only be revised once. If students still have not passed it, they may petition the SP faculty and ask to be allowed to try again, explaining their special circumstances.

Download forms at: https://manoa.hawaii.edu/graduate/content/forms