A GUIDE TO THE MPA COMPREHENSIVE EXAM

A guide to provide support to Villanova MPA students to apply, prepare, and take the MPA Comprehensive Exam.

Villanova Master of Public Administration Program

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Welcome Villanova MPA students to the official "Guide to Comprehensive Exam"!

This guide is designed to help prepare graduate students to study and take the comprehensive exams. It is divided into **seven** main sections:

1. Department Guidelines for the Comprehensive Exam
2. Expectations and Tips for Studying for the Comprehensive Exam
3. Learning Support Services, Managing Stress, and Time Management
4. Comprehensive Exam Grading Rubric
5. Timeline for the Comprehensive Exam
6. Suggestions on Examination Day
7. Accessing Blackboard and Submitting Responses

The sections that follow provide an overview of the Comprehensive Exam as well as offer some helpful studying tips. The Guide ends with a look at the timeline for the comprehensive exam as well as what students should expect on examination day.

We hope this guide is helpful to you.

Sincerely,

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Department Guidelines for the Comprehensive Exam

Purpose:

The comprehensive exam serves as a capstone experience in the MPA program. It is designed to provide students with the opportunity to integrate and to apply the knowledge gained through their coursework in the program.

Structure:

The exam consists of three essay questions addressing themes and issues broad enough to permit students to use theories, concepts, practices and examples from **any** of the courses taken in the MPA program. Students must answer **two** of the three questions.

Each exam question is divided into three parts – knowledge, skills, and abilities. The "Knowledge" portion focuses on demonstrating understanding of specific theories, concepts, practices, scholars, and content from all MPA courses. The "Skills" portion requires students to apply theories, concepts, and practices to specific examples. The "Abilities" portion focuses on critical thinking and evaluation of ideas. Students are permitted to use notes and texts in writing their exams.

Expectations:

In order to pass the exam, students accurately apply ideas (i.e., theories, concepts, practices, and examples) learned in the MPA program and offer a reasonable argument defending their responses to two of the three questions. In order to earn a **Pass with Distinction**, students must link their responses to the scholarly research using the names of scholars and theories and the details from examples and case studies. More details about grading Comprehensive Exams can be found at page 6.

It is recommended that students prepare for the comprehensive exam by revisiting course readings, studying class notes, and re-reading assignments and papers in order to sharpen their understanding of important theories, concepts, practices, and examples covered in those courses. Finally, students must use in-text citations for all sources used in responding to the questions. No formal bibliography is required.

In addition to the instructions provided above, **all students taking the comprehensive exams are expected to uphold Villanova's [Academic Integrity Policy and Code](#).**

Students may form study groups to prepare for the exam, but it is the students' responsibility to form the study groups. **Discussing past exams with students/alums who have taken the MPA comps is prohibited and will be considered a violation of Villanova's Academic Integrity Policy.**

Evaluation:

All essays will be checked against a database of prior examinations and Internet sources using anti-plagiarism software (Safe Assign).   Then, the Comprehensive Exams Committee, comprised by three faculty members teaching in the MPA program, will evaluate the exams. The MPA Director will report the results (Pass with distinction, Pass, Fail) to the the student via email. The MPA Director will consult with appropriate faculty if any problems, such as accuracy, arise with the use of ideas from their respective courses.

Registration:

At the time of application, to be eligible to take the exam, students must have **earned** at least 24 credits (eight courses) and have a 3.00 GPA or higher. **It is highly recommended to have completed MPA 8011 through MPA 8061 (all core/required courses) prior to taking the comprehensive exam.** Students must register for the comprehensive exam by the dates listed on the graduate academic calendar. To register, students fill out and submit the "Comprehensive Exam Registration Form", available here. After the application deadline, the Department of Public Administration will review students applications for approval.

Logistics:

The comprehensive exam is administered online three times annually. Dates for comprehensive exams are set by the Office of Graduate Studies and are found on the Graduate Academic Calendar and the MPA Calendar. Once the application is complete, eligible students will be registered for a special course in Blackboard. Prior to taking the exam, it is recommended that students review the guidelines and instructions, accessed via the Blackboard course. Students can take the exam at any time during a 24-hour window, beginning on Friday at 11:59pm EST and closing on Saturday at 11:59pm EST, on the scheduled exam date.

Once students enter Blackboard and begin the exam, they will have **three hours** to complete and submit their responses.

Questions:

Questions about the comprehensive exam should be directed to the Assistant Director of Student Services. **For technical issues, please call the University Help Desk at 610-519-7777.**

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Comprehensive Exam Requirements:

- The exam requires a **simple in-text citation** for each work that is cited (e.g., Stillman, 2015) or from class notes (e.g., Jacobs, 2014).
- It is important to demonstrate your knowledge of the public administration literature **by discussing theories and their sources.**
- There is no need to provide a list of references, unless you are using sources outside the curriculum (which is not required).
- Each comprehensive exam will be evaluated by the Comprehensive Exam Committee based on **two important criteria**:
    - How well did the student demonstrate **mastery of the public administration literature and curriculum.**
    - How well did the student respond to **each** part of the question. (There are three parts to each of the two questions).

Since this is an **essay exam, students will be expected to write in an essay format. Outlines will not be accepted.

Tips for Studying for the Comprehensive Exam

This section details some effective ways to prepare for the comprehensive exam:
- Make sure to keep **all books, syllabi, notes, and assignments** from the MPA program before taking the comprehensive exams.
    - If you are missing any resources please contact the Assistant Director of Student Services
- **Review each syllabus** for the classes you have taken and identify key themes discussed in each course.
- Develop a list of themes that are discussed **throughout** these courses.
- It is **not necessary** to review the video lectures in preparation for the exam.
- Develop an **outline** of each theme as it relates to the kinds of questions that will be asked during the exam.   Also, include all scholars, dates, page numbers (if it's a direct quotation), and case studies that you are relying upon in the outline. **This way, you will have all the information handy for the exam.**
    - **KNOWLEDGE:** What are the **key theories** associated with each theme?
    - **SKILLS:** What are the **central practices** that a public administrator should consider regarding each theme?
    - **ABILITIES:** How would you best **analyze or evaluate** each theme as it relates to the field of public service?
- You are welcome to use case studies and professional examples. But, make sure that you are referring to the **public administration literature** in your exam responses**.**
    - The key is to USE BOTH.   The exam is about theory AND practice which is a central feature of our curriculum.

- Form or join a **study group** (either virtual or in-person) for academic support and collaboration before the exam. Make sure that you **do not discuss any content of the exam** with anyone who already has taken the exam.
- Schedule an appointment with **Villanova's Writing Center** if you would like to have someone help you practice your writing skills.

Learning Support Services and Managing Stress

- Requesting Accommodations:
  - Be prepared to present documentation **to Learning Support Services** that establishes eligibility for services and supports request for specific accommodation as soon as possible.
  - Students would need to obtain approval from Learning Support Services for an accommodation and notify the Assistant Director of Student Services in advance of taking the comprehensive exam**.**

- Managing Stress:
  - The Counseling Center is available to help you with personal and emotional concerns. With a variety of services and resources, the Counseling Center helps students function optimally with regard to emotional, academic, social and psychological issues.
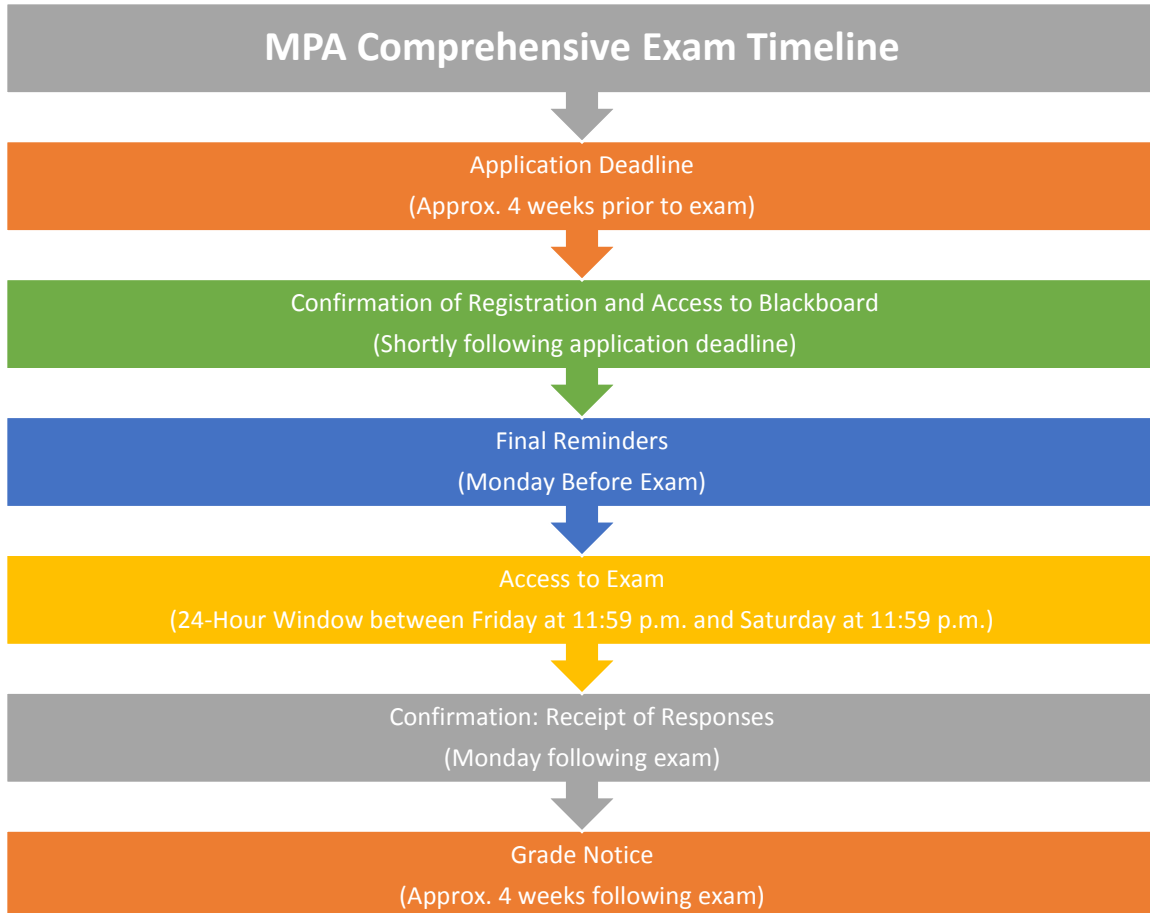
Comprehensive Exam Grading Rubric

Rubric for MPA Comprehensive Exam
- For the response to be scored as a "Pass," it must minimally meet the "Pass" requirements listed below for <u>all three</u> categories & sub-components
- For the response to be scored as a "Pass with Distinction," it must meet the "High Pass" requirements listed below for <u>all three</u> categories & sub-components.
- Responses earning a "Fail" in <u>one or more</u> of the categories listed below will be scored as a "Fail."

Category	Fail	Pass	Pass with Distinction
Completeness of Answer	Response demonstrates a lack of understanding and the answer is incomplete. All parts of the question are not sufficiently answered.	Response demonstrates adequate understanding of the question. Factual information is provided and all parts of the question are answered.	Response demonstrates thorough understanding of the question. Response goes beyond factual information demonstrating nuanced understanding of the question. All parts of the question are thoroughly answered.
Evidence of Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities	Knowledge: Little to no integration of theory and practice is present and provides less than three sources. Response is factually inaccurate and/or lacks theoretical foundation.	Knowledge: Each essay demonstrates an evidence-based understanding of specific theories, concepts, best practices, scholars (citing at least three sources using in-text citations) and the ability to make connections and identify themes across multiple subjects.	Knowledge: Each essay demonstrates an excellent/creative/insightful evidence-based understanding of specific theories, concepts, best practices, scholars (citing more than three sources using APA in-text citations and a References page) and the ability to make connections and identify themes across multiple subjects.

	Skills: Does not sufficiently apply knowledge to practical examples	Skills: Essay sufficiently applies the theories, concepts, and best practices to meaningful examples.	Skills: Essay expertly applies the theories, concepts, and best practices to meaningful examples.
	Critical Thinking Ability: Essay lacks the ability to evaluate the pros/cons of application of ideas	Critical Thinking Ability Essay evaluates the pros/cons of practical application of ideas; or the evaluation includes a benefits/costs examination of suggested ideas to different contexts	Critical Thinking Ability Outstanding evaluation of the pros/cons of practical application of ideas; and the evaluation of benefits/costs of ideas to different contexts
Quality of Writing & Style of Writing	Response contains noticeable errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics so that the reader is distracted from the content. There is limited organization in the response.	Response is free of most errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics so that the reader is minimally distracted from the content. The response is well organized.	Response is free of errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics that would distract the reader from the content. The response is well-organized and persuasive.

Timeline for the Comprehensive Exam

MPA Comprehensive Exam Timeline

Application Deadline (Approx. 4 weeks prior to exam)

Confirmation of Registration and Access to Blackboard (Shortly following application deadline)

Final Reminders (Monday Before Exam)

Access to Exam (24-Hour Window between Friday at 11:59 p.m. and Saturday at 11:59 p.m.)

Confirmation: Receipt of Responses (Monday following exam)

Grade Notice (Approx. 4 weeks following exam)

Timeline Details

- **Application Deadlines:** All students must apply for the comprehensive exams and submit applications by the dates submitted on the Graduate Academic Calendar.
  - **Application Form** and **General Exam Policies:** Available via Graduate Studies
- **Confirmation of Registration:** After the application deadline, all students will receive a confirmation e-mail from the Assistant Director of Student Services confirming enrollment.
- **Final Reminders and Preparation:** On the Monday before the exam, you will receive an email from the Assistant Director of Student Services with final reminders and preparation information.

- o **Please note:** The exam component will not be visible in the Blackboard course page until Friday at 11:59 p.m.)
- **Exam Window:** Students have a 24-hour window to access and begin the exam beginning at 11:59 p.m. on Friday through 11:59 p.m. on Saturday evening. Once the exam has been opened, students will have 3 hours to complete and submit the exam.
  - o **Please note:** There is a 15-minute grace period to submit responses beyond the 3 hour limit. Any exams submitted beyond this deadline may not be accepted for review. If issues are encountered during the submission, please send an e-mail immediately to the Assistant Director of Student Services with your responses.
- **Confirmation of Responses:** On the Monday following the exam, you will receive confirmation from the Assistant Director of Student Services regarding the submission of your responses. If there were any issues collecting your responses, you will receive notification at this time.
- **Grade Notice:** Approximately 4 weeks following the exam (time may change due to the number of students sitting for the exam), you will receive notification of your exam grade (Pass with Distinction, Pass, or Fail) by the MPA Director.

Suggestions on Examination Day

- Select the **best time of day** for you to take the exam.
- Select a **convenient and quiet location.**
- **Have your prepared outlines available.**
- After receiving the prompts for three questions, **select the two questions** with which you are most familiar.
- Place each question you intend to answer at the top of the page in **separate Word documents.**
- Sketch out a **mini-outline** for each question that you intend to answer.
- As you create the outline, make sure you cover **each** part of the question. Each comprehensive exam question has **three parts.**
- **Time management is key!** Set your watch or phone for 1:15 for the first question. Then move onto the second question. This will give you 30 minutes to review your responses at the end to make sure you have answered all **three parts of the question.**

Accessing Blackboard and Submitting Responses

- [Login to MyNova](#)

- Select the Blackboard Learn link
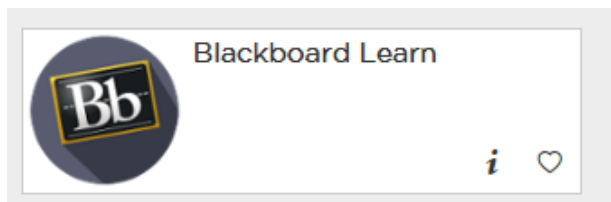
- In the "My Courses" section, select the MPA Comprehensive Exam course
 - "e.g. Fall18_MPA_Comps: MPA Comps"
- Review the Content Homepage

- When the exam is available (Friday at 11:59 p.m.), you will see the exam component in the Content Homepage.

- Once you enter the exam, you will see three questions. Read each question carefully. **Select TWO questions to answer.**
- Write your responses to each question in a separate Microsoft Word file. Remember to provide simple parenthetical citations (Author Year, Page #) for any sources utilized in your answers.

- Once you have completed your responses, save the file to your local drive using the following format: LastNameQuestion #.docx (For example: Boston1.docx).
  - *Note: You may need to log back into Blackboard before submitting your exam. It will automatically log you out of the program after 1 hour of inactivity.

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- Attach your file to the question you responded to by selecting the "Browse My Computer" option beneath the question.
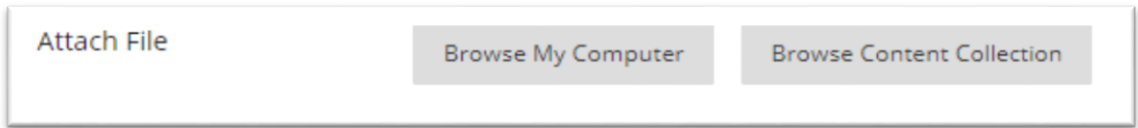
- Select "Save and Submit" when both responses have been uploaded.

- After you have submitted your responses, you will receive the a confirmation such as the following: