

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 Exams”!

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,

Catherine E. Wilson, Ph.D.
Associate Professor and Chair
Department of Public Administration

Bridget Boston, MPA
Associate Director
Department of Public Administration

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 **High Pass**, students must link their responses to the scholarly research using the names of scholars and theories and the details from examples and case studies.

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 should use in-text citations in 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. **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 MPA Director and at least two other faculty members teaching in the MPA program will evaluate the exams. The MPA Director will report the results (pass or fail) to the Graduate Studies Office, which will then notify the student. 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:

To be eligible to take the exam, students must have completed at least 24 credits (eight courses) and have a 3.00 GPA or higher. **It is highly recommended to have completed MPA 8001 through MPA 8004 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 the “Comprehensive Exam Registration Form”, available on the Graduate Studies Website, and submit it to the Department of Public Administration via email michele.griffin@villanova.edu or mail (Villanova University, St. Augustine Center - Room 486, 800 Lancaster Avenue, Villanova, PA 19085).

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](#) as well as the Public Administration Department Website. 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 at 12:00am EST and closing 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 MPA Program Director or Assistant Director. **For technical issues, please call the University Help Desk at 610-519-7777.**

Revised: April 27, 2015

Expectations:

- 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.
- **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 MPA Director in advance of taking the comprehensive exam.
- Managing Stress:
 - Research breathing exercises and other stress relieving exercises
 - Get a full night's sleep – **DON'T CRAM!**
 - Make sure you prepare well! Again, this means **creating an outline for each important theme in the MPA curriculum**, answering the three parts of the question
 - Be confident in yourself!

Time Management

- Bring your outlines to a **practice session**
- Practice a timed session for one or more questions. Make sure to set your timer for **1 hour and 15 minutes** for each question.

Comprehensive Exam Grading Rubric

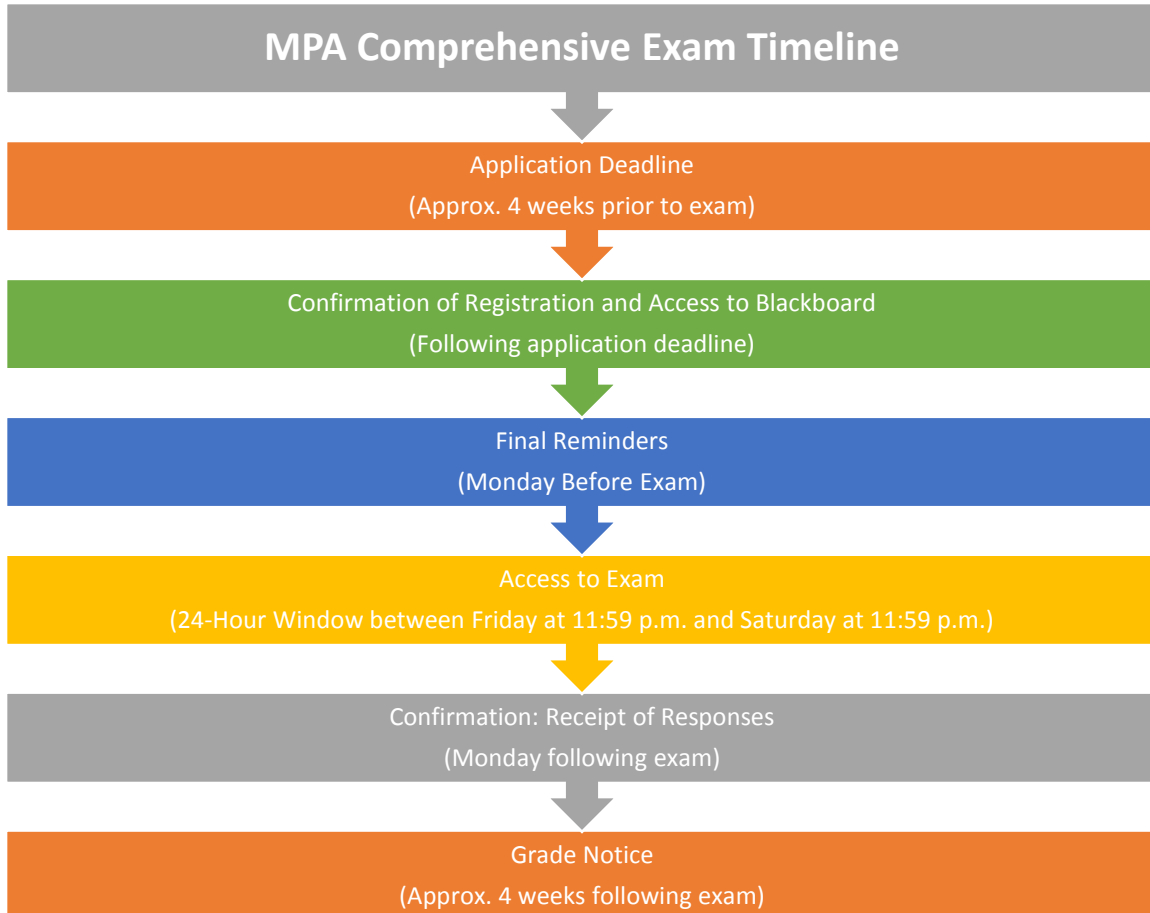
Rubric for MPA Comprehensive Exam

- For the response to be scored as a “Pass,” it must minimally meet the “Pass” requirements listed below for all three categories & sub-components
- For the response to be scored as a “High Pass,” it must meet the “High Pass” requirements listed below for all three categories & sub-components.
- Responses earning a “Fail” in one or more of the categories listed below will be scored as a “Fail.”

Category	Fail	Pass	High Pass
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	<u>Knowledge:</u> 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.	<u>Knowledge:</u> 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.	<u>Knowledge:</u> 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.

	<p><u>Skills:</u> Does not sufficiently apply knowledge to practical examples</p> <p><u>Critical Thinking Ability:</u> Essay lacks the ability to evaluate the pros/cons of application of ideas</p>	<p><u>Skills:</u> Essay sufficiently applies the theories, concepts, and best practices to meaningful examples.</p> <p><u>Critical Thinking Ability</u> Essay evaluates the pros/cons of practical application of ideas; or the evaluation includes a benefits/costs examination of suggested ideas to different contexts</p>	<p><u>Skills:</u> Essay expertly applies the theories, concepts, and best practices to meaningful examples.</p> <p><u>Critical Thinking Ability</u> Outstanding evaluation of the pros/cons of practical application of ideas; and the evaluation of benefits/costs of ideas to different contexts</p>
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



Timeline Details

- **Application Deadlines:** All students must apply to sit 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 two confirmation e-mails: 1) Official Registration Confirmation from the Dean of Graduate Studies, and 2) Confirmation and Details from the Public Administration Department Chairperson
- **Final Reminders and Preparation:** On the Monday before the exam, you will receive an email from the Department Assistant Director with final reminders and preparation information.

- **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.
 - **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 to the Department Chairperson and Assistant Director with your responses.
- **Confirmation of Responses:** On the Monday following the exam, you will receive confirmation from the Department Assistant Director 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 or Fail) by the Department Chairperson.
 - **Please note:** You will also receive final verification of your grade by the Dean of Graduate Studies shortly after the Department's confirmation.

Suggestions on Examination Day

- Select the **best time of day** for you to take the exam.
- Select a **convenient and quiet location**.
- Bring your **prepared outlines** with you.
- 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](#)

The screenshot shows the Villanova University myNOVA portal. At the top is the Villanova University logo and a search bar with the text "What would you like to do? e.g. Check my wildcard balance". Below the search bar are two notification boxes: "What do you think?" and "Chat with UNIT's Help Desk". The "What do you think?" box contains the text: "Send us your feedback so we can continue to improve your myNOVA experience! Would you like anything to be added or changed in the portal? We value your opinion, let us know what..." and a "view more..." link. The "Chat with UNIT's Help Desk" box contains the text: "Need help? Chat with UNIT's help desk representative Monday - Thursday 9AM - 7PM and Friday's 9AM - 5PM." Below the notifications is an "Areas of Interest" section with four tiles: "Check Villanova Email Undergraduate Students", "Check Villanova Email Faculty, Staff", "Check Villanova Email Graduate Students", and "Blackboard Learn". Each tile has an information icon (i) and a heart icon.

- Select the Blackboard Learn link

A close-up of the "Blackboard Learn" tile from the "Areas of Interest" section. It features the Blackboard logo (a blue circle with a white "Bb" inside) on the left and the text "Blackboard Learn" in a bold, sans-serif font. Below the text are an information icon (i) and a heart icon.

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



Welcome to the MPA Comprehensive Exam!

Dear MPA Students,

Welcome to the MPA Comprehensive Exam Blackboard course page. While you will not have access to the exam until [Friday, March 16th at 11:59 PM \(EST\)](#), you do have access to this course page, the MPA Comprehensive Exam Guidelines, along with instructions for using Blackboard.

Please review these documents *thoroughly*.

A few other notes and reminders:

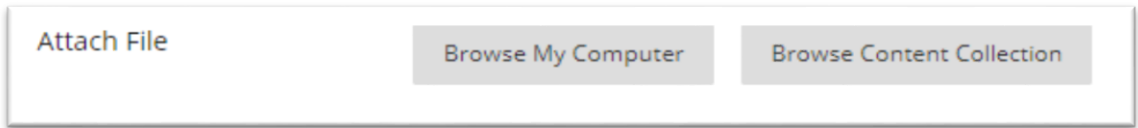
- When the exam is available (Friday at 11:59 p.m.), you will see the exam component in the Content Homepage.

MPA Comprehensive Exam

Select this link to begin the MPA Comprehensive Exam. You will first enter the exam. The test timer will begin at this point.

- 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.

- 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:

