

Northern Illinois University
School of Family and Consumer Sciences (FACS)
Applied Human Development and Family Sciences (AHDFS)

One of the requirements in nearly all NIU master's degree programs is successful completion of a comprehensive examination. The format and procedures are determined by the faculty of each area within a department. Refer to your Graduate Catalog for degree requirements. For those students completing a thesis, the oral defense of the thesis serves as the comprehensive exam.

A. Format and Content of the Comprehensive Exam

Comprehensive examinations are intended to encourage students to integrate what they have learned during their graduate studies at NIU. The examinations are "comprehensive" in that they evaluate students' scholarship and knowledge of material from all required course work and relevant current literature.

Examinations normally are given from 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., on the Friday of the sixth week of classes in the fall and spring terms. Typing, editing and printing are included in the two-hour period allotted for each question. Comprehensive examinations are not scheduled at other times or in the summer term except by special permission of the AHDFS graduate faculty. General question will be taken from 9 a.m. to noon, followed by a break from noon to 12:30 p.m. The research question will be from 12:30 to 2:30 p.m. on the day of comprehensive examinations.

Comprehensive examinations must be taken on IBM-compatible computers. Exceptions must be requested to and approved by the AHDFS graduate faculty.

Students may NOT use either of the same topics for the **Special** Question that they used for HDFS 601 or HDFS 604 projects. **Special** question is a take home examination. You will be given the question upon finishing the Research Question on the day of the comprehensive examinations. You will return the completed answer to the **Special** Question at 8 a.m. the following Monday to the graduate secretary in Wirtz Hall, Room 118.

For the **General** question, students will be allowed to choose two sub-topics from two different groups from the comps topic list, which is posted online. These two topics should **NOT** be the same as topics students used for papers in HDFS 601 or HDFS 604. For the General question only, students will be allowed to bring in 12-15 published resources, including research articles and books on theory, for each of their two sub-topics. Students may not, however, bring in any resources that they have generated, such as lists or a review of literature (other than the two hard copies of the reference list). All students are to provide two copies of a reference list for *each* of the two sub-topic resources. Students may not access any computer files during the comprehensive exam. (For **Research** question, students will not be allowed to bring in any published resources.)

Student study groups may be helpful as preparation for the exams. Refer to the AHDFS area document "*New Instructions for Studying for Comprehensive Exams,*" and consult with their academic advisors for additional assistance.

B. Procedure for Applying to take Comprehensive Examinations

Graduate students must complete at least 21 hours of coursework for an M.S. degree before taking the comprehensive examination. In addition, students must have successfully completed HDFS 601 and HDFS 604. Graduate students must complete the *Request to Take Master's Comprehensive Exam in AHDFS* form which will inform the Coordinator of Family and Child Studies (FCS) of the student's intention to take the exam. The form must be signed by the student, their advisor and the faculty member whom the student requests to write the special question. Along with the form, the student will include a check for \$20 made payable to NIU. Return form and check to the FACS graduate secretary in Wirtz Hall, Room 118. Requests to take the Comprehensive Exam must be submitted by the application due date (April 1 for the fall exam, and Oct. 1 for the spring exam).

AHDFS students must request a specific faculty member to write the **Special** question of the examination (SMFT students will be assigned a question).

The HDFS area coordinator confirms the date and time of the examination and each student's eligibility to take the examination by sending a letter to the student. Examinations are scheduled to allow ample time for evaluation prior to the date the report of results is due to the Graduate School.

In extreme circumstances, a student could postpone taking the comprehensive exam the semester it was requested. Otherwise, failure to take Comps during the requested semester will be considered a fail.

C. Evaluation Procedures

Each examination question is evaluated anonymously and independently by an evaluation committee consisting of two AHDFS area graduate faculty members.

Each question is evaluated on a pass/fail basis. Students must receive passing marks from both faculty members. In the case of disagreement between faculty members, a third reader will be assigned.

The examinations are evaluated on accuracy, objectivity, specificity, scope/breadth, organization, relevancy, clarity, documentation, appropriate references and comprehensiveness. Note that both citations and references must be in APA 6 style. Failure to cite sources will be viewed as plagiarizing and will result in an automatic failure.

D. Reporting of Examination Results

The evaluation committee returns its evaluation results to the HDFS area coordinator who informs the school chair of the results of the examination. The results are communicated to each student by their advisor within five weeks of the examination date. The school chair issues a letter reporting the results of the examination to each student and informs the Graduate School of the results. Examination results are treated confidentially.

In the event that a student fails the examination, evaluating faculty and/or the student's advisor provides constructive critiques, in writing, of the relevant examination items.

E. Retaking the Comprehensive Examination

Students who have failed the examination are allowed to take it again, or "retake" on the next scheduled examination date. (Normally, the exam is given in fall and spring semesters.) Students who retake exam questions the following semester will be asked to retake only the question(s) failed. However, students who delay retaking the exam beyond one semester (summer excluded) will be required to retake all of the questions. Students who fail the exam on their second attempt are dropped from the program.

In the event that a student passes two of the three examination questions, graduate faculty may choose to allow the student to rewrite answers to the third question during the same semester, and in the case of students planning to graduate in the same semester, before reports of examination results are due to the Graduate School. Such rewrites may be requested by the graduate faculty when items seem incomplete or unclear, when the student seems to have a fundamental grasp of the material or when a student fails the multiple-choice part of the SMFT Special question. Variations on the original question or more specific questions may be used for the rewrite.

If the student chooses to not rewrite at the designated time after being notified of the results, then the student will have to retake the failed question during the next semester's Comprehensive exam time. The student will need to apply for this retake and pay the fee again.

If a student takes the comprehensive exams in the semester in which they have been approved for graduation, the student may retake the failed questions later in the semester, for graduation in the subsequent semester. Failure at this retake will mean removal from the program.

F. Appeals of Examination results

Students who have failed the examination or failed a question and its rewrite may appeal to the HDFS area coordinator for reconsideration of the examination results. Appeals must be written and must state the grounds on which the appeal is based. The appeal will be considered at the next scheduled area faculty meeting, which may or may not occur before the rewrite date. Therefore, students wishing to take advantage of the rewrite option should do so before appealing. Students should discuss these options with their advisor.