

Kinds of Comprehensive Examinations Required of Students Enrolled in Master's Degree Programs in Education

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Statement of the problem. The problem of this study is to survey the kinds of comprehensive examinations presently required of students enrolled in master's degree programs in education in accredited institutions of higher education in the United States. More specifically, answers to the following questions are sought:

1. What is the nature of the examinations: general, major area or specialization, or both?

2. What is the form of the examinations: written, oral, or both?

3. If a *written* form is used, what type of items are included: essay, multiple choice, true and false, etc.?

4. If a *general* comprehensive examination is given, what areas are tested? In which of the tested areas are all students required to take one or more courses?

5. What changes have recently been initiated (or, are planned) regarding comprehensive examinations?

Limitation of the study. This study is limited to comprehensive examinations required of students enrolled in master's degree programs in education. It is further limited to requirements as of the 1967-68 academic year in 401 accredited institutions of higher education in the United States.

Procedure

Sample. The 401 institutions included in this study were selected in the following manner. First, reference was made to the

1965-66 *United States Office of Education Directory*.¹ Here, it appeared that 493 institutions in the United States, accredited by their appropriate regional association, offered master's degree programs in education in the 1965-66 academic year and, assumedly, in the 1967-68 academic year.

Next, a questionnaire was sent to each of the 493 institutions, but 61 institutions did not respond. Of the total number that did respond, 31 institutions asserted that they did not offer a master's degree program in education; 401 institutions asserted that they did offer such a program, and they supplied information regarding comprehensive examinations required in their master's degree programs. Four hundred one institutions constitute the sample of this study.

Collection of data. Data for the study were secured by sending the aforementioned questionnaire. Items for inclusion in the questionnaire were derived from initial reasoning and from discussion with education professors (the researcher's colleagues). Furthermore, the questionnaire was refined in cooperation with these professors.

To help ensure a high percentage of

¹ United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. *Education Directory 1965-66, Higher Education*, Part 3. Prepared by Theresa Birch Wilkins. Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966. pp. 1-224.

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return, the questionnaire was limited in length to two-thirds of a standard sheet of paper, with the covering letter comprising the rest of the sheet. Limiting the length of the questionnaire proved effective, for although no follow-up letter was sent, 87.6 percent of the total number of institutions returned a completed questionnaire.

In order to standardize procedure, a copy of the questionnaire was addressed, for each college or university, to a person (for example, a dean, a director, or a department head) considered most knowledgeable of master's degree comprehensive examination particulars. In most instances, the addressees themselves responded. In a few instances, however, a person other than the addressee responded.

Analysis of data. Data were analyzed to discover the percentage of occurrence of certain comprehensive examination particulars.

Findings

Master's degree programs in education most frequently required a comprehensive examination, rather than cited such an examination optional or not required. Specifically, 69 percent of the programs required a comprehensive examination; 26 percent did not specify this requirement; and 5 percent regarded a comprehensive examination optional. Sixty percent of the institutions that regarded a comprehensive examination optional volunteered the explanation that a thesis may be elected by the student in lieu of the comprehensive. Institutions that did not require a comprehensive examination specified some one of the following regulations instead: a seminar course that served as a final course and an examination, an oral defense of a thesis, a one-page essay, an English competency examination, or a special written project. In some institutions, the comprehensive examination has been discontinued with emphasis shifted to more stringent *admission* requirements, rather than rejection by some means at the end of the master's degree program.

Nature of comprehensive examinations. Master's degree programs most frequently required both an examination in the major area or specialization of the student and a general comprehensive examination. Specifically, 63 percent of the programs required both a major area examination and a general examination. Nine percent of the programs cited only a general examination; 27 percent, solely an examination in the major area.

Interestingly, in 1 percent of the programs, the same comprehensive examination requirement did not hold for all students. In these particular programs, varying conditions such as the following prevailed: elementary education majors took a general comprehensive examination, but secondary education students took both a general examination and an examination in their field of academic concentration; students who *did not* write a thesis took a general comprehensive examination, but students who *did* write a thesis took a comprehensive examination in their major area or specialization.

Form of comprehensive examinations. By far, master's degree programs stipulated a *written* comprehensive examination, rather than an *oral*, or both an oral and a written examination. Specifically, 57 percent of the programs required a written examination; 18 percent, both written and oral; 16 percent, oral. In 9 percent of the programs, either a written or an oral examination (or both) was required—depending on existing conditions. These conditions were voluntarily explained by a few institutions:

1. Ten of the institutions that required a written comprehensive examination required, also, an oral examination if a student did poorly in the written examination.
2. One of the institutions that required both a written and an oral examination excused a student from the oral examination if he had done acceptable work in a research seminar.
3. One of the institutions that required an oral examination explained that a written examination was substituted if agreeable to the student's committee.
4. In eight institutions, a student took either a written or an oral examination (or

both) depending on his specialization within the field of education.

5. In one institution, either a written or an oral examination (or both) was required, at the discretion of the examining committee.

6. In some institutions, a particular master's degree program was offered both with a thesis and without a thesis requirement—at the choice of the student. The thesis candidate took an oral examination on his thesis; the non-thesis candidate took a written comprehensive examination.

7. Some institutions offered:

a. A master's degree program of some title with a thesis requirement and an oral examination on the thesis

b. A master's degree program of another title with no thesis requirement but, rather, a written comprehensive examination.

Types of test items that are used in written comprehensive examinations. Pertinent findings may be categorized as follows:

1. Of those institutions that required no written general comprehensive examination, but rather a written examination in the major area or specialization of the student:

a. Sixty-two percent of the institutions required an examination that consisted solely of essay test items.

b. Sixteen percent of the institutions required an examination that consisted of essay, multiple choice, and true-false items.

c. Thirteen percent of the institutions required an examination that consisted of essay and multiple choice items.

d. In the remaining nine percent of the institutions, the test items were any one of the following: multiple choice and matching, solely multiple choice, or some miscellaneous combination of test items.

2. Of those institutions that required no written examination in the major area or specialization of the student, but rather a written general comprehensive examination:

a. Sixty-seven percent of the institutions required an examination that consisted solely of essay test items.

b. One institution used the National Teacher Examinations. However, if the student scored low, he was subsequently required to take an oral examination also.

c. The rest of the institutions required an examination that was either essay and multiple

choice, multiple choice, or multiple choice and true-false.

3. Of those institutions that required both a general comprehensive examination and a major examination:

a. Fifty-one percent of the institutions used only essay items.

b. Twenty-six percent of the institutions used essay and multiple choice items.

c. Eight percent of the institutions used essay, multiple choice, and true-false items.

d. Three percent of the institutions used only multiple choice items.

e. One percent used matching items; one percent, completion items.

f. Each of the following was used by some one institution or other: case analysis and evaluation; open book; analysis of classroom incidents; evaluations and recommendations regarding a school, a department, or a classroom; Advanced Examination in Education of the Graduate Record Examination.

Areas that are included in general comprehensive examinations. Pertinent findings may be categorized as follows:

1. Eighty-seven percent of the institutions described their general comprehensive examination by identifying areas that are tested by means of the examination. However, 13 percent of the institutions did not identify areas, but rather responded in such varying ways as:

a. The general comprehensive examination is a topical examination. It is designed to assist students to integrate ideas, concepts, and facts that are secured from a number of different sources. The questions require responses that are not restricted to a single course area.

b. The examination sweeps across course lines with national, state, or regional problems in education to solve.

c. The examination tests for foundational concepts in education plus a knowledge of what is occurring in education at the state and the national levels. Students are expected to keep abreast of the profession.

d. The examination includes professional literature, hypothetical situations, and all phases of professional education. The institution does not identify specific courses for the comprehensive examination.

e. The examination tests general fitness for the profession.

f. The examination asks the student to

assume that he is in a position to study and evaluate a school, a department, or a classroom. He is asked to recommend changes and to suggest ways that these changes may be effected. The student is asked to refrain from unsupported generalizations, but rather to give specific illustrations, to outline or diagram, and to cite references.

g. The student may choose from among items which, for the most part, are educational problems to be solved.

h. The General Aptitude Test of the Graduate Record Examination is used as the final examination in the master's degree program.

i. The Advanced Examination in Education of the Graduate Record Examination is used as the final examination in the master's degree program.

2. It has already been stated that 87 percent of the institutions characterized their general comprehensive examination as testing specific areas. The areas that were most frequently tested (in descending order) are these: Philosophy of Education; Educational Research; Educational Psychology.

Next in frequency (in descending order) are these: Curriculum; History of Education.

Next in frequency (in descending order): Tests and Measurements; Foundations of Education; Psychological Foundations.

Next in frequency (in descending order): Social Foundations; Educational Statistics; Guidance and Counseling; Human Growth and Development; Methods of Teaching; Administration and/or School Organization; Philosophical Foundations; Current Problems (or Issues) in Education; Educational Sociology; Elementary and Secondary Education.

Last, occurring in frequency of "one," are such areas as: Current Educational Literature; Educational Leaders; Educational Publications; School and Community Leadership.

Some observations are discernible regarding the *patterns* of areas that are tested in comprehensive examinations. Except for 14 institutions, each institution tests a pattern of areas that is duplicated by no other institution in the study. An analysis of the patterns of areas tested by the 14 institutions is as follows:

a. Pattern A, that follows, is common to three institutions; Pattern B is common to three other institutions. *Pattern A*: Philosophy of Education, Educational Research, and Educational Psychology; *Pattern B*: Educational Psychology and Philosophy of Education.

b. The following patterns are tested by two institutions in each case: *Pattern A*: Educational Research, Tests and Measurements, Psychological Foundations, and Social Foundations; *Pattern B*: Psychological Foundations, Philosophical Foundations, and Guidance; *Pattern C*: History of Education, Philosophy of Education, Elementary Education, and Secondary Education; *Pattern D*: Philosophy of Education, Educational Psychology, and History of Education.

Areas in which all students are required to take one or more courses. Pertinent findings may be categorized as follows:

1. Institutions more frequently required, rather than did not require, a core of courses for the master's degree, and it was this core of courses that was tested in the general comprehensive examination. Less frequently, institutions tested not only the core courses but also the additional courses that a student had taken in professional education. Areas that were most frequently included in a core (in descending order) are as follows: Philosophy of Education; Educational Research; and Educational Psychology.

Other areas that were included in a core (in descending order of frequency) are these: Curriculum; Psychological Foundations; History of Education; Foundations of Education; Social Foundations; Guidance and Counseling—Educational Statistics—Tests and Measurements; Philosophical Foundations; and Historical Foundations.

It is interesting to note that "Foundations" (that is, Foundations of Education, Psychological Foundations, Social Foundations, Philosophical Foundations, and Historical Foundations), in contrast with "non-Foundations" areas (for example, Philosophy of Education, Educational Research, and Educational Psychology), were not as frequently included in the core.

2. The core more frequently consisted of two or three areas, rather than four areas or more. Most often, the core consisted of three areas. No one core appeared, however, as the usual requirement among institutions.

Changes that have recently been initiated (or are planned) regarding comprehensive examinations. Institutions most frequently reported no newly initiated or planned changes regarding comprehensive examinations. Specifically, 66 percent of the institutions reported no newly initiated or planned

changes: 24 percent of the institutions did report recent or planned changes; 10 percent cited that they were studying and evaluating their comprehensive examination policies, but no definite changes had yet been proposed. The following are the changes that were reported. Except where noted, no one change was reported by more than one institution.

1. More consideration will be given to oral examinations. Presently, both a general examination and a major area examination are required; the examinations are written in form.

In contrast, in three institutions, both a general examination and a major area examination are required, but the examinations are oral in form. Consideration is being given to replacing oral with written examinations.

In one institution, a 90-minute oral examination is presently used to quiz the student on his thesis, on his course work, and on whatever other areas the committee would like to include. Consideration is being given to adding a written comprehensive and using the oral examination only for the thesis.

2. Policy is being evaluated with a likely change to a more general type of examination, with an expanded review syllabus directing students toward basic problem areas and encouraging the study of current problems and issues. At present, both a general examination and a major area examination are required. The examinations are written in form; the test items are essay and multiple choice.

Similarly, another institution is working toward a more searching examination that will represent a unity of offerings. At present, only a major area examination is given; the examination is approximately 90 percent essay and 10 percent multiple choice.

In another institution, a better general examination will be prepared. It is hoped that the resulting examination will not be tied to specific courses. At present, a general examination is given. The examination is written in form; the items are multiple choice and true-false.

In still another institution, students write on eight topics. Consideration is being given to reducing the number of topics.

3. The move is toward essay examinations. At present, both a general examination and a major area examination are required; the test items are essay and multiple choice.

In another institution, where only a major area examination is required, and the test items are both essay and multiple choice, favor is growing for solely an essay-type comprehensive examination.

In another institution, there is some concern about the usefulness of the essay test items that are included in the comprehensive examination. Question is arising due to the subjective nature of the items and their difficulty of scoring.

In still another institution, both a general examination and a major area examination are given. The examinations are written in form; the test items are essay. It is reported that as the number of students grows, objective items will have to be used at least for the general examination.

4. In two institutions, dissatisfaction exists with the present policy of testing students only in their major area.

In one institution, where *satisfaction* exists with testing students only in their major area, the nature of the examination is planned to be changed from oral to both oral and written.

In another institution, where both a general examination and a major area examination are given, more departmental emphasis with integration of courses around the major is being encouraged.

5. In one institution, where the National Teacher Examinations are given as the final examination of the master's degree program, consideration is being given to the possibility of changing the minimum acceptable score on this examination. In another institution, thought is being given to introducing the National Teacher Examinations as the final examination in the master's degree program.

6. In one institution, adoption of a standardized comprehensive is under consideration.

7. Open-book examinations are under experimentation in one institution. It appears that much depends on the skill of the faculty in writing proper questions.

8. A committee, in one institution, has recently recommended that consideration be given for the elimination of a comprehensive examination for master's degree programs. At present, both a general examination and a major area examination are required.

In another institution, consideration is being given to exempting students with an average above a qualifying level. At present, both a

general examination and a major area examination are required.

9. In one institution, the seminar paper will be used as the basis for a comprehensive examination. No further explanation was given.

10. In one institution, an analysis of cases (for example, collective bargaining of teachers or incidents of classroom behavior.) was added to the comprehensive examination in an attempt to make the comprehensive something besides a repetition of tests in particular courses. The innovation is considered an improvement, but complete satisfaction does not exist with the nature of the comprehensive examination.

Conclusions

In the 1967-68 academic year, the following conditions prevailed regarding comprehensive examinations required of students enrolled in master's degree programs in education:

1. Master's degree programs most frequently required a comprehensive examination, rather than specified such an examination as optional or not required.

2. In institutions where a comprehensive examination was regarded as optional, the most frequent alternative was a thesis in lieu of a comprehensive.

3. Master's degree programs most frequently required both a general comprehensive examination and an examination in the major area or specialization of the student.

4. By far, master's degree programs stipulated a *written* comprehensive examination, rather than an oral, or both an oral and a written examination.

5. Regardless of whether institutions required a general examination and/or a major area examination, the examination(s) most frequently consisted solely of essay test items.

6. Institutions, more often than not, characterized their general comprehensive examination as testing specific areas. The three most frequently tested areas (in descending order) were these: Philosophy of Education, Educational Research, and Educational Psychology.

7. Institutions more frequently required, rather than did not require, a core of courses for the master's degree, and subsequently tested this core in a general comprehensive examination. Less frequently, institutions tested not only the core courses but also the additional courses that a student had taken in professional education. The areas which most frequently constituted the core were as follows (in descending order): Philosophy of Education, Educational Research, and Educational Psychology.

8. Changes that have recently been initiated (or are planned) regarding comprehensive examinations imply these trends:

- a. That both a general examination and a major area examination, rather than just one of these, be required
- b. That these examinations be written, rather than oral
- c. That the general examination cut across course lines.

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