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## The Doctoral Comprehensive Examination in Counselor Education: Faculty Members' Perception of its Purposes

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# The Doctoral Comprehensive Examination in Counselor Education: Faculty Members' Perception of its Purposes

## **Abstract**

This research focused on faculty members' perceptions of the comprehensive examination in counselor education doctoral programs. A between-within repeated measure analysis of variance was computed to evaluate significant differences in perceptions of faculty toward five stated purposes of the comprehensive examination related to their current format of the comprehensive examination. Findings showed significant differences in perceptions within the five stated purposes of the comprehensive examination. There was no significant mean difference between faculty's perceptions of the stated purposes and the current format of the comprehensive examination; however, a significant interaction was found between the format and purposes of the exam. Implications for the profession as well as future research are presented.

## **Author's Notes**

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## **Keywords**

comprehensive examination, counselor education, assessment, doctoral degree, faculty perceptions

According to *Counselor Preparation: Programs, Faculty, and Trends*, the comprehensive examination is required in 94% of all doctoral counselor education programs (Schweiger, Henderson, McCaskill, Clawson, & Collins, 2012) yet literature is limited (Cobia et al., 2005; McAdams & Robertson, 2012; Schweiger, Henderson, Clawson, Collins, & Nuckolls, 2007) and outdated regarding the purpose of this assessment (Burch & Peterson, 1983; Peterson, Bowman, Myer, & Maidl, 1992; Manus, Bowden, & Dowd, 1992; Thomason, Parks, & Bloom, 1980). While there are multiple meanings and formats, global assumptions exist regarding the comprehensive examination as an assessment given to students preceding graduation. Widespread controversy, folklore, and students' horror stories exist about these examinations partly due to a dearth in the literature (Anderson, Krauskopf, Rogers, & Neal, 1984). Though ubiquitous in higher education, there is a lack of consensus on the comprehensive examination's purpose within doctoral counselor education programs and across disciplines (Furstenberg & Nicholas-Casebolt, 2001; Ponder, Beatty, & Foxx, 2004).

The philosophical underpinnings of the comprehensive examination have changed over the decades, ranging from a need for students to publically distinguish themselves as future educators (Jones, 1933), to a rite of passage (Molbert, 1960), to facilitating cognitive complexity (Loughead, 1997), to preparing students for future scholarship (Ponder et al., 2004), and program evaluation (Cobia et al., 2005). Though prominent in higher education, Cobia et al. (2005) question if the historical purposes and formats of the comprehensive examination are consistent with current expectations and training in doctoral counseling programs, particularly in light of the shift within higher education toward outcome-based education (OBE), where the focus of curriculum and accreditation is on measuring and documenting student learning (CACREP, 2015; CHEA, 2010). As part of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related

Educational Programs' (CACREP) Assessment Phase (CACREP, 2015), programs are looking for a systemic approach to program evaluation and student learning outcomes. This article attempts to clarify the purpose of the comprehensive exam in counselor education doctoral programs as a first step in documenting their identified learning outcomes.

Scholars' primary recommendation for future research with respect to the comprehensive examination has been to identify and clarify the purpose of the exam (Peterson et al., 1992; Thomason et al., 1980). A lack of consensus about purpose often leads to an interpretation that comprehensive exams are a rite of passage (Tinker & Jackson, 2004). However, in counselor education, McKee, Smith, Hayes, Stewart, and Echterling (1999) defended a traditional purpose of comprehensive exams as an integral part of a program's culture which had positive benefits. Conversely, comprehensive examinations can be seen by students as "intellectual torture" due to the vagueness of both the purpose of the exam and how to best prepare for it (Anderson et al., 1984, p. 81).

As a milestone in a students' progression towards their degree, Thomason et al. (1980) acknowledged a need to study the comprehensive examination in doctoral level counseling programs. Although exams may serve multiple purposes, Thomason et al. (1980) found the ultimate goal of the comprehensive exam was not clear. The authors suggested that the process should ultimately be a valuable learning experience for students. Peterson et al. (1992) followed up Thomason et al.'s (1980) profession-wide call and reported the top three purposes of the exam included: (a) integrating graduate education, (b) screening for minimum knowledge, and (c) learning experience for students. The inability to separate counselor education data from counseling psychology in both Thomason et al. (1980) and Peterson et al.'s (1992) research becomes problematic when attempting to study the examination in counselor education. It is

important to note that both Peterson et al. (1992) and Thomason et al. (1980) based information from doctoral liaisons and department chairs, and did not include input from program faculty members' perceptions. Thus, this study attempts to understand faculty perceptions of the purpose of the comprehensive exam. Additionally, the authors explore the relationship of the purpose of the exam to the existing format and examine the interactions between the two.

Scholars have emphasized Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, Madaus, & Hastings, 1981) as a framework for enhancing cognitive complexity throughout a doctoral counselor education program (Choate & Granello, 2006; Granello, 2010; Granello, Kindsvatter, Granello, Underfer-Babalis, & Moorhead, 2008). Loughead (1997) recommended utilizing Bloom's taxonomy as the primary purpose for designing the comprehensive examination, evaluating, and providing feedback to students to facilitate higher order thinking. Loughead (1997) attempted to clarify uncertainty in the exam by stating,

In answering doctoral comprehensive examination questions, students are expected to recall knowledge and citations for that knowledge, be able to comprehend or understand material in their field of expertise, apply the knowledge to practical situations, analyze how various elements in concepts relate to one another, synthesize various types of information into a well-organized set of ideas, and evaluate what they have learned or developed based on some delineated criteria. (p. 143)

An extensive review of the literature within counselor education and across disciplines yielded five main purposes for the comprehensive examination: (1) *to assess lower levels of cognitive complexity* (Anderson et al., 1984; Burch & Peterson, 1983; Khanna & Khanna, 1972; Loughead, 1997; Manus et al., 1992; Peterson et al., 1992; Ponder et al., 2004; Saraf, 1985); (2) *to assess higher levels of cognitive complexity* (Anderson et al., 1984; Boes, Ullery, Millnner, &

Cobia, 1999; Estrem & Lucas, 2003; Fox, 1985; Loughead, 1997; Manus et al., 1992; Peterson et al., 1992; Ponder et al., 2004; Saraf, 1985); (3) *to promote a beneficial learning experience* (Cobia et al., 2005; Fox, 1985; Furstenberg & Nicholas-Casebolt, 2001; Peterson et al., 1992; Schafer & Giblin, 2008; Thomason et al., 1980); (4) *to prepare students for future scholarship* (Burch & Peterson, 1983; Cobia et al., 2005; Estrem & Lucas, 2003; Ponder et al., 2004; Thyer, 2003); and (5) *to maintain tradition* (Anderson et al., 1984; Beck & Becker, 1969; Eisenburg, 1965; McKee et al., 1999; Molbert, 1960; Saraf, 1985; Schafer & Giblin, 2008; Tomeo & Templer, 1999; Wolensky, 1979).

A variety of comprehensive examination formats are present in counselor education doctoral programs ranging from the customary onsite closed book written comprehensive examinations to nontraditional formats, such as take home written exams, portfolios, submission for publication, or some combination of these formats (CACREP, 2011; Cobia et al., 2005; Peterson et al., 1992; Schweiger et al., 2007; Thomason et al., 1980). For the purpose of this study, the written examination was categorized into two separate formats: traditional and nontraditional. What was considered traditional and nontraditional was defined in literature by Fox (1985), Peterson et al. (1992) and Ponder et al. (2004). The Traditional Comprehensive Examination refers to a closed-book, onsite, written comprehensive examination. The Nontraditional Comprehensive Examination refers to any alternative format to the traditional exam (e.g., take home written examinations, portfolios, research paper, or a combination of these). Data from the current study serves to fill the gap in the literature regarding a more thorough understanding of faculty members' perceptions of the purposes of comprehensive examinations and will assist in guiding students through the comprehensive examination process.

## **Method**

### **Research Questions**

*Research Question 1:* Are there significant differences *among* faculty members' perceptions of the five purposes of the comprehensive examination?

*Research Question 2:* Are there any significant differences *between* faculty members' current format with respect to their perceptions of five purposes of the comprehensive examination?

*Research Question 3:* Is there a significant *interaction* between the format of the comprehensive examination and perceived purposes of the comprehensive examination?

### **Identification of the Population**

The target population for this study was the entire pool of accessible faculty members teaching in doctoral counselor education programs. The sampling of programs were derived from the CACREP directory of 58 accredited doctoral Counselor Education and Supervision programs (CACREP, 2011) as well as seven non-CACREP programs reported in *Counselor Preparation* (Schweiger, Henderson, McCaskill, Clawson, & Collins, 2012; Schweiger et al., 2007). Utilizing the CACREP website (2011), the researcher located 571 email addresses of current faculty members. Additionally, the researcher located 62 email addresses from the seven non-CACREP accredited doctoral programs.

### **Sample Characteristics**

A total of 554 participants, all faculty members from CACREP and non-CACREP accredited programs were invited via email to complete the survey. The remaining faculty members' addresses were invalid. A total of 125 participants (22.2%) responded, however, only 95 (17.1%) of the invited participants were included for the statistical analyses due to incomplete data or faculty not teaching in counselor education. Of the respondents, 82 (86.3%) were from

CACREP accredited programs, four (4.2%) were from non-CACREP accredited programs, two (2.1%) are currently in programs in the process of applying for accreditation, and seven (7.4%) did not respond to the question. Of those from CACREP accredited programs, participants are from the following regions: 39 (41.1%) Southern, 31 (32.6%) North Central, 16 (16.8%) North Atlantic, seven (7.4%) Rocky Mountain, and one (1%) Western.

Fifty-four (57.4%) females and 40 (42.5%) males responded to the question of gender. Among the participants, 81.1% identified as White or Caucasian, 8.4% Black or African American, 6.3% Hispanic or Latino, and 4.2% Asian. The mean number of years of previous experience as a counselor educator was 13.39 years ( $N = 92$ ,  $SD = 9.13$ ). The mean number of years of experience teaching at their current position in a doctoral counselor education program was 10.50 years ( $N = 93$ ,  $SD = 8.00$ ). Of the 94 respondents to professional status, 22 (23.2%) identified Professor, 32 (33.7%) Assistant Professor, 31 (32.6%) Associate Professor, and nine (9.5%) other (i.e., Research Associate Professor, Clinical Associate Professor).

### **Instrumentation**

A single survey instrument containing open-ended and Likert-scale questions was created for this study (see Appendix A for items). At the outset, content validity of the instrument was determined through the compilation of literature, resulting in the five identified purposes of doctoral comprehensive exams. Concurrently, the first author informally interviewed five counselor educators utilizing convenience sampling from the North Central Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (NCACES) region on the purpose of the examination. The researchers also reviewed previous surveys conducted by Nicolas-Casebolt and Furstenberg (2001), Peterson et al. (1992), Ponder et al. (2004), and Saraf (1985) regarding the comprehensive examination and utilized their purpose statements as well as open ended



questions from the instruments. Permission to use and/or modify items was obtained from Peterson (personal communication, June 25, 2010) and Ponder (personal communication, October 7, 2010). Additionally, the researchers examined online information and handbooks for the 16 CACREP accredited Counselor Education and Supervision doctoral programs in the North Central Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (NCACES, 2011) for updated information on the purpose and format of the comprehensive examination.

After the instrument was developed, an exploratory pilot study was performed to increase reliability and enhance face validity (Light, Singer, & Willett, 1990), consisting of a convenience sample of ten individuals asked to cluster the 25 purpose statements into five categories. To increase item reliability, each of the identified five purposes was assessed with five separate statements, for a total of 25 survey items, listed in Appendix A. The quantitative items utilized a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*important*), 2 (*somewhat important*), 3 (*neither important nor unimportant*), 4 (*somewhat unimportant*) to 5 (*unimportant*) to measure faculty members perceptions of the importance of each purpose of the comprehensive examination. Additional open-ended questions were included to address perceived strengths and limitations of the examination, current policies and procedures, and how faculty members planned to integrate the exam as an assessment addressing the 2009 CACREP standards.

A second pilot study was administered to 17 participants to test the psychometric properties and increase the reliability of the instrument. Due to the limited total number of faculty currently teaching in doctoral counselor education programs and response rates needed to provide statistical significance, 12 participants in three university settings included doctoral candidates who had already completed their comprehensive exams and were preparing for roles as counselor educators were utilized for item reliability in this pilot study. Additionally, five

graduates of a doctoral Counselor Education and Supervision program who were not currently teaching in a doctoral program responded to the survey. Although a limitation, these individuals served to identify any key reliability item issues before administering to faculty members without taking away the limited number of participants. The internal-consistency of the instrument was assessed by calculating the Cronbach's alpha where coefficient alphas ranged in the study from .76 to .95. For a between subjects factor, repeated measure ANOVA, this study required a total sample size of 90, which ran with a medium effect size ( $f = .25$ ), power ( $1 - \beta$  error prob) = .90,  $\alpha = .05$ ,  $r = .4$ , with two groups and five measures (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

An online survey tool, Qualtrics, was used for data collection in this study. A link containing the survey was sent to email addresses obtained from department websites. The survey, informed consent, introduction letter and procedures were approved Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to conducting this research. Researchers also adhered to the American Counseling Association and Association for Counselor Education and Supervision ethical codes. Data were analyzed using the computer software program SPSS V.17. All of the statistical hypotheses were tested at the alpha ( $\alpha$ ) = .05 level of significance to control for Type I error. To maintain statistical power, Light et al. (1990) recommend moderate to high power as well as a medium effect size to detect significant results. Outliers and other potential influential data were screened using scatter plots and additional post-hoc tests.

### **Results**

This study examined faculty members' perceptions of the five stated purposes of the comprehensive examination. Furthermore, interactions were explored between the format of the

examination and perceived purposes. The research analysis used in this study was a between-within repeated measure analysis of variance (ANOVA). With two groups and five measures, this study operated as a two-way ANOVA due to investigation of the between and within factors, in addition to the interaction effect.

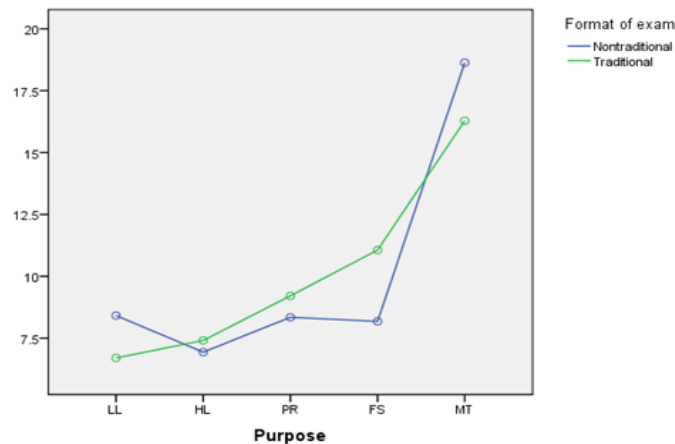
*Research Question 1:* There was a significant mean difference in faculty members' perceptions of the five stated purposes of the comprehensive examination. Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated ( $\chi^2(9) = 111.77, p < .05$ ); therefore degrees of freedom were corrected using Greenhouse-Geisser estimates of sphericity ( $\epsilon = .65$ ). There was a significant group difference across the dependent measures,  $F(2.6, 243.19) = 163.01, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .64$ . Faculty rated *to assess higher levels of cognitive complexity* as the most important purpose of the comprehensive examination ( $M = 7.17 (1.4), SD = 2.36$ ). Furthermore, respondents reported the individual item *to assess student's ability to synthesize and integrate* as the most important purpose statement ( $M = 1.13, SD = .41$ ) and *to assess student's ability to evaluate and critique ideas* as the second most important ( $M = 1.33, SD = .57$ ). Faculty rated the remaining purposes as follows: *to assess lower levels of cognitive complexity* ( $M = 7.53 (1.5), SD = 2.77$ ), *to promote a beneficial learning experience* ( $M = 8.78 (1.7), SD = 3.11$ ), *to prepare students for future scholarship* ( $M = 9.66 (1.9), SD = 4.01$ ), and *to maintain tradition* ( $M = 17.42 (3.4), SD = 5.13$ ). Finally, participants rated "an historic ritual in academia" as the least important purpose of all single item statements ( $M = 3.63, SD = 1.19$ ).

*Research Question 2:* Findings yielded no significant mean difference in faculty's perceptions of the five stated purposes and the current format of the comprehensive examination. Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated ( $\chi^2(9) = 111.77, p < .05$ ); therefore degrees of freedom were corrected using Greenhouse-Geisser estimates of

sphericity ( $\epsilon = .65$ ). Results showed that the purpose of the comprehensive examination was not significantly affected by the format,  $F(1, 243.19) = .01, p > .05$ .

*Research Question 3:* A significant interaction effect was found between the purpose of the comprehensive examination and format,  $F(2.6, 93) = 10.14, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .09$ . A visual observation illustrates the interaction between purpose and format in Figure 1. To further explain the interaction effect, using a Bonferroni adjustment, ( $\alpha = .05/5 = .01$ ) independent t-test were conducted. On average, faculty using a traditional format reported *to assess lower levels of cognitive complexity* was more important ( $M = 6.70, SD = 1.72$ ), than faculty using nontraditional formats ( $M = 8.41, SD = 3.37$ ). The difference was significant  $t(93) = -3.09, p < .01, d = .65$ . On average, faculty using a nontraditional format reported *to prepare students for future scholarship* was more important ( $M = 8.17, SD = 3.68$ ), than faculty using traditional formats ( $M = 11.06, SD = 3.83$ ). The difference was significant  $t(93) = 3.73, p < .001, d = .77$ .

Figure 1



*Figure 1.* Mean scores for the format and five stated purposes: to assess lower levels of cognitive complexity (LL), to assess higher levels of cognitive complexity(HL), to promote a beneficial learning experience(PR), to prepare students for future scholarship (FS), and to maintain tradition (MT).

Of the respondents, 49 (51.6%) utilize a traditional format and 46 (48.4%) utilize a nontraditional format. Of the 46 who report using a nontraditional format, 16 (34.7%) report using a combination of formats. Of these 16 respondents, 11 use a combination of the traditional format with a nontraditional format (i.e., requiring a traditional exam in addition to a take home exam) and five use a combination of two nontraditional formats (i.e., requiring a portfolio and submission for publication). The remaining 30 are split between these nontraditional formats: 17 take home, six portfolios, and one research paper submitted for publication. Six other responses include a critical literature review, onsite open-book, oral case studies, videotape excerpts, multiple research papers, and in-person presentation of professional competence in the areas of supervision, teaching or clinical work with a background paper to support.

Fifty-eight (61.1%) participants reported their program has a written purpose statement, for the comprehensive examinations, 15 (15.8%) reported their program does not, and 22 (23.2%) are unaware of any written purpose statement. Ninety-four participants responded to the questions regarding written policies for evaluating comprehensive examinations. Sixty-one (64.9%) reported their program has a written policy for evaluating comprehensive examination questions, 20 (21.2%) reported their program does not, and 13 (13.7%) are unaware of a written policy.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations to be considered in this study. The first limitation is attempting to differentiate between a faculty members' perceptions of the purpose of the comprehensive examination as it relates to their program's current format, versus their own individual preference of what a proper purpose or format should look like. Additional limitations include response rates, instrumentation, survey design, sample and sampling plan,

and generalization. Previous online survey response rates for counselor educators ranged from 23% (Smith, 2004) to 44% (Wartinger, 2005), whereas this study produced a response rate of 22.2% with 17.1% valid responses. This study was conducted on a web-based site so troubleshooting problems could not be immediately addressed by the researcher. An instrument was created for this study and thus, could be another identified potential limitation. Future research is needed on the validity and reliability of the instrument. This might be done both inside and outside of the Counselor Education discipline. A factor analysis of individual scale items would be useful in identifying variables that are correlated with one another but independent of other subsets. The independent variable was defined by literature (Fox, 1985; Peterson et al., 1992; Ponder et al., 2004); however, numerous variations were reported in the nontraditional format. This may limit the results found. Additionally, participants who reported utilizing a portfolio commented that some of the questions on the survey were not applicable due to their format.

Cautious interpretations are made with the descriptive data regarding the comprehensive examination because the study is not a representative sample of the profession. Due to maintaining confidentiality, specific school and department details were not included on the survey. Generalization is limited by not sampling one representative (i.e., department chair or liaison) from each institution. A misrepresentation is possible of the total number of faculty in counselor education doctoral programs because there is no complete, updated list available in *Counselor Preparation* (Schweighter et al., 2007) or Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (2011).

## Discussion

Multiple purposes were found for the comprehensive exam and the majority of purposes were found to hold merit. Consistent with previous research (Loughead, 1997; Peterson et al., 1992) and regardless of format, the primary purpose found for the comprehensive examination by faculty in doctoral counselor education programs was *to assess higher levels of cognitive complexity* which is the most salient educational purpose mentioned for doctoral comprehensive examinations across disciplines (Estrem & Lucas, 2003; Ponder et al., 2004).

Faculty using traditional formats rated *to maintain tradition* and *to assess lower levels of cognitive complexity* as more important than faculty using nontraditional formats. On the other hand, faculty using nontraditional formats rated *to assess higher levels of cognitive complexity*, *to promote a beneficial learning experience*, and *to prepare students for future scholarship* as more important than traditional formats. This supports Ponder et al.'s (2004) findings in doctoral marketing programs where the number one purpose of the traditional exam in doctoral marketing programs was to test lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy. Schafer and Giblin (2008) reported that the format of traditional exams often makes it difficult for students to demonstrate higher levels of cognitive thinking. Furthermore, Ponder et al. (2004) found *to test a student's ability to conduct independent research* was the top purpose for programs with a nontraditional exam. In order to promote higher levels of cognitive complexity and to better prepare students for independent research, representatives of the programs in Ponder et al.'s study reported an increase in movement from traditional to nontraditional exams.

Data indicated that 39% of faculty reported they either did not have a written purpose statement or do not know the purpose. A lack of stated purpose may support the assumption that the comprehensive examination is a rite of passage (Anderson et al., 1984). Although there are

different philosophies regarding the traditional purpose of the comprehensive examination, this study provided an insight in the level of importance (ranging between *neither unimportant nor important* and *somewhat unimportant*) of maintaining a traditional purpose of the comprehensive examination. These results conflict with previous literature that stated a primary purpose for the comprehensive exam was tradition (Anderson et al., 1984; Manus et al., 1992; McKee et al., 1999; Saraf, 1985; Schafer & Giblin, 2008; Tomeo & Templer, 1999).

### **Implications for the Counseling Profession**

The results of the study have several implications for counselor educators, students, and individual programs. Similar to McAdams and Robertson's (2012) look at the oral examinations, clarity is needed throughout the entire comprehensive examination process for faculty and students beginning with the purpose of the exam. Although not a representative sample of all doctoral counselor education programs, the fact that 15 faculty (15.8%) reported their program does not have a written purpose statement and 22 (23.2%) were unaware of any written purpose statement, raises concern. As a result, we encourage programs to take a careful look at their examination purposes, policies and procedures. Clearly stating the comprehensive examination purpose and evaluation criteria may help students to perform better and enhance the learning process. Cobia et al. (2005) shared how CACREP objectives are made explicit to students before learning and assessment begins in their centerpiece evaluation. Rubrics, similar to the one Loughead (1997) created with the purpose of assessing both lower and higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy, can be one mean to outline expectations and grading procedures.

Burch and Peterson (1983) and Cobia et al. (2005) recommend creating a comprehensive examination committee consisting of faculty members and doctoral students to re-evaluate their purpose and goal in counselor education to make expectations more clear to both faculty and



students. After deciding on a purpose, Peterson et al. (1992) recommended doctoral counseling programs host training or workshops for evaluating comprehensive examination questions to increase reliability. Additionally, Nicholas-Casebolt and Huber (2001) recommend using four aspects of program evaluation (utility, accuracy, feasibility, and propriety) to improve the validity and reliability of the comprehensive exam in doctoral social work programs.

No operational definition for the comprehensive examination is readily available for counselor educators. CACREP clearly defines that assessments need to be tailored to individual institutions but does not prescribe a universal framework for evaluation procedures, including the comprehensive examination (Urofsky, 2009). In recognition that 58 (89.2%) of doctoral counselor education programs located in the United States are CACREP accredited (CACREP, 2011; Schweiger et al., 2007), more research in aligning the comprehensive examination with the CACREP Doctoral Standards may prove useful. Since the comprehensive examination already exists in the majority of doctoral counselor education programs, questions arise as to how these practices might meet the changing needs of doctoral counselor education programs and support the growing trend of measuring Student Learning Outcomes (SLO). The implementation of both the 2009 and 2016 CACREP standards, require Counselor Education and Supervision programs to provide evidence of documenting SLOs as it relates to their assessment plan (Urofsky, R., 2009; Urofsky, Bobby, & Ritchie, 2013).

As the accreditation standards evolve and change, it is important for the purpose of the comprehensive examination to reflect the current focus of programs. Adkison-Bradley (2013) explored the development of the CACREP doctoral standards and provided recommendations to creatively think about doctoral study in counselor education moving forward, including increasing expectations and learning for scholarship separate from the dissertation process.

Although there is no mention of the comprehensive examination in Adkison-Bradley's (2013) article, the suggestions encourage programs to reexamine their purpose, mission, and goals moving forward. Can counseling faculty integrate this traditional form of assessment in doctoral programs to meet the changing accountability requirements of accreditation? Based on an investigation of graduate level comprehensive exams, Brito, Sharma, and Bernas (2004) asked a key question that can be generalized across education levels, "could your department benefit from a comprehensive, cost-effective, curriculum-driven exam that would provide a direct assessment of student learning?" (p. 209).

A healthy perception of the comprehensive examination is conducive to a productive learning environment for the student. Koltz, Odegard, Provost, Smith, and Kleist (2010) explored the traditional comprehensive examination process for doctoral students in counselor education programs in a qualitative study using photo-voice and found four main themes for students: self-doubt, tension, industry, and motivation. A more clearly defined and transparent purpose for the comprehensive examination will yield an environment that will allow students to take ownership and become creators and designers of their learning (Anderson et al., 1984; Cobia et al., 2005). Additionally, outcome based education supports the position that when students have choices and options, they perform at higher levels of competency. Golde and Dore (2001) encouraged students to ask more questions regarding expectations about all parts of a doctoral program, including the comprehensive examination. Koltz et al. (2010) and Bartle and Brown (2006) recommended faculty take a more active role in mentoring doctoral advisees in the process of comprehensive examinations.

After deciding on a novel purpose, Cobia et al. (2005) found a portfolio, as opposed to the traditional comprehensive examination, could assist in documenting learning outcomes. The

authors' self study of a CACREP-accredited Counselor Education doctoral program identified a novel purpose of program evaluation, where students' performances are used to pinpoint areas of weaknesses in the curriculum, a specific course, or in the students themselves. However, this does not imply that a portfolio is the only way to measure student learning as CACREP (2011) clearly defines that assessments need to be tailored to individual institutions. Cobia et al. (2005) reported an "ideal" evaluation model would be comprehensive; include both a formative and summative method; actively involve students in decision making; link to skills, knowledge, and competencies necessary to be a successful counselor educator; and be flexible enough to incorporate emerging professional trends.

### **Future research**

Initially, a profession-wide survey on purposes and formats of the comprehensive examination from department chairs or a comprehensive examination liaison from individual counselor education programs would prove useful in determining a starting point of what currently exists in the field. Further refining the scale created for this study could increase understanding of the multiple purposes of the comprehensive examination. A factor analysis of individual scale items for this study would be helpful in identifying variables that are correlated with one another but independent of other subsets. Furthermore, research could examine how well the comprehensive examination measures the stated purpose. Additionally, research could look at the different levels of faculty (assistant, associate, full) and how they rate the purposes.

It could be beneficial for future research to study the purpose and corresponding format of the comprehensive examination in relation to job preparation, scholarly productivity, quality of work, and permanence of the qualities measured by the exam. Cobia et al. (2005) recommended future studies to examine whether job-seeking graduates are advantaged in some

way that could be attributed to the portfolio, as opposed to other formats. Future investigation is needed to understand how well different formats of the exam meet the stated purpose of the exam. This includes exploring the strengths and limitations of existing examination formats and how it relates to an individual program's purpose and learning objectives. With the adoption of the 2009 CACREP standards and the subsequent 2016 standards, future research could focus on the five Student Learning Outcomes as measured by the exam.

After establishing clear research on the purpose and format, future research could focus on the content (specialty vs. general exams), creation of effective examination questions, evaluation criteria, remediation, and reliability. The oral examination's purpose, format, and evaluation criteria would be beneficial to examine as it is an important aspect of nearly all comprehensive examinations reported by Schweiger et al. (2007; 2012). Predictors of success on the comprehensive examination (i.e., GPA, instruction or preparation received, student's relationship with faculty, etc.) may also be useful to students and faculty. Further qualitative research focusing on the student's experiences while preparing for and taking the exam may also be beneficial to the field.

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## **Appendix A: Purposes of the Comprehensive Examination**

1. To assess lower levels of cognitive complexity (LL)
  - a. To assess student's fundamental knowledge
  - b. To assess student's comprehensive knowledge
  - c. To identify students who do (or do not) have adequate knowledge
  - d. To assess student's ability to comprehend material
  - e. To assess student's ability to apply knowledge to novel situations
2. To assess higher levels of cognitive complexity (HL)
  - a. To assess student's creative thinking skills
  - b. To assess student's ability to synthesize and integrate
  - c. To assess student's critical thinking skills
  - d. To assess student's ability to evaluate and critique ideas
  - e. To assess student's ability to analyze concepts
3. To prepare student for future scholarship (FS)
  - a. To prepare student for scholarly academic life
  - b. To prepare student for dissertation and future scholarly research
  - c. To prepare student to conduct independent research
  - d. To develop student's professional writing skills
  - e. To prepare students for future careers as scholars
4. To promote a beneficial learning experience (PR)
  - a. The comprehensive examination process is a beneficial learning experience for students
  - b. The comprehensive examination process provides educational value for students
  - c. The comprehensive examination process motivates student learning
  - d. The comprehensive examination process provides an opportunity for student growth
  - e. The comprehensive examination process enhances student learning
5. To maintain tradition (MT)
  - a. A rite of passage
  - b. A historic ritual in academia
  - c. Maintains a tradition
  - d. An initiation into the field
  - e. A hurdle for students to successfully overcome in obtaining the degree