THE COMPREHENSIVE EXAM
About the Final Step in Earning your MA at CSULA

Students choosing the comprehensive examination (comps) option for the M.A. degree in Sociology are required to pass three sociology exams, one in each of the following areas: **Theory, Research Methods**, and an **elective**. This handout is meant to provide practical information, a guide to preparing for the comps, and actual study sheets and practice questions for the theory and methods comps.

**Overview- Focus and Orientation**

Students demonstrate through their comprehensive exams that they have left their strictly student status behind and are now *early-stage professionals*. This is a key concept in understanding the proper approach to the comps.

The comps are **set apart from all other work** normally undertaken by MA students. The student is moving beyond providing a summary end-point piece of work for a course or two. *It is through the comps that students demonstrate that they have the background, knowledge, and sophistication in sociology that would allow them to teach, consult, compete for grants, or design and undertake contracted research.* For this reason, comp exams committee members expect to see students demonstrate many aspects of professional attainment in the answers, including:

1. The appropriate use of **professional terms**.
2. Identification of **key thinkers/contributors** to the field and correct reference to them as warranted in the answers.
3. A broad understanding of the **major theoretical foundation/methodological approaches** relevant to the specified sociological area.
4. Ability to **focus on an issue** and to draw on and **apply relevant concepts, approaches, paradigms, and theories**.
5. Ability to **integrate** the **body of knowledge** in a thoughtful, penetrating, and relatively **sophisticated treatment** of the issue(s) under discussion.
The comps are not about the ability to “just” answer questions. Rather, the process is more like demonstrating the capacity to develop lecture material or contribute well-grounded and original thinking around an issue or to take a significant role when engaged in problem solving. This is why simply receiving grades of “A” in your 500-level seminars is not, in itself, a guarantee that you are fully prepared to take the comps.

In demonstrating your competence as a young professional, you need to take active responsibility for the finishing steps in your own education. This means that you must make the intellectual and practical effort required to integrate your understandings from these courses and to follow-up by reading the relevant sociological literature in order to be able to fully grasp the significance of the theories, paradigms and approaches. Beyond this, you must be able to comfortably use and apply the intellectual and practical tools of your profession.

Your goals are:

1. to have acquired the requisite body of knowledge;
2. to recognize the concepts and dynamics outside of the classroom;
3. to be able to apply sociological concepts and approaches to illuminate given issues in societal and human organization and interaction;
4. to understand how to unfold and investigate such issues in conceptual/theoretical light; and
5. to be able to choose and apply the appropriate research methodology to further such investigations.

The comps are the means by which your established colleagues (the professors grading the comps) assess whether or not you have achieved these goals.

**Testing Schedule, Prerequisite and Process**

Comps are offered once in the Fall and once in the Spring. Students who are in good standing and have completed all course work, or who will be completing their course work in the same quarter as the comprehensive examinations need to get a permit to
enroll in the comps from the department office. Once the permit is entered, they enroll in Soc 596 in the same manner as they would enroll in any other course.

The three examinations are given two weeks apart:

   Week 5, Wednesday, 10am -2pm: Theory
   Week 7, Wednesday, 10am -2pm: Methods
   Week 9, Wednesday, 10am -2pm: Elective

Prerequisite are as follows:

**Theory comps**
Soc 412 and Soc 414 (or equivalent senior/early graduate courses in classical and contemporary theory); and
Soc 512 and Soc 514, graduate seminars in classical theory and contemporary theory.

**Methods comps**
Soc 210A and Soc 210B (or equivalent elementary statistics);
Soc 410 (advanced statistics);
Soc 390 (or the equivalent undergraduate research methods course);
Soc 490 or 491 (advanced quantitative or qualitative methods); and
Soc 590 (graduate seminar in research methods).

**Elective comps**
Student may choose any one elective graduate seminar (500-level course) completed.

Generally, students will be expected to answer from 3-5 essay-style questions on each of the comprehensive exams. The theory and the methods exams are set up to provide students a choice among questions in each of several categories. The breakdown is roughly the same each quarter and can be expected to more-or-less follow this guideline:

**Theory:**
   Section I= choice of questions on classical theory
   Section II= choice of questions on contemporary theory
   Section III= choice of questions asking for an application of theory to explain some social phenomenon.
Methods (both quantitative and qualitative):
Section I= choice of questions on study design
Section II= choice of questions of specifics of different methodological tools
Section III= choice of questions on statistics

Notes, calculators and other study aids are not allowed.

The questions are newly composed for each testing quarter; however, they do not differ in fundamental ways from quarter to quarter. Previous questions are kept in a notebook available to students in the department office. A good strategy in preparing for the exam is to make copies of these questions and to use them as study aids while taking the relevant classes and when reading sociological material. In addition, study guides are included at a later point in this booklet.

Students are allowed 4 hours to work on each of the exams. This time period allows for resting between questions, organizing one’s thoughts, and so forth. Even so, the length of time allotted is an indication of the care and depth of though expected on these exams. Be careful to provide coverage and depth; do NOT simply become repetitive.

A committee of three relevant faculty members collaborate on the exam questions. This process guarantees that the choice of questions is truly representative of the area and is not overly influenced by any one professor’s approach or emphasis. The same three faculty members independently grade the exams. When more than one student is taking the exams, the professors grade them without knowing which students have written the exam answers. They then turn in their grades. This blind grading procedure has been established to guarantee objectivity.

Grading Procedures
Failing One or More of the Comprehensive Exams

The three exams are graded separately, so to pass the comprehensive exams, students need to earn a “pass” in each of the three. A student may pass even when failing to answer one question adequately, if answers to remaining questions on that particular
comprehensive exam are strong enough. A student who answers two of the questions on a single exam inadequately, will most likely fail that exam. In order to fail an exam, at least 2 of the 3 graders have to agree that the work was not adequate to pass.

A student who fails one or more of the areas of the comprehensive examinations is allowed to retake the failed exam(s) in another testing quarter. This provides more than one quarter to study. A student who fails one or more of the exams two times will not earn the MA degree from CSULA.

PREPARING FOR THE COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATIONS

Specifically in terms of the comps, the depth of treatment is important to practice before taking the exams. This is why the questions that have been posed on previous comprehensive exams are available to students. They may be photocopied and used as study guides. The optimum way of proceeding is to photocopy these questions prior to taking any of the graduate level seminars. Students should make their best effort at writing a draft response to the questions. An ongoing process of continual revision should take place as a student reads and participates in classes. This should include incorporating more and more of what is discussed across classes. Students should also be thinking about the nature of these questions. Again, although the questions change with each administering of the comps, the type of thought, treatment, and body of knowledge, however, remains fairly consistent.

Study Guides for CSULA Sociology Comprehensive Exam

THEORY: In completing the theory charts, you should be able to fill in all the appropriate cells as you study for the comps. You should also know which cells should remain blank. Make copies and fill these in as you take your 512 and 514 classes.

METHODS: In completing the methods worksheet, you should be able to give a brief definition of each listed tool, and approach. ALSO, you should know:

(1) the relative strength and weaknesses of each;
(2) when to use each; and
(3) how to write a defense of your choice of methodological tools and approaches.

Finally, you should be able to discuss:

(1) the relationship of theory and research;
(2) the logic of research; and
(3) the purpose of research.

Forming study groups around these charts and worksheets will also help you. Keep in mind that it is not enough to “know” how to “fill in the blanks,” but that you also need to be able to discuss and apply these concepts in essay questions. You also need to be able to use appropriate key terms. Finally, remember that you may not take any notes into the exams; these charts and worksheets are only study tools designed to;

1) Help you focus your attention during your seminar reading and discussions;
2) Help trigger your memory during later studies;
3) Help you approach the exam with a better understanding of the type of material you should be able to draw from.