

# GRADUATE NEWS



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**Special Points of Interest**

- Finishing exams is one of the most rewarding accomplishments.
- The goal of comps is to develop the student as a scholar.
- Comprehensive exams serve as an integrative experience.
- A stimulating learning experience that empowers students to move to the next level.

**“The only test of leadership is that somebody follows.”**

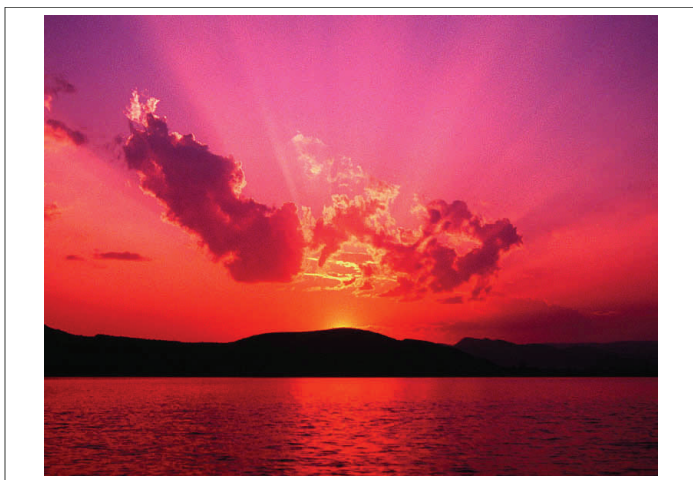
Robert K. Greenleaf

## THE EXPERIENCE OF TAKING COMPREHENSIVE (QUALIFYING) EXAMS

This information will be helpful for graduate students preparing to take comprehensive (or qualifying) exams [hereafter, “comps”] and for faculty helping graduate students to prepare (i.e., just hand them a copy of this newsletter!).

It’s been four months since I took comps for my doctoral program in Higher Education at Florida Atlantic University, but I remember it like it was yesterday. Finishing my exams was one of the most rewarding accomplishments of my graduate school experience (I have not yet defended my proposal or dissertation).

Generally speaking, the goal of comps is to develop the student as a scholar. The means to this goal, however, varies greatly across graduate programs. To provide context for my suggestions, I’ll provide some information about the way the



**“... To prepare and support educational leaders.”**

Educational Leadership department organizes comps.

The comprehensive examination is intended to serve as an integrative experience. I used the examination to synthesize coursework into a broader, more mature understanding of the fields of education and leadership and to apply or extend my knowledge to meet

my own individual goals. Above all, the comprehensive examination is intended to be a stimulating learning experience that empowers students to move to the next level of their intellectual and professional development. In reflection, the process of preparing to take my comprehensive exam was a pivotal point in my academic and professional career.

## LEADERS OF THE FUTURE HEAR OUR WISDOM

“Good leaders make people feel they’re at the very heart of things, not the periphery. Everyone feels that he or she makes a difference to the success of the organization. When that happens people feel centered and that gives their work meaning.”

Warren Bennis

“Leadership is not magnetic personality-that can just as well be a glib tongue. Leadership is lifting a person’s vision to higher sights, the raising of a person’s performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations.”

Peter F. Drucker

“The challenges of change are always hard. It is important that we begin to unpack those challenges that confront this nation and realize that we each have a role that requires us to change and become more responsible for shaping our own future.”

Hilary Rodham Clinton

## PREPARING FOR THE EXAM

In general, preparing for comps can be viewed as a process which has three developmental stages:

- **gathering information and research**
- **understanding and applying information**
- **testing strategies**

**Gathering Information and Research.** It is imperative to think of your coursework as a foundation for comps. As you write each paper for class, research beyond the course required readings. Develop a list of authors that represent significant contributions to the topic area you are studying. Use those citations in your papers... know the authors...

understand how one author views the same topic differently... challenge yourself to be a true scholar above the requirements of the course.

Then, six to eight months or so before you plan to take comps, gather information about faculty expectations, comps policies and procedures, and other students' experiences. A good place to start is by talking to the students who have completed comps. Take a fellow graduate student, who has successfully passed his or her comps, out for coffee or lunch, and pick his or her brain about how he or she prepared for comps. Next, find out from your advisor what the department considers to be the goal of comps. I assume some students (and some faculty), view comps as a cruel hazing ritual or a rite of passage. Others view it as a time for students to prepare a litera-

ture review or as a way to test students' foundation knowledge and conceptual understanding of leadership and education.

The department's view of this process is repeatedly stated by faculty in courses directly related to your field of study and in all six leadership classes. Are you expected to know the author (s), date, and source for the references provided in your answers? I think it is important to know the frequently cited individuals you are studying as well as the dates and references. This should be natural if you have been studying these authors and citing them in your papers.

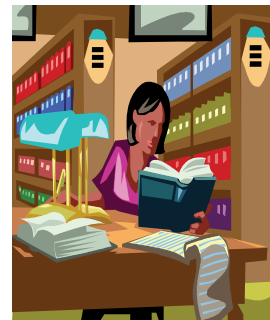
**Understanding and Applying Information.** Second, you should gain an understanding of the empirical research, theoretical perspectives, conceptual issues, and methodological techniques in the area(s) you are studying. Whether your comps ask a general or specific question related to your area, you should know the classics – Senge, Northouse, Boleman and Deal – as well as how the classics remain useful for understanding issues in that area. Decide on a strategy for reading the materials you think are important (you cannot read everything again...read globally). A student in my program said his strategy was to thoroughly read and understand the "biggies" in his area of higher education; he read the other materials for what he called "nuggets" or the main points.

It is also a good idea at this stage to draft an annotated bibliography of the references you plan to use on the exams. This bibliography can be organized by sub-topic area, chronologically, or both. Use whichever way you find most helpful for understanding and synthesizing the material.

### **Testing Strategies.**

The third and final part of preparing for comps should involve testing your knowledge of the material. In the last few weeks prior to comps, begin outlining and drafting responses to those comps questions you delineated from the course syllabi. The outline should delineate both your argument(s) and the empirical research and theoretical ideas that support your argument(s). One faculty person told me that she considered high quality comprehensive exam answers to be a student's well-formulated argument(s) or view(s) supported by empirical research. I found this explanation to be helpful in organizing my answers.

As a final stage in your preparations, start putting yourself in situations similar to the testing situation 2-3 weeks before the exam. The Educational Leadership department administers comps in one 6-hour session, give yourself that amount of time to answer the practice questions you create. Consider asking a fellow graduate student or external person to review your answers and give you feedback. The ideal reviewer is someone who has successfully passed this hurdle or who understands your area of leadership (not



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a member of your study group).

As with any type of writing, your answers should be presented in an organized and coherent manner. You should be constructing high quality answers not high volume answers. The best strategy I can suggest is to be clear and concise in your responses by outlining your answer and articulating what you understand the question to be asking.

There is not a right or wrong way to prepare for this trans-

formational experience. It is unique to you. Be confident in yourself! Your faculty have provided you with the foundation required to be successful in this academic experience.

I hope this is helpful!  
Good luck in your academic pursuits!

Deb Casey  
Educational Leadership



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## TO STUDY IN GROUPS OR NOT...

Consider organizing a study group with other graduate students preparing for comps to talk about how to prepare, provide each other with support, and exchange ideas about the readings. My suggestion is to follow an action learning model of setting group norms, an agenda, and time allotment.

However, there is a limit to what this group can do for you. My study group stopped meeting 3 or 4 weeks prior to comps for two reasons. First, stress is contagious, and we were beginning to freak each other out (e.g., "Hey, Mekenzie, did you read that article by so-and-so?" Mekenzie responds nervously, "No. Why, did you?"). Second, the few weeks prior to comps is a time when each student should be formulating his or her own ideas and arguments about the

literature. This distance will be helpful for your sanity and your ideas (in fact my colleagues thought I was crazy but the week before comps I left town for four days. This was the best move I ever made. I focused directly on studying and eliminated the daily distraction of my day-to-day activities).



*"Stress is contagious, and we were beginning to freak each other out."*



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## The Departmental Nuts and Bolts

**My assumption is that comps are strongly emphasized as a transformational step toward the next phase of doctoral work.** Graduate students take comps generally after 60 percent of their coursework is completed. A committee of faculty is selected to participate in the process. The comps committee consists of faculty members who specialize in specific areas of concentration with one member of the faculty serving as the chair.

Students can obtain course syllabi from the Educational Leadership ([www.leadership.fau.edu](http://www.leadership.fau.edu)) website which provides the objectives from each of the courses (In my opinion, the comps questions come from these objectives.). Exams are given once in the spring and once in the fall semester.

The exam takes place on the Boca campus in the Education computer lab. All students begin the exam at the same time. Each student has 6 hours to answer 4 questions (some sections of the exam allow for question options) and everyone answers one question (I assume this may vary each semester) on leadership (this was my favorite questions to answer...I learned so much in preparing to take the exam about my personal conceptual framework of leadership and how I apply it everyday). Students can pass with honors, pass, be deferred, or fail. The Student Services office will notify you by mail of your exam score.



### “Expect the Unexpected”

Cold/hot testing rooms  
Loud typing  
People Entering/leaving rooms  
Time pressure  
Electrical outage  
Apple/PC computers  
Extended wait-time for Results

## EXAM PREPARATION STRATEGIES

- Outline the core courses from notes and required literature.
- Read outside the required books ahead of time.
- Create a “Five-Week Plan for Balance” and place it on your refrigerator  
*Example*
- Tape your notes and listen to the tapes whenever you can (car, home, pool).
- Create your own bibliography of important leaders and authors.
- Study (1-3 hours, one-on-one, with colleagues, listen to tape, conference call).
- Develop a support network of colleagues, graduate students, friends, family.
- Apply the theoretical aspects of what you are learning to your own leadership.
- Workout (once a day, four days a week).
- Participate in study groups of four or less.
- The day before comps stay at a hotel in Boca (clear your mind/have dinner/go to bed early/wake-up call/set alarm/eat a good breakfast/go early to building/stay away from others talking about exam/wish each other luck/focus).
- Eat Healthy.
- Send other graduate students taking the exam “information for the day”, daily test questions (keep them simple).
- Maintain Stress Level/Do not project stress (apologize/thank those helping you/go out/recognize others).
- Make note cards and review them.
- Do a blessing (write it early and have it prepared for yourself to read).
- Balance (continue to connect with others/travel/work/family/friends/class).