2019 Assessment Review: Psychology Doctoral Program
First Doctoral Examination

Specify which area of assessment you are reviewing in this cycle. This review will examine how effectively an assessment helps you to determine whether students have learned or achieved what you want them to learn or achieve at a given stage in the program, based on the outcomes you have set for them.

This report is reviewing the use of the First Doctoral Examination in this cycle. The Psychology Doctoral Program, the largest of the Doctoral Programs at the Graduate Center, was recently re-organized into ten distinct Training Areas of study: Basic and Applied Psychology (BASP), Behavioral and Cognitive Neuroscience (BCN), Clinical Psychology at John Jay (APA-accredited, Forensic specialization), Clinical Psychology at Queens (APA-accredited, Neuropsychology specialization), Cognitive and Comparative Psychology (CCP), Critical Social Personality and Environmental Psychology (CSPEP), Developmental Psychology, Health Psychology and Clinical Science (under review for APA accreditation - HPCS), Industrial-Organizational Psychology (I/O) and Psychology and Law. The CSPEP Training Area was a recent (2018) merger of Critical Social-Personality Psychology and Environmental Psychology, whereas the CCP Training Area was a recent (2018) merger of the Animal Behavior and Comparative Psychology (ABCP) and Cognition, Language and Development (CLD) Programs.

Across the ten distinct Psychology Training Areas, faculty have utilized three different approaches in organizing the First Doctoral Examination: a) actual or planned collection of original data followed by a written report and oral defense of the work; b) a scholarly written literature review and/or grant proposal typically followed by an oral defense of the work; and c) a written exam that focuses on research methodology and design. While these approaches diverge a bit, all of these approaches seek to assess six key capacities: students’ content knowledge of psychology in general, and their specific field; students’ methodological competence; students’ ability to critique, organize and design research, and students’ critical thinking and communication skills.

The first approach of actual or planned collection of original data followed by a written report and oral defense of the work is utilized by the BASP, Clinical at John Jay, CCP (CLD), Developmental, HPCS, I/O and Psychology and Law Training Areas. The Clinical at John Jay and the Psychology and Law Training Areas expect students to complete a report of an original qualitative or quantitative research study equivalent to criteria for a MA thesis using standard sections (introduction, methods, results, discussion). Written and oral reports are graded by three examiners, with the criteria for passing based on appropriate standards for doctoral training at this level (publishable quality). The HPCS and BASP Training Areas expect students to complete a mentored empirical research project on an appropriate research topic in their respective fields. This includes conducting the research and analyses, writing a research manuscript of the completed empirical project, and giving a 15-30 minute oral presentation of the completed research at a national conference or as part of a local colloquium series. The project can involve the collection of new data, the analysis of data from a faculty advisors’ existing research, secondary data analysis on a national set, or an extension of a faculty-approved research project. The project is supervised and evaluated by the student’s faculty advisor and another member of the Training Area doctoral faculty. The Developmental Psychology Training Area requires a visually-guided presentation of the student’s original research, developed through the first and second years in the program. The exam assesses the student’s ability to design and implement an original empirical study, present it in scholarly format to a scholarly audience, address questions, and create a plan for submitting the presentation to a relevant professional conference. The CLD part of the CCP Training Area requires a publication-quality empirical paper based on the student’s research in the first two years. A rubric is provided for the First
Exam to guide the student and the advisory committee that will grade the exam and determine whether the student has passed or failed. The I/O Training Area expects students to successfully defend a thesis proposal and complete all required revisions. The exam assesses students’ research skills through a written paper followed by an oral defense. Passing criteria includes the demonstration of understanding and integrating scholarly literature, the conceptualization of theory and definition of a relevant research problem, and to design, implement, and interpret the results of that research.

The second approach of a scholarly written literature review and/or grant proposal typically followed by an oral defense of the work is utilized by the BCN, CCP (ABCP) and CSPEP (Critical Social-Personality) Training Areas. The Critical Social-Personality part of CSPEP requires students to identify a research idea presented in some specific work of a classic scholar from social/personality psychology’s past and then trace how the construct has developed, theoretically and methodologically, as it has been carried forward by others (at least five later publications, empirical and theoretical) in a scholarly (30-35 page) essay. The essay must articulate the idea they are tracing, evaluate the conceptual and methodological grounds for the original and evolving construct, how the idea has been handled in research, and forecast the research issues on the horizon for the next decade. After discussing the argument the theorist originally authored (2-4 pages), a 15-20 page summary of the five scholarly works including critical reflections on design, ethics and methodology follows. Key moments of changes in the idea as well as current debates about the idea should be evaluated in 3-5 page sections. Grading is performed by three faculty readers according to criteria indicating a clear understanding of the original emergence of the idea, a thorough description of how the research was tracked, a well-substantiated critical analysis of the chosen scholarly articles, a careful tracking of the ways in which the idea has retained its original form or was transformed, a scholarly treatment of conceptual and methodological concerns, and a creative consideration of future research. The ABCP part of the CCD Training Area requires students to choose among five topics and create a publishable-quality literature review aimed at critically assessing published research in comparative psychology and animal behavior. The topics are approved by a committee of two ABCP faculty members and a third GC CUNY doctoral faculty member. The BCN Training Area expects students to demonstrate readiness to undertake an original research project by selecting three scholarly research papers that do not overlap with their previous research experience. One paper is chosen by the Examination Committee. The student provides a one page summary followed by a 12 page submission of a detailed critique of the paper and a research proposal (in NIH/NSF format). An oral exam includes a presentation and critique of the paper and the proposal. A 3-member faculty panel assesses mastery of the fundamentals of the Neuroscience, the adequacy of the proposal and the student’s ability to respond flexibly to questions.

The third approach of a written exam that focuses on research methodology and design is utilized by the Clinical Psychology at Queens and CSPEP (Environmental Psychology) Training Areas. The Clinical Psychology at Queens Training Area expects students to pass a written exam that focuses on the students’ understanding of research methodology. Students must choose one research scenario out of three provided, and then design an experiment to address the question. Three faculty members grade each anonymous exam and grade students in the following five areas: Research Question, Research Design, Methods and Procedures, Data Analysis, and Evaluation. Grading is Pass/Fail and students must receive a score of 3 (satisfactory) or higher on each of the five areas to pass the exam. The Environmental Psychology part of CSPEP asks four interconnected questions related to Research Design and Methodology in the Environmental Social Sciences; Critical Analysis of Contemporary Environmental Problems; Critical appraisal of the conceptualization and design of research in environmental
Psychology; Psychological and Social Theory. These questions draw on course learning, particularly from Research Methods and the Environmental Social Science I, II and III sequence.

What learning outcomes do you hope are achieved through the exam or activity under review? Use your 2017–2018 assessment worksheet (attached) to find a complete list of your learning outcomes, as well as information on which outcomes best apply to this year’s assessment.

As indicated in the Psychology Learning Outcomes Goals submitted in 2018, the First Doctoral Exam provides evidence for:
Outcome 1. Theory and Content of Psychology—Students will show familiarity with the major concepts, theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and historical trends in psychology in their specific training area and across the larger field of psychology, consistent with ILO #1 (Broad and specialized knowledge in their discipline) and ILO #4 (A rigorous grounding in professional ethics).

Outcome 2. Research Methods in Psychology—Students will understand and apply basic research methods in psychology, including research design, data analysis, and interpretation. Students will be encouraged to produce both internal and external research proposals to gain funding and professional recognition for their work, consistent with ILO #2 (Advanced oral and written communication skills appropriate to their discipline), ILO #3 (Professional skills and experience required for career success), ILO #4 (A rigorous grounding in professional ethics) and ILO #5 (A substantial and original contribution to their field).

Outcome 5. Critical Thinking Skills—Students will respect and use critical and creative thinking, skeptical inquiry, and, when possible, use the scientific approach. Students will be encouraged to use critical and creative thinking in the production of internal and external grant proposals to gain funding and peer-review recognition for their work, consistent with ILO #2 (Advanced oral and written communication skills appropriate to their discipline), ILO #3 (Professional skills and experience required for career success), and ILO #5 (A substantial and original contribution to their field).

Outcome 6. Communication Skills—Students will be able to communicate effectively in a variety of formats, including written and oral presentations to colleagues and the general public. Students will present at forums ranging from their specific training area, the Psychology program, the Graduate Center-sponsored events, as well as national and international meetings to disseminate the findings of their original work consistent with ILO #2 (Advanced oral and written communication skills appropriate to their discipline), ILO #3 (Professional skills and experience required for career success), and ILO #5 (A substantial and original contribution to their field).

Gather evidence to help you evaluate how well your assessment/activity demonstrates successful attainment of its related learning outcomes. Your 2017–2018 assessment worksheet will be helpful in selecting the evidence you will examine. Ideal evidence would be examples of student work; other forms of evidence include publication data, job placement data, exam grades or pass rates. Report your findings. Is the assessment (and preparation for it) effective? If it is, provide the evidence for its effectiveness. If it is not, describe what changes you plan to make to ensure this form of assessment is more effective.

Students in nine of the 10 Training Areas typically take the First Doctoral Exam within the 45-credit window, completing it by the end of the 2nd, 3rd or 4th semesters in residence. The BCN Training Area, as part of the CUNY Neuroscience Collaborative, and subject to the rules in the Science cluster, has the students take the First Doctoral Exam at the beginning of the 3rd semester in residence. We have collected data from all Training Areas between 2013 and the present, as this was the beginning of these constituted Training Areas.
Thus, 97% of Psychology students took and passed the First Doctoral Exam after their initial try. A little over 1% passed after an allowable second try, designed for revision with substantial faculty feedback. Less than 2% of the students withdrew from the Program before taking the First Exam because of academic issues. No student took and failed the exam twice.

What further changes could be made to the assessment or to the learning outcomes associated with it, or to the curriculum/preparation for the assessment? What other next steps will your program take as a result of this review, in terms of program planning and decision making?

In student preparations for earlier versions of the exam, there was either a reliance on coursework to provide information or little guidance at all. In virtually all of the present versions of the exam, there are explicit steps taken by each of the areas of study to prepare the student for the exam. In coursework and advising, there is an active scaffolding so that students can master the exam with confidence and competence. In some, there is a formal formation of a committee that works with the student in fulfilling the requirements for the exam. In others, there are parts of formalized courses that prepare the student for the exam. In all cases, the student receives formal and important feedback that may result in revisions in the first two approaches, and the ability to correct errors and omissions in the retaking of the third approach.