The ODYN Comprehensive Exam¹:
An Overview of its Purpose and Procedures

Jennifer L. Kisamore
University of Oklahoma-Tulsa

2/26/2016
Version 5.1

¹ This document is to serve as a general guide regarding the comprehensive exam. Any policies and procedures mentioned in this document are described based on procedures in place at the time of its writing. Policies and procedures are subject to change at any time so students should check with their advisor and the Graduate College in the semester in which they plan to take the comprehensive exam regarding current practices.
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This paper is designed to tell you more about the ODYN comprehensive exam, including its purpose, format, grading and other procedures, as well as how to best approach the comprehensive exam and the typical issues that you can expect to face while studying for and taking the exam. Because this paper is just an overview of what to do and to expect, it will not answer all your questions about the comprehensive exam. Be sure to ask the faculty member who is coordinating the exam process for the semester in which you plan to take it when you have questions along the way!

Is the Comprehensive Exam Required?

Students who began the ODYN program during or after the fall 2008 semester can opt to complete a capstone project, research thesis or comprehensive exam as part of ODYN program requirements. Students must satisfactorily complete one of these three options as part of program requirements. Be sure to discuss these options with your advisor so that you can make an informed choice about which option is the best fit for you and your career. Because this document is focused on the comprehensive exam, the capstone project and thesis options will be covered minimally. Please contact your advisor for additional information regarding these options.

What is the Purpose of the Comprehensive Exam?

The comprehensive exam has two main goals: to assess your level of mastery of ODYN concepts as well as to facilitate deeper understanding of the field. While faculty members seek to verify that the student has a minimal level of mastery of the field and that he/she is able to perform at a professional level in the workplace, the comprehensive exam provides the student
with the opportunity to deepen his or her understanding of Organizational Dynamics as the student reviews and integrates the various topics studied in the program. To the extent that students focus on understanding ODYN concepts at a deep level (as opposed to studying merely to pass the exam), they should readily fulfill both goals of the exam.

Exam questions will be posed in a way that will require students to assimilate and synthesize their learning over various courses to show that their knowledge of the field is sufficiently broad as to encompass numerous ODYN concepts while also understanding the concepts at a deep level including interrelationships between the concepts. Students are expected to demonstrate knowledge of the philosophy, history, current issues, and major problems of the field in general, including such areas as applications of technology, organization of resources, provision of service, as well as leading and managing people, knowledge, and projects. A student’s answers are expected to demonstrate not only his or her knowledge of the research literature and current workplace practices/problems but also the student’s skills and abilities in applying theories and research-based practices in the workplace.

Who can take the Comprehensive Exam?

ODYN students admitted after fall 2008 have the option to take a comprehensive exam in lieu of completing a capstone or thesis. Because the capstone and thesis options both require a sequence of two courses, students who opt to take the comprehensive exam must take 2 additional courses in the program as electives in order to have the 36 credit hours needed to graduate.\(^2\) Students do not need to be enrolled in a specific course in the semester in which they

\(^2\) Students may be able to use these elective hours towards completion of a graduate certificate offered by the Organizational Dynamics program. Students should consult with their advisor to ensure they are taking the correct courses to meet university requirements as well as their academic and career goals.
take the comprehensive exam, but they must be enrolled in at least 2 credit hours in that semester per OU’s Graduate College Bulletin.

When is the Comprehensive Exam Offered?

The comprehensive exam is generally offered every fall and spring semester. Offerings, however, are based on faculty availability for coordination and grading of the exam. The comprehensive exam is not offered in summer semesters. Students should take the comprehensive exam in the last regular (fall or spring) semester in which they are in the program, although they may take the exam somewhat earlier if necessary.3

Exam Components

The comprehensive exam includes both a written and oral exams and covers four areas: (1) teams/leadership/survey of ODYN; (2) statistics/measurement; (3) human resource management; and (4) project management.4 This format is similar to that of the capstone project and research thesis which require written papers and oral defenses of the papers.

The written exam. The first part of the exam is written; students complete written tests for the four general areas while physically on the OU-Tulsa campus or at another approved, proctored location. The tests are conducted as open-book and open-note tests, but they are not collaborative.

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3 In order to take the comprehensive exam, the Tulsa Graduate College requires that a student has completed at least 75% of the required coursework for the program. Ideally, the comprehensive exam (or thesis or capstone) will be the last program requirement a student completes. Limits on when these courses are offered, however, may necessitate students completing a course or two after completing the comprehensive exam, thesis or capstone project. Program faculty recommend students take the comprehensive exam after completing as much coursework as possible as material covered in regular coursework will help students prepare for the comprehensive exam.

4 If a student chooses to complete an alternate specialization other than human resource management or project management, the alternative specialization question will be tailored to the area of alternative specialization provided relevant experts in that area can be identified who are willing to serve as graders for the question.
**Exam scheduling.** Students have 3 hours to complete each area test. Tests are given over two Saturdays. On the first Saturday, area test 1 and 2 will be administered. On the following Saturday, area tests 3 and 4 will be administered. All students taking the comprehensive exam in the same semester must take the same area tests at the same time in order to maintain exam security. With unanimous agreement, comprehensive exam students in a given semester may request the comprehensive exam committee allow the area exams be given in a different order and/or on days other than Saturday so long as no more than 7 test-free days occur between the two days of proctored exams. The procedure outlined above will be the default procedure including instances of dissention by any of the comprehensive exam students in a given semester.

**Written exam scoring.** Three graders with appropriate expertise in the topic area will grade each area test. Written exams will be scored using an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (failure to answer the question) to 10 (perfect answer). Graders may opt to use finer distinctions between score values (e.g., 7.5) when assigning scores. Students must earn an average score of 7.0 on the 4 area tests to be able to proceed to the oral exam. No exceptions to this policy will be given. Students will receive feedback on their answers from the exam coordinator which will include areas of weakness which students should review prior to the oral exam. Students who do not earn a 7.0 or higher on the written exam will automatically fail the comprehensive exam.

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5 Each exam day, students have 6.5 hours to complete two area tests. Students are allotted 3 hours to complete their answers for each area test leaving 30 minutes for restroom and snack breaks. Students are responsible for managing their test time accordingly.

6 Students may continue onto the oral exam even if earning below 7.0 on any area test as long as the overall average across written area tests and across graders of those tests is 7.0 or above. A total of 12 scores (4 area tests x 3 scores for each area) will be used to determine the overall average for the written exam.

7 A single faculty member’s score cannot result in failure of the entire written portion of the exam. If such a situation occurs in exam scoring, the exam coordinator will convene the comprehensive exam committee to determine how to resolve any such issues regarding disagreement in scoring. If committee members cannot resolve the disagreement themselves, feedback from an additional grader to be chosen by at least 2 of the 3 original graders will be sought.
Any student who fails the exam should contact the exam coordinator to determine eligibility to take the exam in a subsequent semester.⁸

**The oral exam.** The second part of the exam involves an oral exam in which faculty members ask additional questions about each of the four general areas assessed on the written test such as asking students to clarify or expand upon parts of their written answers. The oral exam committee will be comprised of the exam coordinator and two additional OU faculty members who were involved in grading of written area test questions. Questions asked during the oral exam will generally focus on topics whose mastery was not demonstrated on the written exam. The oral exam is only administered to students who have earned an overall score of 7.0 or higher on the written exam. The oral exam is required for all students who have successfully completed the written portion of the exam, regardless of their scores on the written exam.

*Exam format and scheduling.* The oral exam will generally last between 1 and 1.5 hours. The exam will be scheduled no earlier than 1 week after the student has received feedback on his/her written exam performance. During the oral exam, members of the examination committee will take turns asking the student questions until the committee is satisfied that all of their questions have been answered. At that point, the student will be asked to leave the room while the committee deliberates. During this time, members will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the student’s answers and then will vote to determine whether the student demonstrated satisfactory proficiency on the topics of the exam. After the committee votes, the student will be invited back into the room to discuss the results of the exam.

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⁸A faculty committee will determine whether students whose fail the comprehensive exam during any part of the process may retake the exam in a later semester or must withdraw from the program. Per university regulations, students are only permitted to retake the comprehensive exam one time. A second failure on the exam will result in automatic dismissal from the program.
Oral exam scoring. Oral exams will be scored as pass or fail. The outcome of the oral exam, whether the student is deemed to pass the oral exam or fail it will be based on the majority vote of the exam committee. Failure on the oral exam will result in automatic failure of the comprehensive exam. Students who fail the exam should contact the exam coordinator to determine their eligibility to take the exam in a subsequent semester (see footnote 8). Students should note that the criteria for successful performance on the two exams will differ. For instance, the written exam will assess not only mastery of the topic areas, but also competencies including but not limited to: written communication skills, planning and logic, and ability to utilize resources to answer complex questions. On the other hand, the oral exam will not only assess mastery of the topic areas but also competencies including but not limited to: oral communication skills, critical reasoning skills, ability to develop extemporaneous solutions to novel situations and ability to incorporate expert feedback into responses to complex questions.

Preparing for the Exam

Written. Students should be sure to allow adequate time to prepare for the exam. The exam is designed to test each student’s overall understanding of everything learned in the Organizational Dynamics program. While the written test is open-book/open-note, students should realize that preparation is key to good performance on the exam. Books and notes should be used minimally during the exam to look up information as overreliance on books and notes will result in not being able to complete the exam within the time limits. Students should try to anticipate exam questions and write responses to the anticipated questions in preparation for the exam. Students should also review exam study materials made available on D2L for the purpose of preparing for the comprehensive exam. Faculty members also encourage students to form study groups and seek clarification from ODYN faculty for questions they encounter in
preparing for the exam. In each semester in which the comprehensive exam is scheduled to be
given, a limited number of review sessions will be held to help students prepare for the exam.
These review sessions are optional but the ODYN faculty strongly encourage students to prepare
for, attend, and be engaged in these sessions so they can best prepare for the exam. Students must
contact the faculty member who is coordinating the comprehensive exam to request access to the
comprehensive exam study materials available in D2L.9

**Oral.** While some students can communicate better in writing than orally, others can
explain concepts in person better than they can write about them. The best way to prepare for the
oral exam is to try to anticipate questions the exam committee will ask. Students are encouraged
to spend adequate time in preparation for the oral component of the exam by revisiting any topics
the exam coordinator indicated they should review as well as any areas that they felt they did not
cover adequately on the written portion of the exam. Students are encouraged to jot down
anticipated questions and practice answering them. Students should prepare for this part of the
exam as earnestly as they did for the written part of the exam. While students have an
opportunity in the written portion of the exam to consult notes and books and well as ponder the
question over some time, they will not have these resources in the oral part of the exam. Thus
failure to prepare for the oral exam will be much more apparent to examiners in the oral part of
the exam than in the written part of the exam.

**Red Tape**

Students need to alert the faculty member serving as exam coordinator in a given
semester about their intention to take the comprehensive exam no later than the Monday of the
2nd week of classes in the semester in which the student will take the exam. This will help ensure

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9 Students may request access to this site even earlier such as the semester preceding the semester in which the
comprehensive exam will be taken in order to begin preparation for the exam.
students have access to the study materials and the supervising faculty member can double-check to ensure the student has completed the required amount of coursework to be eligible to take the exam and has turned in the Program of Graduate Work form in the previous semester. Students should also be sure they have completed all necessary paperwork for graduation at the beginning of the semester in which they plan to take the comprehensive exam. Failure to turn in necessary paperwork can delay graduation from the program and necessitate taking extra credit hours to meet graduation requirements of the Graduate College. Check with the Tulsa Graduate College for more information about important dates and paperwork related to graduation.10

In addition to materials that students must hand in for graduation, the committee members must hand in paperwork indicating that each student who took the exam has either passed or failed the exam. Such a form is generally signed by the comprehensive exam committee at the time of the oral exam. It is a good idea to check with the instructor to make sure the necessary paperwork has been completed and is turned in to prevent any administrative problems including delayed graduation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the comprehensive exam is likely the biggest and hardest, yet most rewarding exam that you will ever take. Do not underestimate the amount of time you will need to prepare for it! There is no cookie cutter approach to this process as it will require you knowing how you learn best.11 Take this opportunity to learn more about yourself and the field of ODYN.

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10 Students who plan to participate in convocation need to complete additional paperwork and purchase a cap and gown for the ceremony. There is usually an information session held (in late February or early March) that provides such information. Convocation is only held at the end of the spring semester in Tulsa although fall graduate can participate in the spring ceremony. Tulsa-based students may also participate in the commencement ceremonies in Norman. Please check with the Tulsa Graduate College for more information about graduation and Convocation requirements.

11 Consider taking a learning style inventory to learn how you learn best. One is available at: http://www.vark-learn.com/english/page.asp?p=questionnaire
Average score across the 4 area tests is 7.0 or higher

Majority of exam committee vote "pass"

Congratulations! Comprehensive exam has been passed.

Majority of exam committee vote "fail"

Comprehensive exam has been failed.

Indicates unsatisfactory demonstration of knowledge of ODYN concepts.

Indicates satisfactory completion of exam components; final exam score cannot be determined until all components are considered.

Indicates satisfactory demonstration of knowledge of ODYN concepts.
Appendix

General Preparation Tips

- **Gather your study materials.**
  Gather classic research as well as conduct literature searches to gather the newest most important pieces of research as well as consider trends in the various areas on which you will be tested. Be careful because it's easy to become consumed and overwhelmed with this part. You won’t be able to download and read everything. Make choices about which is most important, and be able to justify those choices.

- **Read strategically**
  While you will get a basic list of readings/topics to review, you should also be prepared to expand on that list based on the courses you took, your career goals, and your own interests. Feel free to have the exam coordinator review this expanded list. Faculty members will be more impressed by answers that go above and beyond the basic readings to incorporate concepts and topics that will help you on your career path. Also realize in doing readings that it is easier to synthesize and recall information if journal articles are read in a logical order, organized chronologically and by topic.

- **Take detailed notes and reflect on articles/books**
  After reading an article, chapter or book, write down the main points of the piece. This will make you think critically about the material and will also give you another resource to consult when writing your answers.

- **Get organized!**
  It is extremely important to get organized when preparing for a major exam such as the comprehensive exam. Not only do you want to organize your notes to make studying easier, but you will also want them organized so that you don’t waste time trying to find information for the open-book part of the exam. Consider rewriting/typing your notes and/or putting tabs in your notes to help you locate detailed information easily. Consider also the use of search functions (e.g., the “find” function) when consulting electronic sources.

- **Obtain/prepare sample questions**
  You will receive sample questions for each test area. Additionally, you can pair/group up and write sample questions that you exchange with other students to answer. The process of writing sample questions will help focus your studying as will answering sample questions. Also consider doing a run-through taking a sample test under conditions similar to the ones you will experience on test day. Realize that generating written responses to anticipated and the sample questions can save you time on exam day. Given the test is open note, students can cut-and-paste and modify responses to anticipated questions as needed when the anticipated questions align with the actual exam questions.
• **Consult with experienced students.**
  Contact other students who have successfully completed the comp exam. Ask them how they prepared and what they would do differently (and why) in preparing for the exam. Also, if they are willing, ask them to review your answers to sample questions for their feedback on the adequacy of your responses and your potential readiness for the exam.

• **Consult with and heed advice of faculty.**
  One faculty member will oversee the comprehensive exam process. However, there will be different writers and graders for each area test based on faculty member expertise. Ask the exam coordinator who the writer and graders will be for each question to you can better anticipate the types of questions you will be asked as well as the types of answers that will be expected from the graders.

• **Know how you learn.**
  People learn in different ways. Consider how you learn best. Do you learn best by reading and writing? If so, recopy your notes. Do you learn best by hearing? If so, read your notes into a recorder and listen to them whenever possible (e.g., folding laundry, driving, running, etc.). Do you need to talk it out? If so, discuss concepts with yourself, your spouse, or your pets. Do you learn best by doing? If so, practice doing tasks you will be expected to explain (e.g., running an ANOVA, developing a performance appraisal system, selecting members for a virtual team). While you should use multiple formats to learn, make sure to include the process that helps you learn best in the preparation process.

• **Consider the challenges you will face.**
  What are the challenges you face in preparing to take the comps? Locating study materials, reading them, managing your time, keeping productive, and learning how to discuss the interrelations of theory and research are all part of studying for comps. Do you have a family? Roommate? Do you have the space to spread out? A quiet place to work? Think about all the challenges you face and then devise solutions so that you can prepare and take the test effectively.

• **Set a time frame for studying and stick to it.**
  Carve out time that you can devote exclusively to studying - no working, no family responsibilities, no other coursework. Be realistic in how long it will take you to prepare for each area test. The written part of the comprehensive exam is typically given in the second half of the semester as the first half of the semester (or longer) should be spent preparing for the exam. Be sure to use that time wisely. Also, given there is a week between the two days of testing for the written exam, be sure to schedule studying according to the order the tests will be given and use the week to revise exam preparation methods as needed.

• **Manage your time.**
  Recognize that your time is limited. You need to decide what to study and how much time to devote to each topic. It's likely that you have a better grasp of some topics than others, so distribute your study time accordingly. Devise a schedule and determine how you will fit all of your studying before the exam. Each week set goals. Each day have a to-do list and follow
it. You will find that some topics take less time and other more time. Adjust your schedule and plans accordingly.

- **Seek support.**
  Remember that you're not alone in preparing for comps. Work with other students. Share resources and advice. Simply hang out and talk about the stress. Consider creating a study group, set group goals, and then report your progress to your group. Meet with others to quiz each other and clarify concepts. Know when you are likely to be more productive studying alone and when being around others will be more helpful.

- **Remember your task.**
  It's easy to get swept away with the task of reading and memorizing oodles of articles. Don't forget that you will be asked to *reason* about these readings, construct arguments, and discuss the material at a professional level. Stop and think about what you're reading. Identify themes in the literature, how particular lines of thinking evolved and shifted, and historical trends. Keep the big picture in mind and think about every article or chapter - what is its place in the field at large?

- **Review your answer before submitting.**
  Under time pressure it can be too easy to make typos and omit words. Leave 10 to 15 minutes (or more) to give yourself a chance to review your answer to make sure you have addressed all the points in the question, that your answer is logical and coherent, and that there aren’t major formatting, grammatical, or spelling errors. Use your computer’s software to do grammar and spell checks to save time on those tasks.

- **Write concisely while covering major points**
  Faculty do not expect that you will be able to cite every source you read in the limited amount of time available for the test, nor do they expect that you will be able to cover every possible topic or situation in your answer. Your answers, however, should include citations of experts in the area and/or ground-breaking studies or theories. Also, you want to balance breadth and depth in your answers so that you are covering several topics at an adequate depth.

- **Write a brief outline before you start writing your actual answer.**
  Writing an outline will help organize your thoughts before you start writing. It will also help you keep track of the numerous points you want to make in your answer. The several minutes you spend creating the outline (which you don’t turn in) will make your answer flow more logically and will help you remember key details you may forget if you begin writing immediately.

- **Use headers and subheaders in your answer.**
  For each area test, you can expect your answer to be several pages long. Use of headers and subheaders will help organize your answer in a way that is easier for you to write and the exam committee to read. You can use entries from the outline you created for headers and subheaders.
• **Manage your time**
  Know how much time you have for each area test and stick to it. If you complete one area test in less than 3 hours you can allot the extra time to the other area test for the day. However, be sure you aren’t short-changing one area test for another. Remember that each area test is worth the same number of points.

• **Be strategic in test taking**
  Each day you will have two area tests to complete. You may find that by answering the one you can answer more easily first, you build your confidence to complete the second test. On the other hand, you may want to answer the “harder” test first to get it out of the way so you can feel some relief to allow you to focus on the other test. Know yourself and how you test best, and use that to your advantage. Also, be sure to answer ALL area tests and remember they all count for the same number of points (and that a very low score on one test can jeopardize your chance of having an overall average of 7.0, meaning you have to retake the whole exam). For multi-part area tests, skip questions if you get stuck on them and come back to them later. Sometimes answering one part will help you remember a key point you need to answer another part.

• **Take breaks as needed**
  Taking short breaks can help keep your energy up while also giving you a chance to reflect on your answers. Be sure to not take too many or too long of breaks though. Be cognizant of whether you need the break or are simply taking one to avoid answering the question.

• **For the oral exam, collect your thoughts and rephrase the question**
  The oral exam is different than the written exam in that you can’t go back to insert ideas easily and still have a coherent sounding answer. Once a question is asked, consider rephrasing the question to ensure you understood what is being asked. Mentally organize the points you want to make prior to beginning to answer the question.

• **Take care of yourself in the process**
  Preparing for the comprehensive exam can be a grueling process. Be sure to take care of yourself before and during the exam process. Eat, sleep and exercise well. Avoid unusual and/or heavy foods on the day before and day of exams. Take walks or do other things you enjoy to break up study sessions. Long cram sessions will be less effective than shorter, focused sessions in which you have a positive attitude. Get enough sleep. Reviewing your notes immediately prior to sleep is especially helpful.

• **Have a positive outlook/sense of humor**
  Comprehensive exams are no one’s idea of fun. However, this can be a very enlightening process in which you see connections that you had never seen before (nor ever would have if not for studying a variety of topics simultaneously).

Adapted from:
Kuther, T. “How to prepare for your comprehensive examination,” Dingfelder, S. F. “Preparing for your comprehensive exams,” and AHA Committee for Graduate Student’s “Preparation tips for comprehensive exams.”