Oral Exam Guidelines

The objective of the oral exam is to provide a forum for you to demonstrate how you integrate theory, practice, and research related to the training that you have received in the Clinical Counseling Psychology Program. In essence, you will be asked to describe a conceptual model and to show how this model guides and informs your clinical decision making. Therefore, your skill in case conceptualization is an important aspect of the oral exam. Clinical decisions are not guided solely by theory, however. Increasing demands for accountability also emphasize that you consider the empirical evidence in support of your intervention.

In addition to examining the scholarly literature on the effectiveness of psychotherapy, you should address the question of how you would demonstrate that your intervention worked with a particular client. In the era of managed behavioral health care, therapists are expected to demonstrate the effectiveness of their interventions. This is not an easy task, especially because each client presents with unique problems and circumstances. Nonetheless, you should discuss how you would demonstrate the effectiveness of your intervention. Several questions are relevant to this issue. For example, what are the goals of the intervention? What evidence would indicate that your intervention has (or has not) been effective? What assessment tools or procedures would you use to obtain this evidence? How does this (assessment) information guide your clinical decisions?

You should be mindful that you are expected to integrate the various elements of your training and study. You should call upon information from both your course work and internship experience. We want to discourage narrow, one-dimensional formulations of human nature and experience.

The procedures for the oral exam will mirror the training that you have received in the program. The exam itself will be conducted in such a way as to maximize your opportunity to exhibit your ability to synthesize and integrate theory, practice, and research.

The time allotted for the exam will be one hour. During the exam you are expected to demonstrate competence on several related tasks or topics.
Naturally, you should be well prepared for the exam. A structured but flexible approach that organizes the presentation and budgets time appropriately is important for your success. During the exam, you are expected to address the following points.

1. It is important to provide a concise model of human functioning that describes optimal or adaptive functioning. Outline a model of adaptive functioning that does not rely on terminology or categories of abnormal behavior. During this discussion, you are expected to articulate a vision of adaptive or optimal functioning, especially human strengths or resilience. There are a number of models that vary in terms of underlying assumptions and empirical evidence and the study of personality in general provides a variety of models that have been subjected to rational and empirical critique.

2. You should provide a clean description of impaired or maladaptive functioning. Examples should be cast in psychological rather than medical or quasi-medical language and concepts. The analysis should highlight the role of developmental and social learning processes that are often at the core of impaired or maladaptive functioning. You should also be able to discuss how maladaptive cognitions, behaviors, and emotions are currently construed within the current DSM nomenclature. However, the conceptual categories described in the DSM should not be regarded as the basis for understanding and remediating impaired functioning, but instead, as tools that can be used in this endeavor. Case examples that were encountered during the internship can be especially helpful in illustrating these concepts.

3. You should be prepared to perform an abbreviated case formulation. It is particularly important to describe how specific assessment procedures guide and inform the selection of empirically supported interventions. Regardless of the treatment orientation that is espoused, you must be able to indicate why one intervention has been selected instead of some other. In other words, formulaic intervention plans are to be avoided in favor of ones that take into account the complexity of human experience. Strengths and limitations of the client, various social, circumstantial, and time constraints of the client, as well as the relative
merits of the intervention (as discussed in the professional literature) should be discussed.

4. Finally, you should be prepared to discuss the status of the empirical support for the interventions that you describe. These interventions may have strong empirical justification, with many replications, or they may have provisional information regarding their efficacy (i.e., some clinical and research evidence that is positive but also some evidence that is inconclusive or contradictory). The point here is that you should not advocate unequivocally, or even provisionally, an intervention or set of interventions without knowledge of their current empirical status. In other words, you should come to the oral exam mindful of the research that pertains to the interventions that you discussed in during the case formulation. Moreover, you should be familiar with current reviews and meta-analyses of the general efficacy of the conceptual model more generally.