SAA MA Certifying Exam Policy & Procedures

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Rationale for the SAA MA Certifying Exam

In compliance with MSU graduate school requirements, students in Plan B master's programs must successfully complete an Evaluation or Examination. In the Student Affairs Administration (SAA) MA program, students must complete Certifying Examination Essays representing their work in the program. To be eligible for graduation, students must have their final essays evaluated and accepted by the SAA faculty according to the guidelines in this document.

Purpose of the SAA MA Certifying Exam

The purpose of the SAA MA Certifying Exam is for students in the Student Affairs Administration MA Program to independently demonstrate their ability to connect theory and research about information and issues in the field of student affairs and higher education to practice. Students are challenged to integrate information from core courses and other sources and apply this information to situations that relate to student affairs.

Nature of the Evaluation

The exam consists of two essays (Part One and Part Two). The first step, before beginning the essay writing, is a meeting with the student's advisor to get approval for themes to be used in the essays (see below under Preparation). The exam is not timed, as it can be started at any time following the advisor's approval of themes. The essays must be submitted during the last semester of enrollment, with the exception of students who intend to complete their coursework in the summer; these students must submit their final essays in the spring semester immediately preceding the summer in which they complete their course requirements.

Eligibility

A student is considered eligible to submit their essays when they are successfully making progress to degree and: (a) have successfully completed and passed the 7 required SAA core courses (EAD 805, 870, 871, 873, 874, 875, 889; completion of EAD 893 is not required for exam eligibility) and (b) have a cumulative grade point average of 3.0 or higher. All core courses must have letter grades. Students must have the Annual Progress to Degree form from the previous academic year uploaded into GRADSIS. Students are ineligible to submit their certifying exam essays if their academic record includes any incomplete courses or deferred grades. The student's advisor verifies that the student is making satisfactory progress to degree and is eligible to submit their certifying exam for evaluation by the faculty. Students must be enrolled in at least one credit hour at Michigan State University during the semester in which they submit their essays. The student's advisor will notify the student regarding their eligibility. If the student is ineligible to submit their exam on the established deadline, they must petition the faculty, via a memo to their advisor, once they have become eligible. The student would also request to submit their exam on the next established deadline. If there are extenuating circumstances, the student could petition for an alternate submission date. Approval of all petitions is at the discretion of the faculty.

Deadlines

Completed essays are due:
- Spring & Summer Semester Graduates: Last Monday of January
- Fall Semester Graduates: Last Monday of September

SAA MA Certifying Examination Essay Process from Start to Finish

Preparation

Step One: All degree candidates are expected to consult with their faculty advisor during the semester before the one in which they intend to submit their final essays (summer semester is excluded; summer candidates should consult with advisor the prior fall semester). The student should meet with their faculty advisor by November 15 (for spring semester submission) to get approval for the two themes they plan to use in the essays and discuss their plans for addressing the requirements. If the student plans to submit their essays in fall semester, they should meet with their advisor by April 1 of the previous academic year. *Reminder*: the essays must be submitted in the last semester of enrollment before degree conferral, unless graduating in the summer. See Deadlines.

The advisor consultation should include the following:
1. Ensure student's first-year Annual Progress to Degree is uploaded in GRADSIS. Note that if the student is continuing past the fourth semester, a second-year Annual Progress to Degree form will also need to be uploaded in GRADSIS before submitting the Certifying Examination Essays for evaluation.
2. Discuss requirements for the Certifying Examination Essays.
3. Discuss the themes the student is considering using in Parts One and Two (see below).

Step Two: Following the consultation, the student will email their advisor indicating their final selection of two themes to use in Part One of the exam. The advisor will reply by email either confirming approval of those two themes OR asking for clarification or changes. If clarification or changes are needed, the student and advisor repeat this process including, if necessary, another meeting. The student should not begin writing the exam essays until their advisor has approved two themes, in writing, by email. Once the two themes are approved, there will be no further discussion with the advisor regarding the content of the exam. Themes cannot be changed once approved.

Under typical circumstances the consultation, proposal of two themes, any revisions to the themes, and *email approval* of the two themes will be complete by December 1 (for January submission) or May 1 (for September submission).

	If you plan to graduate in spring semester (April/May)	If you plan to graduate in summer (August)	If you plan to graduate in fall semester (December)
Consultation with advisor	No later than November 15 prior	No later than November 15 prior	No later than April 1 prior
Advisor approves themes in writing by email	Typically by December 1	Typically by December 1	Typically by May 1
Completed essays due	Last Monday of January	Last Monday of January	Last Monday of September

Content

There are two parts of the SAA MA Certifying Examination, designed to help students identify connections between their coursework and student affairs practice. Read the instructions for Part One and Part Two before writing. The two essays are linked and require integration across the essays as well as synthesis within each.

Part One:

Write an essay of 1400 to 1600 words that describes two themes from SAA core courses (EAD 805, 870, 871, 873, 874, 875, 889) to showcase your learning throughout the program. A theme is a recurring idea or frequent topic you identified during your coursework in the SAA program. Each theme must derive from at least three core courses, meaning you will connect ideas, insights, and learnings across courses rather than just one course. Make sure you clearly name and define your themes. For example (and you may not use this example in your exam), if you were writing about the theme of "the evolution of academic integrity within student affairs," you might draw on student development theories related to ethical development (873), assessment of students' knowledge and attitudes about academic integrity (889), the functional area of campus conduct (874, 875), the differences in conduct offices across institutional types (875, 870), the history of ideas related to academic integrity (870, 871), and instructor roles in promoting discussions about academic integrity (871). Your themes may be, but are not required to be, related to one another. You should be able to write about them as distinct themes within the essay in a way that demonstrates how each of them relates to three core courses.

Your essay should consist of (a) an introduction that names/defines/describes each theme and provides a roadmap/outline for your essay, (b) a discussion of theme one, (c) a discussion of theme two, and (d) a brief summary of the essay. Be sure to name specific courses and their content (e.g., readings, assignments, etc.) in the theme discussion sections.

The reference list at the end of Part One must contain at least 10 distinct sources (e.g., readings, media) that were included (as required or optional/recommended) in core courses.[1] You may include additional sources but *must* include 10 from core courses. Title page and references do not count in the 1400 to 1600 words.

Part Two:

Write an essay of 1400 to 1600 words that links one of the two themes from Part One to one example from your practical experience during the SAA program. The experience could be from your practicum site, your graduate assistantship, a summer internship, or a course-based experience such as the Group Assessment Project (889) or Office Consultation Project (875). Continuing the example of "the evolution of academic integrity within student affairs," you might write an essay that connects knowledge from core courses to an experience you had working with the University Ombuds office for your OCP in which you developed materials for instructors related to academic integrity and the use of ChatGPT in courses or an experience working in your assistantship or practicum with a student who was accused of plagiarism.

Your essay should consist of (a) a short introduction to the essay, (b) a brief description (approximately 450–500 words) of the experience,[2] (c) a description of how you applied or could now apply knowledge from three core courses to address the situation (approximately 850–1100 words), (d) a short conclusion to the essay. Note: If you are writing about a course-based experience (e.g., OCP, GAP, Student Stories, etc.), that course would count as one of the three courses. Therefore, you must apply knowledge from two *additional* core courses.

The reference list at the end of Part Two must contain at least 10 distinct sources (e.g., readings, media) that were included (as required or optional/recommended) in core courses. You may include additional sources but *must* include 10 from core courses. Title page and references do not count in the 1400 to 1600 words.

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[1] For the purposes of counting references, different theorists described in an edited book such as the textbook from EAD 873 (*Student Development in College, 3rd ed.)* count as separate sources. That is, using Patton et al. (2016) as an example, if you are referencing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Marcia Baxter Magolda's Self-Authorship Theory, both from the textbook, they count as separate sources. In the reference list, include the textbook (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye) as one source. In parentheses at the end of the entry in the reference list name the authors. Indicate the cite is from a core course by including an * at the start of the citation. In this example, you would put the following in the reference list:

*Patton, L. D., Renn, K. A., Guido, F. M., & Quaye, S. J. (2016). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass. (Bronfenbrenner)

*Patton, L. D., Renn, K. A., Guido, F. M., & Quaye, S. J. (2016). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass. (Baxter Magolda)

[2] To the extent possible, you should not reveal any confidential details about yourself or others in your essay. You should mask the identities of individuals involved in the situation; for example, use pseudonyms or generic terms (such as "the student," "the student organization," "my supervisor," etc.). Do not disclose details that would require readers to make mandatory RVSM or other reports. If you have any questions about how to mask identifying details, please consult your advisor.

Formatting

Students should use the following formatting guidelines when completing their essays.

- Word Count: 1400 to 1600 words each for Part One and Part Two
- Clearly identify the final word count after each essay's concluding paragraph (e.g., [1488 words])
- Use current APA manual for all formatting (e.g., title page, text, page numbers, reference list, etc.)
- Font: Times New Roman, 12-point font
- Spacing: Double spaced
- Margins: 1-inch
- Title Page: In addition to following APA formatting, include your two approved themes and the three classes you discuss to support each theme.
- Reference List: Two reference lists (one for each essay), formatted in APA 7th edition. Note that sources across Parts One and Two may overlap. See **Appendix A** for a sample reference list.
- Compile the documents in this order into one MS Word document: Title Page, Part One Essay, Part One Reference List, Part Two Essay, Part Two Reference List

Submission

- Spring & Summer Graduates: Completed project due by 11:59p.m. (ET) on the last Monday in January.
- Fall Graduates: Completed project due by 11:59 p.m. (ET) on the last Monday in September.

After a student is confirmed eligible to submit their exam, they will receive an email with a unique Qualtrics link. The student will use this link to submit their exam. For additional details and requirements, see **Appendix B**.

If a student does not submit their exam on the established deadline, they must petition the faculty, via a memo to their advisor, to explain the situation and request an alternate submission date. Approval of all petitions is at the discretion of the faculty, who may also require the student to identify two new themes.

Review and Evaluation

Examinations will be reviewed by a committee of the student's advisor and one additional HALE faculty member using the Certifying Exam Rubric (see **Appendix C**). Exams will not be anonymous (that is, they will have student names on them). The committee will evaluate exams as a whole (both essays and requisite references) as acceptable or unacceptable. Students will be informed by the SAA MA Coordinator, in writing, via the student's MSU email account of the committee's determination. The potential outcomes are as follows:

- If the committee review determines the student's work to be acceptable, upon notification to the student of a "pass" on the exam, the SAA MA Program Coordinator will submit the result to the HALE Administrative Assistant and/or the Office of Student Affairs for the College of Education to confirm satisfactory completion of the exam requirement.

- If the committee review determines the exam as a whole (Part One, Part Two, References, Overall Formatting) to be unacceptable, the student will be asked to revise and resubmit. Prior to revising and resubmitting, the student must consult with their faculty advisor who will provide detailed feedback from the committee's review and a deadline for submission of the revised exam. Because MSU's academic calendar may vary, the SAA MA Coordinator will notify SAA students eligible to submit the exam of the specific date revisions would be due. The exam will be reviewed again by two HALE faculty members using the same rubric. If the exam is still not acceptable, it will be returned to the student with additional feedback for further revision. This process continues until the committee determines the exam to be acceptable.

To receive final program certification (i.e., degree conferral) within the semester the exam was submitted, the student must receive an overall determination of "acceptable" by the deadline determined by the Graduate School.

Appendix A: Sample Reference List

Below is a sample reference list for the SAA MA certifying exam. Each essay requires its own list with at least 10 citations from core courses. As a reminder, you must incorporate information from 3 core courses into each essay.

The reference list must follow the 7th edition of the APA manual. In addition, indicate sources from core courses with an asterisk at the beginning of the citation. See below for examples.

For the purposes of counting references, different theorists/topics covered in different chapters in an edited book (for example, the textbook from EAD 873 [*Student Development in College,* 3rd ed.]) count as separate sources. That is, continuing the example of *Student Development in College*, if you are referencing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Marcia Baxter Magolda's Self-Authorship Theory, both from the textbook, they count as separate sources. In the reference list, include the textbook citation (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye) separately for each chapter you reference. In parentheses at the end of the entry in the reference list, name the theorist/topic/etc. See the examples in the reference list below.

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Appendix B: Submission Instructions

Preparing the Exam for Submission

You will submit one MS Word file: Title Page, Part One Essay, Part One Reference List, Part Two Essay, Part Two Reference List.

File name: YourLastName.docx (e.g., Marin.docx)

Running Head: YourLastName (e.g., Marin)

Submitting the Exam

After you have prepared your file for submission, go to the unique Qualtrics link emailed to you from the SAA MA Program to submit the file. Make sure you have uploaded the correct file before clicking Submit. You will not be able to submit anything else after you click Submit.

By submitting your exam you certify agreement with the following statement:

"All work on my Certifying Examination is original and was completed only by me. I had no assistance or consultation with content or editing."

After your file is submitted, a web message will appear stating "Thank you for submitting your Certifying Exam." You will also receive an email confirming your exam submission.

Emergencies

In case of an emergency prior to exam submission, please email your advisor with specific details of the circumstance.

If you have an emergency with Qualtrics, please email Dave Dai (daix@msu.edu) and copy Dr. Marin (pmarin@msu.edu) with specific details of the circumstance. They will respond as soon as possible.

Appendix C: Certifying Exam Rubric

Exam Component	Unacceptable, Revision Required	Acceptable
Part 1	Essay did not meet one or more of the required elements: • 2 key themes not identifiable and/or muddled in the introduction • Missing roadmap/outline of essay • Fails to clearly define both themes and their meaning • Does not clearly identify and explain how each theme derives from at least 3 SAA MA core courses • Limited or no connection of ideas, insights, and learnings across courses • Does not use adequate evidence in the form of citations from core courses to support claims • Provides no summary/conclusion • Essay contains grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors	Essay met all required elements: • Clearly identifies 2 key themes succinctly and explicitly in introduction • Provides an effective, brief roadmap/outline of the essay • Clearly defines each theme and its meaning • Clearly identifies and explains how each theme derives from at least 3 SAA MA core courses • Clear connection of ideas, insights, and learnings across courses • Uses evidence in the form of citations from core courses to support claims • Provides a summary/conclusion that is aligned to content of essay • Free of grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors
Part 2	Essay did not meet one or more of the required elements: • No theme from Part 1 identified in the introduction • Does not describe briefly (approx. 450–500 words) a practical experience from the SAA program • Does not adequately apply knowledge from 3 SAA core courses to addressing the situation (approx. 85–1100 words) • Does not use adequate evidence in the form of citations from core courses to support claims • Provides no summary/conclusion • Essay contains grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors	Essay met all required elements: • Theme from Part 1 identified in the introduction • Provides a brief description (approx. 450–500 words) of a practical experience from the SAA program • Clear application of knowledge from 3 SAA core courses to addressing the situation (approx. 850–1100 words) • Uses evidence in the form of citations from core courses to support claims • Provides a summary/conclusion that is aligned to content of essay • Free of grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors

Exam Component	Unacceptable, Revision Required	Acceptable
References	• Either reference list for each essay does not contain 10 sources from required or optional/suggested readings from SAA core courses • Reference list is not formatted according to APA 7th edition	• Reference list for each essay contains at least 10 sources from required or optional/suggested readings from SAA core courses • Reference list is formatted according to APA 7th edition
Formatting (for each Part of exam)	Essay did not meet one or more of the required formatting: • Did not identify word count after essay • Essay fell outside word count • Missing or incorrectly formatted Title Page • Font is not Times New Roman • Font is not 12-point font • Essay is not double spaced • Essay is not formatted according to APA 7th edition	Essay met all of the formatting requirements: • Word count of 1,400–1600 words per essay • Clearly identified word count after concluding paragraph • Title Page per APA 7th edition • Font: Times New Roman • Font: 12-point font • Essay is double spaced • Essay is formatted according to APA 7th edition