

# Assessing Professional & Personal Development in Contemporary Graduate Education

Graham D. Rowles, Ph.D., Heidi H. Ewen, Ph.D.,  
 Monica M. Underwood, B.A., and John F. Watkins, Ph.D.  
 Graduate Center for Gerontology



## ABSTRACT

This poster reports on a comprehensive web-based assessment program at the doctoral level premised on dimensions of intellectual, professional and personal progress. The program involves interlocking elements of student self-rating assessment, faculty assessment of student progress, and a system of interactive and iterative feedback among students and faculty.

## INTRODUCTION

There are currently few comprehensive evaluation programs and tools for the dynamic assessment of progress through a doctoral (Ph.D.) program, and none in gerontology. This poster presentation reports on the preliminary implementation of the first such program. Developed by a team of faculty members, students, and professional staff including instructional technology experts, this assessment program targets **seven dimensions of intellectual and professional progress** at the doctoral level:

- 1) [substantive grounding](#) (knowledge base);
- 2) [methodological competence](#);
- 3) [integrative thinking](#) (ability to think through an interdisciplinary lens);
- 4) [critical thinking](#);
- 5) [intellectual risk taking](#);
- 6) [scholarly and professional independence](#);
- 7) [identification with gerontology](#).

In addition it monitors **four dimensions of personal growth**:

- 1) [involvement/commitment](#);
- 2) [emotional wellbeing/stress management](#);
- 3) [physical health](#);
- 4) [time management](#).

Outcome measures for each dimension were developed as part of a longitudinal assessment program involving seven measurement points (commencing at the beginning of each student's doctoral program, repeated at key transition points in the curriculum and each student's personal trajectory of professional development, and concluding two years after graduation).

## METHOD

### Participants

- 22 students aged 21-54 yrs
- Enrolled in the Gerontology Doctoral Program at the University of Kentucky's Graduate Center for Gerontology
- 11 of the 22 students had taken and passed qualifying exams

### Goals

- To present and discuss key dimensions of doctoral educational assessment, including Intellectual & Professional Progress and Personal Growth
- To present and interpret preliminary findings from implementation of a doctoral level assessment program.

### Self Assessment Schedule

1. Entry into program
2. End of first semester (completion of initial core)
3. End of first year
4. Completion of Integrative Seminar (usually at end of fourth semester)
5. Following qualifying examinations
6. Following doctoral dissertation defense
7. Two years post graduation

## RESULTS

### Initial Assessment, Fall 2006 Comparison of Students Pre- and Post-Qualifying Examination

| Item  | Pre-Qualifying Exam |      | Post-Qualifying Exam |      |
|---|---------------------|------|----------------------|------|
|   | Mean                | SD   | Mean                 | SD   |
| <b>INTELLECTUAL AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH</b>   |                     |      |                      |      |
| <b>Scholarly and Professional Independence</b>  |                     |      |                      |      |
| I am able to express my own thoughts & ideas.   | 4.0                 | .89  | 4.4                  | .67  |
| I am able to conduct myself effectively in a professional environment.                          | 4.1                 | .54  | 4.1                  | 1.45 |
| I am confident in my ability to critically assess research design & methods.                    | 3.6                 | .51  | 3.7                  | .91  |
| I feel confident integrating insights and ideas from diverse areas of research and scholarship. | 3.6                 | 1.37 | 3.9                  | .70  |
| <b>Methodological Competence</b>  |                     |      |                      |      |
| I am confident in my ability to formulate useful research questions.                            | 3.6                 | 1.29 | 3.82                 | .98  |
| I am competent working in a clinical environment.*  | 2.5                 | 1.75 | 4.1                  | 1.38 |
| I am competent in my ability to analyze and interpret data.                                     | 3.3                 | 1.35 | 3.8                  | .87  |
| <b>Intellectual Risk Taking/Creativity</b>  |                     |      |                      |      |
| I am confident expressing alternate points of view in scholarly and professional settings.*     | 3.6                 | .81  | 4.3                  | .47  |
| I am confident in extending theory through my own research activities.                          | 3.5                 | 1.57 | 3.8                  | .60  |
| <b>Gerontological Knowledge Base</b>  |                     |      |                      |      |
| I am well-grounded in theory.   | 3.61                | 1.4  | 3.6                  | .82  |
| I am well-grounded in the current issues and problems of aging.                                 | 3.7                 | 1.27 | 4.3                  | .65  |
| <b>Scholarly Communication</b>  |                     |      |                      |      |
| I am confident in my ability to orally present my research ideas or findings.*                  | 3.6                 | 1.04 | 4.5                  | .52  |
| I am confident in my ability to express my ideas or findings in writing.                        | 3.8                 | .87  | 4.3                  | .65  |

\* p ≤ .05

Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither Agree Nor Disagree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree

## RESULTS

| Item  | Pre-Qualifying Exam |      | Post-Qualifying Exam |      |
|---|---------------------|------|----------------------|------|
|   | Mean                | SD   | Mean                 | SD   |
| <b>PERSONAL GROWTH</b>  |                     |      |                      |      |
| <b>Involvement/Commitment</b>   |                     |      |                      |      |
| Engagement/Involvement in departmental seminars and colloquiums is important to my development.   | 3.8                 | 1.06 | 4.2                  | .75  |
| I have opportunities to participate in the development of the program.                            | 3.6                 | 1.57 | 4.1                  | .54  |
| <b>Emotional Well-Being/Stress Management</b>   |                     |      |                      |      |
| I can adjust to the rigors of the doctoral program.*  | 3.6                 | 1.29 | 4.6                  | .52  |
| I can maintain a sense of self as a participant in this program.                                  | 4.2                 | .60  | 4.3                  | .52  |
| <b>Physical Health</b>  |                     |      |                      |      |
| How is participating in the doctoral program affecting your health?***                            | 2.9                 | .54  | 2.7                  | .65  |
| How often do symptoms of depression or anxiety interfere with your performance in the program?*** | 3.1                 | .70  | 3.3                  | .79  |
| <b>Time Management</b>  |                     |      |                      |      |
| I maintain adequate levels of leisure and recreation.   | 3.2                 | .98  | 3.3                  | 1.35 |
| I effectively manage the competing demands of the program.  | 3.5                 | 1.23 | 4.3                  | .65  |

\*  $p \leq .05$

\*\* Scale: 1=very negatively, 2=negatively, 3=no effect, 4=positively, 5=very positively

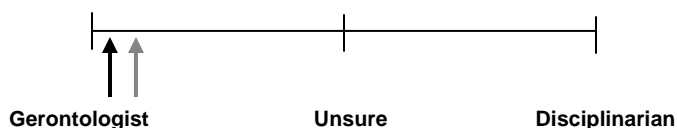
\*\*\* Scale: 1=always, 2=often/frequently, 3=occasionally/infrequently, 4=never

## DISCUSSION

- The assessment system is designed to track students' intellectual, professional, and personal growth as they progress through their doctoral studies.
- Gerontology doctoral students identify themselves as 'gerontologists' early in their doctoral education.
- Preliminary findings from the first data collection using the assessment system indicate that students who have completed and passed their qualifying exams are more confident in their ability to articulate diverse ideas in professional settings, work in direct contact with research participants, present research findings to scientific audiences, and adjust to the rigors of doctoral education. These findings suggest elements of the program that are supportive of professional growth.
- Longitudinal analyses within each cohort will enable us to determine which time points (e.g. completion of coursework, qualifying examinations, dissertation development), and which domains are most critical for student growth and, therefore, amenable to constructive intervention.

**On the following scale, indicate the extent to which you identify yourself as a gerontologist.**

Black = Post-Qualifying, Gray = Pre-Qualifying



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*For more information contact:*

Dr. Graham D. Rowles, Director  
Graduate Center for Gerontology  
306 Health Sciences-CTW  
University of Kentucky  
Lexington, KY 40536-0200

Email: growl2@email.uky.edu  
Phone: (859)257-1450, x80145