

FEMP

Guide for Final Student Assessment

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, OSU Political Science Masters degree candidates have been required to successfully complete a comprehensive written exam as a requirement for graduation. With the addition of the FEMP option, a need to develop a different evaluation process was identified, primarily due to the unique nature of the FEMP mission and goals. In particular, since the program is expected to produce graduates that have practical skills in addition to applicable theoretical knowledge, there was a need to develop a method that measures those practical skills in addition to the prerequisite knowledge. The traditional comprehensive written exam is adequate for the evaluation of knowledge, but is not designed to identify competence in practical skills. The assessment approach was identified as the best approach for ensuring accurate evaluation of both.

This process, the final of the three FEMP support areas (the others being the practicum and the internship), is accomplished through either an *Assessment Center* (for traditional students) or an *Outcomes-Based Assessment* (for in-service professionals in management/administrative positions). The purpose of your assessment process is to evaluate your ability to apply the knowledge that you have gained in the program to situations that you may encounter in your profession. This is accomplished through the evaluation of your performance on a combination of situational simulation exercises, oral presentations and defenses, and case study designs

An committee composed of academic- and peer-professionals trained as assessors will serve to evaluate you in the assessment. You will also be given practical, comprehensive feedback on your performance in the assessment, along with recommendations for further educational and/or professional development opportunities.

The purpose of this guide is to provide you with information regarding assessment, assessment requirements, and assessment guidelines.

PREREQUISITES

Since the assessment is designed to be a “capstone exercise”, you must obtain the approval of the FEMP Director to participate. In addition, you must have successfully completed a practicum and an internship (the internship is for traditional students only). You must have also completed or be currently enrolled in all course work required for graduation. To be eligible for the *Outcomes-Based Assessment*, you must currently be an in-service, management/administrative-level professional in an emergency service delivery or support organization. All other departmental and graduate college requirements also apply. Consult with the FEMP Director to ensure that you meet these requirements before requesting the final assessment.

GUIDELINES

In order to participate in the assessment process, you must provide a written request to the FEMP director NO LATER THAN the second week of your final semester. In your request, provide justification if you believe that you are eligible for the outcomes-based assessment. If you do not provide justification, or if the FEMP Director determines that you are not eligible for the outcomes-based process, you will be scheduled for an assessment center. You will be notified by the Director of the date and time for your assessment as soon as it is scheduled. If you are participating in an outcomes-based assessment from a remote location, the details of your schedule will be determined through consultation with the Director.

ASSESSMENT CENTER

Background

As noted above, assessment centers are used as the final evaluative process for traditional FEMP students. Assessment centers are not a new concept and, in fact, have been widely used in industry and the public sector for years. The term “center” is misleading in that an assessment center is not a place, but rather a process used primarily as a hiring and promotion tool.

“Typically used for selecting key management personnel, the assessment center can best be described as a series of individual and group exercises during which evaluators assess the capabilities and behavior of candidates for promotions or finalists for a job. Candidates for a position participate in exercises designed to simulate the kinds of responsibilities that the person hired is expected to handle. The evaluators assess the candidates using predetermined criteria selected on the basis of the skills and abilities most essential to successful job performance.”¹

Although each procedure must stand on its own merits, the concepts and practices of properly designed and implemented assessment centers have consistently been proven valid as evaluation processes.²

Dimensions

The attributes or qualities evaluated in an assessment center are known as “dimensions”. The critical nature of dimensions is that they contain not only a title, but also, more importantly, a definition. Since a title such as “oral skills” alone means different things to different people, a measurement based on the title alone might likewise be varied among evaluators. The inclusion of a definition ensures consistency of the evaluation base. Dimensions most common to assessment centers include:³

Oral Communication - Ability to accurately and clearly communicate information, ideas, tasks, directives, conditions, and needs to groups or

individuals, with or without time for preparation (includes nonverbal gestures and use of aids where appropriate).

Written Communication - Ability to communicate in writing using proper grammar and syntax, in an organized, accurate, and concise manner.

Problem Analysis - Ability to identify problems, to secure relevant information from both oral and written sources, to identify possible causes of problems, and to analyze and interpret data in complex situations involving conflicting demands, needs, or priorities.

Judgment - Ability to evaluate courses of action, to develop alternative courses of action, and to reach logical decisions based on available information.

Organizational Sensitivity - Ability to perceive the impact of a decision on the rest of the organization, to perceive the impact of outside pressures on the organization, and to be aware of changing societal conditions.

Organization - Ability to efficiently establish an appropriate course of action for self and/or others for the accomplishment of a specific goal. Ability to make proper assignments of personnel and resources.

In addition to the common dimensions listed above, which are almost always assessed in public service assessment centers, the following dimensions are also sometimes used in assessment centers:

Initiative – The desire to actively influence events rather than passively accepting them; to be self-starting, taking action beyond what is necessarily called for.

Interpersonal Relations - Ability to perceive and to react to the needs of others, to pay attention to others' feelings and ideas, to accept what others have to say, and to perceive the impact of self on others.

Independence - Ability to act based on one's own convictions instead of the desire to please others.

Development of Subordinates - Ability to maximize human potential of subordinates through training and developmental activities.

Persuasiveness - Ability to organize and present material in a convincing manner and to gain agreement or acceptance.

Delegation - Ability to use subordinates effectively and to understand at what level a decision can best be made.

Listening - Ability to extract important information being presented in oral communication and to convey an impression of interest in what others have to say.

Decisiveness - Readiness to make decisions, render judgments, take action, and commit oneself to a course of action.

Exercises

Exercises and activities, each simulating a job-related situation, are developed that allow assessors to evaluate dimensions for each candidate. These situations must be “job-related”, or, in other words, specifically based on the job description of the position being assessed. The situations should also be similar to situations that the candidate might face if actually in the desired position. Most exercises are designed to measure more than one dimension while some dimensions are measured in multiple exercises. Collectively the exercises should cover all of the desired dimensions. Some of the more common exercises include:

In-basket – This requires the candidate to both organize items such as letters, memos, notes, written requests, etc.; and to make decisions about each. The exercise contains inherent conflicts in scheduling that require the candidate to effectively delegate, schedule, organize, communicate, etc.

Leaderless Group - Designed to simulate any number of job situations where groups come together to solve a problem. All candidates come together, a problem is identified, and the group is charged with making recommendations or solving the problem within a specified time period. No group leader is assigned, and the candidate(s) with leadership ability emerge to take control.

Oral Presentation – Designed to simulate any number of job situations, such as a presentation before a board, a press conference, a presentation of a new policy, etc. This exercise can also include the submission of a written report related to the presentation.

Interview – The candidate is in charge of “interviewing” a subordinate, member of the public, or another peer on a “problem.” The candidate is briefed before the exercise, allowed to ask pertinent questions, and given a short time to review and prepare. The interview allows the candidate to ask questions and determine accuracy. The candidate then must make a decision and take action.

Superior-subordinate – Similar to the interview, the focus is on the superior/subordinate relationship as it pertains to applicable law, policy, and labor relations.

These are the most common exercises that are employed, but these are by no means all of the exercises that can be utilized. Other exercises can be developed or exercises can be combined as appropriate. It is imperative, though, that the design be valid.

Feedback

Another important feature of the assessment center is the formal feedback process during which assessors provide performance feedback to candidates. Feedback may also include recommendations on opportunities for improvement and professional development. The assessment coordinator is responsible for collecting information from each assessor, organizing and prioritizing the information, and coordinating the feedback sessions. In these sessions, each candidate meets with the coordinator, reviews the feedback provided by the assessors, and works together with the coordinator to establish opportunities for personal or professional improvement and development such as training, mentorships, education, etc.

FEMP ASSESSMENT CENTER

Although traditional assessment centers have been used primarily to facilitate hiring and promotion decisions, they have recently expanded and are now used in areas such as organizational development, employee development, training program effectiveness, and overall organizational and individual needs assessments. The benefits of these principles of the non-traditional application of assessment centers have led to their inclusion in the Fire and Emergency Management Program in lieu of a comprehensive exam. As such, the Assessment Center for FEMP Master's candidates is based on three concepts:

- 1) Thorough demonstration of knowledge gained from the FEMP core courses.
- 2) Effective demonstration of the ability to apply this knowledge in a practical manner based on the job-related dimensions of each candidate's chosen profession.
- 3) An effective feedback component that provides individual feedback to each candidate.

Knowledge

There are ten (10) core courses, or thirty (30) hours, required of each master's candidate including the following:

POLSC 5013	Quantitative Methods
POLSC 5030	Practicum
POLSC 5040	Readings in Public Administration
POLSC 5313	Seminar in Public Management
POLSC 5333	Seminar in Public Personnel
POLSC 5353	Seminar in Organizations
POLSC 5613	Seminar in Public Policy Analysis
POLSC 5320	Seminar in Public Budgeting
POLSC 5113	Seminar in Public Program Evaluation
POLSC 5343	Seminar in Fire and Emergency Service

For each of these courses, you must competently demonstrate knowledge of the course-learning objectives. The assessment center is designed to test this knowledge.

Exercises

During traditional assessment center exercises, candidates are evaluated on their ability to apply management skills and knowledge. However, FEMP assessment exercises are designed to measure the practical application of the academic knowledge gained through the program. During the evaluative process, the academic- and practitioner-assessors work closely together in assessing this application of knowledge. Obviously, it is the academic-assessors who will provide the most input on the accuracy and legitimacy of the knowledge, while the practitioners will have more input on the effectiveness of the practical application skills. Together the assessors will organize their findings in a standard format in order to facilitate the coordinator's feedback process. As mentioned in the previous section, you must demonstrate an acceptable grasp of the FEMP core knowledge in order to complete the program. However, the *application* of that knowledge is assessed *only* for feedback as a professional development opportunity.

The exercises that are included in the FEMP assessment center may include any combination of those listed earlier (oral presentations, in-baskets, leaderless groups, interviews, etc.). Some exercises may also include a written component that will be assigned approximately one month before the date of the assessment. Graduate-level writing skills will be necessary for successful completion of the process.

Each exercise will be based on one of two sub-components: the fire services or emergency management. The exercises will be chosen for you based on your professional aspirations and goals.

Feedback

The assessment coordinator will be responsible for gathering and compiling the assessors' findings and recommendations in a standard format and for providing feedback to you. The feedback will not only include a review of your performance in the assessment center, but also, more importantly, will identify educational and/or training opportunities for the improvement of your knowledge and/or skill in applicable area(s). In addition, if you do not adequately demonstrate knowledge in the core subject areas, the coordinator will also work with the FEMP director to develop the required remedial program for you.

OUTCOME-BASED ASSESSMENT

As noted earlier, the assessment process for in-service professionals in managerial and/or administrative positions with emergency service providers or support organizations is the Outcomes-Based Assessment. The outcomes-based model is similar to the assessment center in the following ways:

- Trained assessors, both academic and practitioner, will conduct the evaluation.

- You will be evaluated on pre-determined programmatic and professional critical dimensions.
- Exercises will be designed to test both your knowledge of each learning objective in the FEMP core curriculum and your ability to apply such knowledge.
- Comprehensive and complete feedback will be provided to you, including the identification of opportunities for academic improvement and professional development.

The difference between the outcomes-based model and the traditional assessment center is that the outcomes-based model is designed to allow you and the FEMP to take advantage of your professional experience. While gaining experience in emergency service management, you have had the opportunity to address situations/problems that an assessment center is only designed to replicate. As such, the assessment center would be an experiential based exercise rather than a practical based exercise, and would not be as productive for you or as effective for FEMP in the evaluation of programmatic knowledge. The outcomes process is designed to overcome this weakness by focusing on your ability to apply knowledge gained and lessons learned retrospectively, as well as predictably. The process is designed around two exercises; 1) a program analysis, and 2) a case study design.

Organizational Analysis

You are to develop a formal analysis of two programs within your organization from any of the following areas:

Human Resource Management: this may include administering job performance requirements, evaluating and improving department operations, labor relations activities, employee assistance efforts including member assistance and CISD programs, and professional development programs

Community and Governmental Relations: this may include activities and programs designed to inform, educate, and project a positive public image to the community

Administration: this may include short and long-range planning, fiscal and budgetary operations and projections, evaluation and projection of training needs and programs, budget programs and activities, departmental SOP's and rules & regulations, etc.

Inspections and investigations: this may include strategic &/or operational plans/planning and programs, community needs analyses, legislation, etc.

Emergency Services Delivery: this may include major disaster plans, including natural and man-made, multi-agency planning and operations, organizational operations and community planning, etc.

Safety: this may include a comprehensive risk management program as well as target-specific hazard evaluation and planning

Other specific/specialized area: must be approved by FEMP coordinator

Your findings should be presented in the context of a practical application of knowledge that you have acquired in your graduate studies. You will also need to consider information from your course work and that available in current literature, particularly that related to and found in the core courses of the program. There is no standard format or model for the analyses; instead, the overall format and length is up to you. The committee's evaluation will be based more on your ability to practically apply your knowledge in an appropriate and effective manner rather than on your style of presentation; therefore, it is important that you focus your efforts on ensuring that knowledge gained from the FEMP core curriculum is evident and practically applied. In other words, you will be assessed on substance, not style; however, graduate-level writing and oral skills are essential for successfully completing this assignment.

Case Study Design

For the final part of your outcomes-based assessment, you will be required to prepare a descriptive case study and to submit it to the FEMP Director for approval. The case must be based on a specific incident or issue that you have faced in your professional career. The case must also be appropriate for evaluation by students in the FEMP. The design must be inclusive and specific enough to allow the evaluation of principles and knowledge inherent in the FEMP core curriculum. For example, a labor/management event may be appropriate for evaluation based on principles/programs presented in Public Personnel Administration, Public Management, Organizational Theory, and/or the Fire & Emergency Management Seminar.

The purposes of the Case Study Design are:

1. **To assess your ability to connect the theory presented in the FEMP to “real-world” issues through an indirect, qualitative approach.** Up to this point you have been evaluated on the your knowledge of the FEMP curriculum, your ability to support that knowledge through research, and your ability to synthesize theory and apply it directly to issues/problems faced in fire or emergency administration/management. However, the case study will be used to evaluate both your ability to recognize a situation that is a legitimate opportunity for the application of FEMP-based principles, and your ability to develop a product that reflects that knowledge and ability.
2. **To give you an opportunity to develop the skills you will use in training, research, organizational evaluation and development, and professional publication.** In addition, you can effectively share your experience in a way that will allow others to consider how they would handle similar problems in the context of their own experience and FEMP education.

3. **To add to the body of compiled FEMP assessment case studies for use in future FEMP courses.** This is an invaluable opportunity for future FEMP students to learn from you, one of their peers who has “been there.”

The case study format is flexible, but the following minimum requirements should be covered:

1. Statement of the problem or issue – This should be a concise synopsis of the underlying issue(s) or problem(s) addressed by the case study. This section should also serve as a short introduction to the case. For example, a problem statement for a labor/management issue might be:

“In the early 1980’s, River City faced many of the budgetary constraints faced by other cities in Northern California. As a result, the city made a budgetary decision to reduce fire staffing by 20%. In turn, the local firefighters union voted to strike if the reduction was ordered, which was a violation of state and local law. The Fire Chief was ordered to develop an action plan to first avoid a strike and secondly, to deal with a strike if it should occur.”

2. Background – This section should provide the reader with an overview of the issues and information pertinent to the case. It is important that it be complete enough for the reader to acquire a good understanding of the setting, history, players, and organization(s). However, it should be concise. Avoid unnecessary details and issues. (In sensitive cases or in cases involving specific personnel, you should use pseudonyms.) Use sub-sections and headings to clarify and organize the information.
3. Case – This is the heart of the case study where you should present the issue(s) and/or problem(s) in detail. Just like the background, the case should be concise, yet complete, and you should use sub-sections and headings. Pertinent tables for data and related information should be included in this section. *The case should NOT offer solutions or action taken*, but instead should provide the reader with the same information held by the original decision-makers. Once again, the purpose is for the reader to learn on his/her own, without guidance from those who know the outcome. As such, it is important that the approach not be biased or lead the reader towards a “correct” or “successful” solution.
4. Decision Problem – In this section you should provide the reader with the various decisions or solutions that may be considered and with a discussion of the possible consequences of each decision. This serves to show that in most cases there is not a perfect solution and that for each decision there are inevitable outcomes. Hopefully, this will force students to consider possible solutions in a rational, systematic manner.

In addition to the body of the case (the sections listed above), an addendum should be developed for future instructors. The addendum should include the following:

1. Writer's Introduction – This section should provide the instructor with information on who should use the case study, a complete overview of the issues underlying the case, and the principles that students should consider. FEMP core courses and any appropriate related learning objectives/principles should be referenced. In addition, the section should outline pertinent history, relationship(s) with other organizations (if appropriate), and relation to the profession as a whole.
2. Discussion Questions – The writer should provide the instructor with a bank of discussion questions that directs future students toward the FEMP principles underlying the case. It is important to remember that in case studies there is often no “right or wrong” answer. Questions should force the student to rationally consider possible answers and solutions in the context of his/her experience and knowledge gained from the program.
3. Follow-up – This section should provide the instructor with the history of the decision(s) that were actually made and a summary of the results. Once again, you should not determine “right” or “wrong” directions or answers for discussion questions. Instead, this should be an opportunity for students to learn from the experiences of others in the profession.

The final product should be no longer than 12-15 pages, double-spaced. The final evaluation of the case study will be based on the integration of FEMP core course objectives and principles, completeness, and quality of work. Graduate level work and writing skills will be expected. You will be notified of the results of the evaluation of the case study no later than two weeks after it is received. If further work or revision is required, a timeline for submission will also be provided.

Conclusion

It is important to remember that YOU are responsible for ensuring that you...

- meet all qualifications necessary to take part in the assessment.
- submit your request IN WRITING to the FEMP Director within the first two weeks of your final semester.
- document your qualifications in your request if it is your desire to take the outcomes-based assessment.
- follow up with the FEMP Director to ensure that your request for assessment has been received and that your assessment is being scheduled.

- are prepared for the assessment and are on time.
- appropriately schedule your time and appropriately organize your assessment presentations.
- represent yourself to the assessors in a manner that reflects well on the FEMP, your fellow students, and the fire and emergency service professions.

Notes

¹Taylor, M.D., “Assessment Centers for Hiring and Development,” *MIS Report*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (April 1990), p.1.

²Jaffee, C.L. and Frank, F.D., *Interviews Conducted at Assessment Centers: A guide for Training Managers*, Dubuque, Iowa; 1976, pg 1.

³Maher, P.T. and Michelson, R.S., *Preparing for Fire Service Assessment Centers*, Bellflower, CA; 1994, pgs. 22-23.