Comprehensive Competency Review
Appendix C.i.: Written Reflections Questions—Instructions and Template

These questions are intended to make you think about your learning in the MS program thus far. Include in your answers any thoughts or comments that you think are relevant to your progress and overall development as a clinical researcher.

These answers should be about 250 words.

1) What is the most important skill (not knowledge) that you have acquired in the program?
(Describe why the skill is important to your career as a clinical researcher, and what has contributed to your leaning in this area.) An example of how one of your colleagues has answered this question is pasted below.

My written and oral communication skills are the most important skills that I have acquired in the program. To be a successful clinical researcher, I will need to publish my research and effectively communicate my findings to my peers, both locally and nationally. For this reason, I have invested extra time to develop my communication skills. This year, I have taken the medical writing class, where I submitted a number of written class assignments and gave an oral presentation about my research to my class. I have also worked closely with my mentor to advance my written communication skills. In doing so, I have had one manuscript accepted for publication and anticipate submitting my second manuscript within the next month. To advance my oral communication skills, I have also presented my research as a poster at the Society of General Internal Medicine’s National Meeting and the Department of Medicine’s Research Day. I will also be delivering an oral presentation at the VA HSR&D Conference this summer.

2) Where do you feel you need to focus your learning to achieve broad competence as a clinical researcher?
(Describe why you need this skill set or knowledge, how you will acquire it, and how you became aware that you are not yet competent in this area.) An example of how one of your colleagues has answered this question is pasted below.

In order to improve and broaden my competence as a clinical researcher, I need to focus my learning on expanding and building on my research projects. I need to expand the skill set that allows me to extend one project into another, hypothesis driven research project based on my discoveries on a current project. The information uncovered in one project, can open up the door
for another. This involves approaching projects with an open mind. I need to develop my skills in the field of research to spot these opportunities and then delve into them.

In order to achieve this, I must gain more experience in the field of clinical research. I intend to do this in several ways. First, continuing to explore the literature in a given field is critical in this process. This will help me to understand what others are uncovering in the field and spark new hypotheses. Reviewing the literature will also provide me with ideas about other potential projects, focusing on the current state of knowledge of the field and also on the knowledge gaps in the field. Staying up to date on recent articles is very important here. Additionally, learning more about research methods, both in the classroom through continued ICRE courses and also in the lab, will enhance my knowledge and skill set. I particularly would like to build on my knowledge of lab methods in conducting research in a variety of areas, such as flow cytometry and whole genome and whole exome sequencing. I look forward to further exploring these techniques in the Fundamentals of Bench Research course in the summer of 2017.

I also would like to collaborate with other institutions, which is oftentimes crucial in research. Particularly in the field of pediatric hematology oncology where the patient population at a particular institution is rarely large enough to run very well powered studies, working with other institutions is critical. It is only through this sort of collaboration (for example, the Children’s Oncology Group) that we have been able to make such strides in treating and curing pediatric cancers. Thus, I would like to build on my contact with leaders in the field at other institutions.

3) What have been the greatest challenges to you in the program so far?
(Consider specific areas of knowledge, skill sets, or experiences that have caused you difficulty. Describe the steps you will take to overcome these challenges in the second half of your program.) An example of how one of your colleagues has answered this question is pasted below.

Fellowship is very emotionally grueling. It is oftentimes difficult to devote the time necessary to each component of my fellowship, and I frequently find myself torn between my research project and ICRE coursework and my patient and clinical responsibilities. Balancing those components from a time standpoint remains quite trying. For example, due to the high clinical volume of the program, the call schedule can be quite grueling. Furthermore, the emotional tribulations when a pediatric patient does poorly are difficult. One particular challenge that I faced was during the summer core classes when several patients that I follow closely relapsed or died. During that time, staying focusing on the coursework, while attempting to support the family and pouring over the literature to decide on the next course of treatment for the patient was difficult for me. There were times when I felt torn because I was unable to be in the hospital with my patient and the family during a critical time. For example, in one instance I was paged while in class by a
radiologist to inform me that the most recent scans for one of my patients was very concerning for relapsed disease.

In the second half of the program, these challenges will still remain. I will still have a demanding call schedule and an even large cohort of patients that I must follow closely. Additionally, with time, there is always the increasing risk of patient relapse. I think that having worked through these situations successfully for the first half of the program, I will have the confidence and the experience to meet the challenges ahead. Additionally, the emotional support that I receive from my attendings and particularly from my co-fellows, will continue to help guide me through the troubling times when my patients do not do well. Fellows have monthly sessions in which we all meet with two of our attendings to discuss challenges in fellowship. I have found this conference to be a very helpful outlet to discuss these situations and receive advice and support from others (attendings and co-fellows) who have faced similar challenges in their careers. Also, I have learned to gain comfort and strength from the patients who have done so well during therapy and their families. I also gain hope from this program. I hope that the skills I develop in this program will make me a better researcher and therefore better able to make a significant contribution to the field of pediatric oncology.