Learning and Development Area

Guide to the preliminary examination (12/2013)

The major preliminary examination assesses breadth and depth of knowledge in a student’s chosen area of interest. Rather than a traditional test, the prelim measures your ability to review and write about research in the field of study of interest to you. The exam consists of an independently written, comprehensive paper typically between 30 and 40 pages (prepared according to APA guidelines), the aim of which is to summarize and extend previous research and theory on an important topic in the scientific study relevant to our understanding of human development and/or learning. The content of the paper should include a literature review of the topic of interest and identification of outstanding questions for the field(s) of study.

In general, the prelim is designed as an opportunity for you to acquire and demonstrate a deep and rich understanding of a substantive topic in educational psychology. The exam is intended to launch students into the dissertation topics. In particular, the preliminary exam is meant as a test of the following competencies:

- Understanding of theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and analytical strategies used in their chosen field of study
- The ability to appropriately interpret and generalize research results relevant to the field of study,
- The ability to assess and communicate the importance or significance of a study and its broader implications,
- Proficiency in the skills of scholarly writing.

Process

The preliminary exam process involves three major stages; progression through these stages should be determined in consultation with the student’s primary advisor.

1. The first stage is a proposal meeting wherein you will meet with the members of your committee separately. Your committee is to be comprised of three faculty members, at least two of whom are in the Learning and Development Area. At least one week prior to the meeting students should send an outline detailing their goals for the preliminary exam document. At this initial meeting the student will present their ideas for the prelim. Members of the committee will provide feedback to the student regarding specific issues that should be addressed in the prelim. The committee may choose to re-schedule the meeting for a later date if the topic of focus appears too broad or too narrow.

2. After the committee accepts the topic of the prelim the student may begin writing. The student will have 8 to 10 weeks from the proposal meeting to write the paper.
3. The final stage of the prelim involves a defense. After 8 to 10 weeks of writing the student must submit the paper to the committee members and arrange a time for the defense (allowing at least 2 weeks for the committee to read the document). The goal of the defense is to allow the student to demonstrate oral mastery of the material covered in the prelim document and to provide opportunities for the committee to ask questions about the area of research. At this meeting the student will give a short (approximately 15 minutes) presentation of the material covered in the document after which the committee will ask questions pertaining to this and related topics.

At the defense the committee will likely make recommendations for revisions to the prelim document. Students should anticipate needing at least 2 weeks to modify their paper to address these comments. Moreover, the committee will need to consider these revisions prior to making a decision about the outcome of the exam. It can take up to 2 weeks before the committee evaluates these revisions. Thus, be sure to consider this revision stage of the prelim process when scheduling.

Consult the graduate school website for deadlines and the application for the prelim exam (http://graduateschool.uwm.edu/students/current/doctoral/).

**Additional information**

- Note that preparation for the prelim begins well before the first stage of the proposal. Most students will have spent 6- to 12-months reviewing literature relevant to their area of research prior to their proposal hearing.

- Students need to complete the Registration for PhD Preliminary Examination form (see Appendix C for sample), and return the registration form to the Graduate Student Coordinator. This form needs to be signed prior to beginning the prelim process (to verify that you are eligible to take the exam) and after the process (to verify the outcome of the exam).

- Students who pass the exam need to meet with the Graduate Student Coordinator to arrange for all necessary signatures on the Graduate School Prelim Warrant. Note that successful completion of the prelim is one requirement for achieving “dissertator” status.