**Department of Education, Culture & Society**

**Preliminary Exams**

Preliminary exams, or Prelims, are the exams that doctoral students take after they have completed 27 hours of coursework and before they have completed 36 hours of coursework. The goal of the exam is for students to demonstrate a high level of competency in mapping and analyzing fields of research around two questions that interest them in a manner that shows how particular empirical and conceptual work has framed, studied, as well as rendered particular findings.

The prelims are not intended as a preliminary literature review for the dissertation. Rather, they serve as a bridge between the structured inquiry of regular coursework and the independent inquiry represented by the dissertation. The prelims may address a topic or theory related to the dissertation, but their primary purpose is to launch students into independent research on a set of topics that interests them. The student chooses a topic that requires substantial familiarity with one or more research literatures bearing on a question, and develops a question and reading list before enrolling for the prelims.

**Questions:**

**1. The exam has two questions**

a. The first question should be generated by the student with input from the committee and should focus on the student’s area of interest.

b. The second question should be generated collectively between the student and the committee and aim to deepen the student’s understanding of either:

1.) One of the disciplinary sub-fields represented in the department, or

2.) One theoretical framework or the relationship between two or more of the theoretical frameworks the student has investigated in a preliminary way in her or his course work.

**2. Reading list**

a. With the assistance of the committee the student generates one reading list for each question.

b. Typically, the reading list will include a combination of texts that the student has already read and texts not yet read.

c. The length of the lists will vary depending on the texts included (i.e, books, articles, and chapters), but normally they will include 20 to 25 items.

**3. Exam format**

a. Each question should be 20-25 pages (not including references). The manuscript expectations are discussed below.

**Procedures**

1. Prelim committee will consist of three ECS faculty members. A student who is enrolled in a joint Ph.D. program (such as that between ECS and the Writing Program) may have one member on the committee from outside the ECS department, but in general all members of prelim committees should be ECS faculty.

The Prelim committee often overlaps with the dissertation committee, but not always. Sometimes students change their mind about the topic they’re interested in over the course of the prelims. (The dissertation committee has five members and may include one or two members from outside the department. University guidelines require that at least one member of the dissertation committee be from outside the home department. Up to two outside faculty are permitted. The majority of faculty on the committee must be from within the home department, and the chair must be from the home department.) Students should be advised at the outset and reminded later that they will be forming a new (though possibly overlapping) committee for the dissertation. Hence, the Committee’s work is complete once the student’s preliminary committee’s comments and assessment are submitted to the student.

2. The committee should be formed after the student has completed 24 hours of course work and before she or he has completed 36 hours of course work.

1. The student must bring her/his committee together for a meeting to talk about the reading list during the last half of the semester prior to taking the exam.

The formal meeting at which the question and reading list are finalized must be scheduled during either the first or the second week of fall or spring semester. The committee makes any final changes to the question and reading list before the end of the second week of classes. The question and reading list that the student and committee agree upon then become the contract between the student and committee. (This is not to say that the student may not add other readings, but the list represents the readings for which s/he is held accountable. The intent is to contain the prelim experience so that it is more manageable than a proposal, in which the project and reading list might change midstream.)

1. The exam must be taken when the student has completed 27 hours of coursework and before they have completed 36 hours of coursework.
2. Full-time students should enroll for 6 prelim hours during the semester they take the exam, 3 hours with the chair and 3 hours with another committee member. Part-time students should enroll for 3 hours when they take the first exam and another 3 hours when they take the second exam.
3. Students may discuss the exam with other students (and with faculty), but should not submit drafts for feedback from faculty before the exam is completed.
4. In case of “failure,” revisions should be completed within one month of the oral defense.

**Calendar**

a. Questions and reading lists will be finalized no later than the third week of the semester.

b. The exam shall be completed by the 12th week of the semester

c. The oral “defense” shall be completed before the end of the semester. At this meeting, the committee offers the student feedback on the paper(s), asks questions, and makes suggestions for the next prelim or the proposal. No formal presentation is expected from the student, but he or she may wish to talk with the committee about struggles with the literature, surprises, questions, or anything else that was part of the process.

**Assessment of Preliminary Exam**

Preliminary Examinations are assessed with the following expectations in mind:

* Quality of writing. The mechanics of the exams should align with publication standards. This includes clear and clean grammar as well as a thorough spell check. The author should adhere to one of the key citation formats (i.e., APA, MLA).
* Quality of the argumentation and organization of the essays. Different sub-disciplines within education employ, at times, different modes of argumentation. Readers/evaluators will appraise the essay from the normative mode of argumentation employed within the field in which the question is situated. The argument should be explicit early in the essay(s). The organization of the essay should guide the reader to understand the argument through appropriate citation and rich examples that are unpacked. The organization should have needed scaffolding to structure the reader’s engagement.
* Analysis. The author should provide the reader with the needed analysis of the literature that she or he is presenting. The clustering of studies to constitute a body of literature should include an analysis of how particular conceptual units are linked and what is afforded by joining these units. Quotations equally should be analyzed, or unpacked, to provide the reader an interpretation of what the author of the quote is activating or linking, as well as what the author is placing in the background, when appropriate.
* Voice. The writing should be pedagogical in its presentation of the argument(s). The author’s voice should be evident. The author’s standpoint should be made explicit to the reader early in the essay. Standpoint can be ontological and/or epistemological/theoretical positioning. The articulation of standpoint should be appropriate for the mode or argumentation being employed.