Appendix 5. Preliminary Examination Process

PURPOSE:

The doctoral preliminary examination is designed as a summative evaluation and preparatory process. The goals are (1) to assess whether students have the relevant knowledge and scholarly skills necessary for completing a dissertation and (2) to advance understanding and thinking related to their chosen area of scholarship.

After all required coursework for the PhD, including the minor, is completed, the preliminary examination is the last step to attain dissertator status. Ideally, the exam should take place within one semester of completing coursework. (In some cases, the exam may be scheduled during a student’s last semester of classes, but this should only be considered if there is a clear rationale for doing so and the student has limited coursework remaining. Extended timelines may also be considered and should be discussed with the student’s advisor/dissertation committee chair.)

PRELIM COMMITTEE STRUCTURE:

A preliminary exam committee is composed of three faculty, two of whom should be CSCS faculty (one of these should be the student’s dissertation chair).5 [Students who entered the CSCS graduate program prior to Fall 2019 are not required to have more than one member of their committee (their committee chair) be CSCS faculty, although it is still advised.] Per Graduate School requirements, at least two of these members must be UW-Madison graduate faculty.6

NOTE: Most faculty are on 9-month appointments and are not required to read prelims or schedule oral defenses during the summer months. Students should check with their committee members about the timing of meetings to be sure it fits with their schedules.

EXAM FORMAT:

In most cases, the preliminary exam will consist of three questions:

Q1: A synthesis/review of perspectives and empirical literature on a topic close to the student’s area of interest.
Q2: Methodologies for studying phenomenon in this area.
Q3: Application of research to practical problems.

5 CSCS faculty associates may serve on prelim committees, and they count toward the two CSCS faculty requirement for committees. However, faculty associates do not count as “graduate faculty” per Graduate College guidelines (see footnote 2 below), and thus do not count toward the requirement that two of the three committee members be UW-Madison graduate faculty.

6 The Graduate College defines graduate faculty as all university faculty “holding professional rank (professor, associate professor, assistant professor or instructor) in any department with graduate program authority, including those with zero-time appointments in such departments.”
Questions for preliminary exams will be determined on an individual basis and tailored to each student’s interests and future plans. Sample questions from past CSCS preliminary exams are available for students to review. Requirements for the length of responses will vary by question and will be communicated to the student by their committee.

**PRELIM PROCESS/STEPS:**

1. **Discussions with Prelim Committee Chair**
   Early in a student’s last semester of PhD coursework, students should initiate discussions with their committee chair about prelims. These discussions should center on the student’s dissertation and career plans, and potential relevant topic areas for the three preliminary exam questions. Students should also discuss with their chair potential prelim committee members that will bring relevant expertise/experience to the student’s committee.

   Based on these discussions, students should assemble their prelim committee and begin developing the following documents that they will share with their committee prior to the PhD Candidacy Meeting:
   - A written statement of research interests (up to 1 page, single-spaced).
   - A brief paragraph summarizing career goals.
   - An initial reading list of key articles, books, and resources they will draw upon for their written prelim exam. This may be structured as a single reading list or three separate reading lists relevant to the three prelim questions (empirical literature, methods, application).

2. **PhD Candidacy Meeting**
   After a prelim committee has been established and the above documents drafted, the student should schedule a candidacy meeting with their full prelim committee. Two weeks prior to this meeting, the student should share the above documents [statement of research interests, career goals, reading list(s)] with their committee. Students should also bring a completed copy of their “Course Requirements Checklist” and the “PhD Preliminary Exam & Dissertator Status Form” to the meeting.

   During the meeting, the committee will provide feedback to the student related to their research interests and prelim topic areas. The committee will also review the student’s initial reading list(s) and offer additional suggestions. The committee can also begin discussions of potential topics/directions for prelim exam questions in consultation with the student. Finally, the committee should review the student’s “Course Requirements Checklist” and sign off on their “PhD Preliminary Exam and Dissertator Status Form”. [The student should submit the signed “PhD Preliminary Exam & Dissertator Status Form” to Eric MacKay following this meeting. This form will be used to request a Prelim Warrant for the student’s oral defense.]
This meeting should be scheduled at least two months prior to the date the student intends to start their prelim exam. Re-writes of the statement of research interest and/or a follow-up committee meeting may be necessary to formulate a focused topic.

3. **Finalized Reading List & Drafting of Prelim Questions**
   Following the PhD Candidacy meeting, the student should finalize their list(s) of key articles, books, and resources that they will draw on for their written prelim. These reading lists represent the student’s formation of their chosen area of expertise and are intended to ensure that the student is ready for the written prelim. The expectation is that students have read and thought about the resources listed (i.e., this is not a to-do list of new material to read). Students should share their finalized reading list(s) with their committee no less than two weeks before the date they intend to start their exam.

   After reviewing the student’s finalized reading list(s), the committee will finalize the student’s questions for their written preliminary examination. Generally, each committee member will take the lead on drafting one question, but all questions must be approved by all members of the committee. The committee should also indicate page requirements/limits for each answer. While it is up to the committee to determine length requirements appropriate to the questions being asked, page limits should be set at no less than 15 pages and no more than 30 pages (double-spaced, not including references).

4. **Written Exam**
   The student should communicate to their chair the date they wish to start their written exam. On that date, the chair of their committee will forward the student their prelim exam questions via email.

   Students may use any books, articles or other published resources to answer their prelim questions, but they are not permitted to receive direct assistance from other individuals in the completion of their exam. If the student requires clarification of a question, the student is encouraged to contact their prelim committee chair, who will then get feedback from other committee members.

   Typically, the written preliminary exam should be completed and delivered to committee members within four weeks of receiving exam questions from the committee chair. In some cases involving unavoidable commitments (e.g., full-time work, caregiving responsibilities, etc.) or other extenuating circumstances, students may be granted a longer timeframe for completion.

   A student may use a copy editor only under special circumstances (e.g., if English is a second language) and with approval of the committee. The copy editor must be from outside the field. If copy editing is approved, the student must turn in the written prelim on time and then may have an additional two weeks to work with a copy editor before the committee reads the copy-edited prelim.
5. **Oral Defense**
A preliminary exam oral defense should be scheduled within one month of submission of the completed written answers. The defense, which is a meeting between the student and their committee, serves as an oral exam and feedback session. It is the student’s responsibility to schedule the oral defense.

In the oral defense, the student briefly describes their written responses and answers questions from the committee. The oral exam provides an opportunity for the student to clarify possible shortcomings in the written exam and to engage in in-depth discussions to move forward the student’s thinking.

After the discussion, faculty confer and determine the outcome of the exam. Responses (written and oral) to each question are evaluated independently. For each question, a student may:
- Pass with no revisions
- Pass with minor revisions (to be assessed by the committee chair only)
- Pass with major revisions (to be assessed by the entire prelim committee)
- Fail with a complete reworking of response to a question required

If a student passes on all questions, they are advanced to doctoral candidacy and are eligible for dissertator status with the Graduate School. If a student does not pass a particular question, they must revise their responses to the question(s) that they don’t pass. The committee may also suggest additional courses to be taken by the student.

The student should bring their Prelim Warrant to this meeting. Once the committee has determined that a student has passed their Prelim Exam, all committee members will sign off on this form (this may be at the time of the oral defense or after revisions have been submitted, reviewed, and approved.)

6. **Re-Examinations**
Re-writes are not uncommon. If the decision is a Pass with minor revisions, then the student has one week to turn in revised responses to the question(s) requiring re-writes to the committee with a cover letter outlining changes in response to issues raised by the committee. If the decision is major revisions, then the student has one week per question requiring revisions to turn in revised responses to the question(s) requiring re-writes to the committee. Here too the students should also include a cover letter outlining changes in response to issues raised by the committee.

If the decision is that a student failed one or more questions, and a complete reworking of one or more responses is required, the committee can either (a) ask the student to completely rework their response(s) to the original question(s) or (b) prepare a new question(s) for the student designed to help the student think through areas where they were weak in their original written response(s) or defense. The student has 10 days per question to complete their new
In the case of either major revisions or a complete reworking of a response, a second oral defense will be scheduled. A decision of Pass or Fail will be made following the second oral defense.

Under exceptional circumstances, the prelim committee may allow a longer timeline for completing the re-examination. Only one additional chance to pass the question(s) will be granted.

If a determination is made that the student did not pass the re-examination, then the student will not be permitted to continue on in the PhD program. At this point, the committee should consider whether a MS in Human Ecology should be awarded to the student.

NOTE: Per Graduate College guidelines, students have 5 years from the date of passing their preliminary examination to take their final oral examination and submit their dissertation. Failure to complete their degree within this 5-year period may result in their having to retake the preliminary examination and be re-admitted to candidacy.