

Preliminary Exam Process

School of Education

College of Health and Human Sciences

Beginning Summer 2016, the outlined procedures will be the only preliminary examination option available to School of Education doctoral students.

Background

Preliminary examinations, also known as comprehensive or general examinations, are taken once a student has completed the majority of doctoral coursework. These content and methods exams are given at most doctoral programs across the United States and in many other countries around the world. Preliminary examinations are a required by the Colorado State University Graduate School and the School of Education (SOE). In the SOE, the final product of the preliminary exam is a written paper and accompanying oral exam. The paper is composed of three sections or topics: 1) a literature review relevant to the student's proposed dissertation topic, 2) a critical analysis of the key theoretical constructs in the student's proposed dissertation topic OR a critical analysis of the methods used by scholars who have engaged in research of the student's proposed dissertation topic, and 3) a response to a question drawn from a list posed by the student's SOE specialization area.

Advisors and students will work together to determine when the student is ready to begin their preliminary examination. It is important that the student work closely with their advisor on every step of the preliminary examination process. The advisor should be guiding the student through the preparation stages prior to beginning the examination and will help the student select relevant topics to address to their dissertation topic and career goals. The student and advisor should work together to connect relevant coursework to the preliminary examination and to prepare the student to produce a high-quality final product.

Preliminary examinations are stored electronically by the SOE and will be accessible to the School of Education Director. The SOE Director will review preliminary examinations for several purposes, all related to the expectations for doctoral study at a Carnegie Research I University: assessing examination topics and formats, evaluating the quality of examination responses, and comparatively assessing examinations for consistency in committee structure, purpose, format, rigor, and overall quality across all degree specializations.

Purpose of the Preliminary Examination

The purpose of the preliminary examination is to provide information to students and faculty regarding the student's readiness for the final phases of doctoral work (the dissertation proposal and final dissertation). In preparing for and writing the preliminary examination, students are expected to integrate and synthesize knowledge gained through coursework and academic experiences, as well as to define and demonstrate knowledge of theoretical constructs, extant research, and research methods relevant to the domain of inquiry in which they will conduct their dissertation research. All students are expected to demonstrate both depth and breadth of knowledge in their area of study, as well as critical inquiry/research knowledge and skill.

Passing the preliminary exam indicates the student is prepared to conduct rigorous, high-quality dissertation research commensurate with the expectations and responsibilities of earning a doctoral

degree from a Carnegie Research I University. Generally, a doctoral committee is looking for evidence of the following items in the preliminary exam responses:

- Strong analytical, problem solving, and critical thinking skills
- Breadth of knowledge of a sub-discipline (e.g., higher education leadership; organizational learning, performance, and change, etc.)
- Depth of knowledge of a particular domain of inquiry in which dissertation research will later be conducted
- Ability to communicate academic knowledge effectively and to multiple audiences (e.g., scholars, practitioners, etc.).

Preliminary Examination Preparation

When they begin doctoral studies, students are expected to be thinking openly and flexibly about the inquiry domain in which their dissertation research will be located. As students progress through their studies, ideas should become more focused. Throughout this process, students are expected to converse with their advisors, other faculty members, and peers about possible topics for their preliminary examination. Ideas in this regard should become increasingly well-defined. Once a student and their advisor have determined that the student has read enough, studied enough, and processed enough information to complete the preliminary examination, the student will submit an Intent to Complete Preliminary Exam (SOE-14) form the SOE Graduate Programs Office. The form should not be submitted until the advisor agrees the student is adequately prepared to complete the examination.

Determining when a student is ready to complete the preliminary examination is complex and varies considerably from person to person. Each student should consult extensively with their advisor and other faculty members regarding when they are ready to complete the examination. Students may begin writing Sections One and Two of the preliminary examination whenever they feel prepared enough to provide a detailed response. Students will receive a randomly assigned Section Three question within two business days of submitting their Intent to Complete the Preliminary Exam (SOE-14 form) to SOE Graduate Programs Office. **From the date of receipt of the Section Three examination question, the student has 12 weeks to complete and submit Sections One through Three of the preliminary examination.**

Students should realize the content of the exam is cumulative and should include information obtained and developed throughout their doctoral program. Completion of the examination requires a 15-20 page well-argued response for each of the three examination sections (45-60 pages total). Two sections focus on in-depth knowledge of the inquiry domain in which the student will conduct dissertation research and one section focuses on breadth knowledge of the student's program. All examination responses must accord with current American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines (refer to the most recent edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*).

Preliminary Examination Written Sections

Each student will construct 15-20 page responses (not including references) to each of three sections of the preliminary examination. As with most academic writing projects, students are expected to reflect on their work throughout their studies with their advisors, other professors, and peers. The student may ask their advisor questions during the preliminary examination writing process, but the advisor may not be used as a co-author or editor. Students may also converse with field experts and other professionals, but the final product must be the student's work and reflect their testable knowledge. Finally, it is the student's responsibility to produce a reader-friendly, carefully edited, and thoroughly proofread final copy of the preliminary examination.

The written preliminary exam is comprised of the following three sections:

Section One

The purpose of Section One is to develop a focused, critical, and integrative review and analysis of the research literature relevant to the student's proposed dissertation topic. This question is meant to be an analysis of the literature related to a subset of the dissertation topic. It is not meant to be a copy of the literature review chapter of the dissertation. As said above, students should think specifically about one portion of the dissertation topic and conduct the analysis by posing questions, employing theoretical framing, and detailing the method of analysis. There are many models of literature reviews available to consult, including those found in *Review of Educational Research*, *Review of Research in Education*, *Educational Research Review*, *Educational Psychology Review*, *Psychological Review*, etc. These are good examples in terms of analysis of literature, but not in terms of length. The response still limited to 15-20 pages, not including references. Many other top-quality journals in a variety of education sub-fields can provide models of a literature review.

Section Two

Choose either 2A or 2B:

2A. The purpose of this section is to write a reasoned, critical analysis and integration of key theoretical constructs that will constitute the conceptual framework for the student's dissertation research. This section should demonstrate knowledge of theoretical constructs relevant to the student's inquiry domain and thoughtful assembly of relevant constructs into a reasoned conceptual system. In other words, this section should constitute an "argument" for the conceptual approach the student will take and the conceptual framework that will guide their inquiry.

2B. The purpose of this section is to write a critical analysis of the methods scholars have used to engage in research in the domain of inquiry in which the student will be working. One reasonable approach to this section is to select a subset of studies from the critical literature review (Section One) that contain methods that seem most relevant and promising for conducting research on the student's dissertation topic. The student should critically and comparatively analyze the methods sections of these studies, including what kinds of questions can they answer well; what kinds of questions can they not answer well; what alternative designs, data collection strategies, data analysis strategies might have been used; and an argument for the methods the student will use in their dissertation research. Importantly, an analytic paper on methods is not the same as a draft of the methods chapter used in the dissertation. A methods chapter will be written during the proposal and dissertation phases of the student's work. Rather, this section of the preliminary examination should contain analyses, reflections, and rationales (roads to take or not take) related to epistemological framing, research design, data to be collected, data analysis strategies, etc.

Section Three

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate knowledge of the student's specialization area within education. Each specialization area is constituted by a body of theory and research which all scholars in the specialization should have familiarity. Each SOE specialization area has constructed a set of questions based on this body of theory and research (see Appendix A). Once the signed Intent to Complete Preliminary Examination (SOE-14 form) is submitted to the SOE Graduate Programs Office, the student will be randomly assigned one of the specialization area questions. The student will then construct a reasoned, well-argued response. Most, if not all, of this theory and research will have been covered or indexed during the coursework phase of the degree.

Preliminary Examination Oral Defense

Once the written preliminary examination is completed and submitted to the SOE Graduate Programs Office, it will be forwarded to the student's doctoral committee members. An oral defense with the student's committee is required to complete the preliminary examination. This oral defense should occur three to eight weeks after the written responses have been submitted to the SOE Graduate Programs Office. Students should work with their committee to determine a date and time for the oral defense. They can contact the SOE Graduate Programs Office to reserve a meeting room and/or request a remote meeting connection.

Although there is some variation in the way oral defenses are conducted, typically the student will make a short presentation about their writing process, the content of their responses, and the ways in which the preliminary examination has prepared them for the dissertation phase of the degree. Following this presentation, the committee will ask questions related to the content of the preliminary examination responses, related coursework, and other doctoral-level activities. Generally, and presuming the student has constructed thoughtful, reasoned, high-quality responses, this process is a lively dialogue about important academic issues and the student's abiding interests and scholarly commitments.

Following this dialogue, the student will be asked to leave the meeting and their doctoral committee will have a confidential discussion about the student's performance and decide whether the student earned a "pass" or a "fail." Split committee decisions are determined by majority rule (i.e., if three committee members vote to pass the student and one member votes to fail, the student passes the examination). If there is a tie between the number of members passing and failing the student, the student fails the examination. See the "Conclusion of the Preliminary Examination" section for more information.

It is the student's responsibility to provide their committee with a copy of the Report of Preliminary Examination for the Ph.D. Degree (GS-16) form, which will be signed by the committee according to their decision. If a member of the student's committee participates in the oral defense via distance (teleconference, videoconference, Skype, WebEx, phone, etc.), the member must email the student's advisor stating how they participated in the examination and how they voted. The email will be used in lieu of their signature and should be included with the GS-16 form. Immediately following the oral defense, the GS-16 form must be filed in the SOE Graduate Programs Office, which will obtain the SOE Director's signature and submit the form to the CSU Graduate School within two business days.

Preliminary Examination Completion Deadline

Upon receiving their Section 3 question, students have 12 weeks to write and submit their written preliminary examination document. Upon submitting the written document, the oral defense must occur within three to eight weeks.

Failure to comply with the preliminary examination written document submission and/or oral defense deadlines will result in failure of the preliminary examination. A student's preliminary examination deadlines may be reasonably extended due to extenuating circumstances with approval of the student's doctoral committee.

Conclusion of the Preliminary Examination

A committee vote to "pass" the preliminary examination moves the student to doctoral candidate status. Doctoral candidates will work with their advisor to move forward with the dissertation proposal, research, and writing the final dissertation.

If a student fails the examination, the committee will determine whether and under what conditions the student may submit a second preliminary examination attempt. CSU Graduate School guidelines regarding a failed first attempt are included below:

“Providing the committee approves, a candidate who fails the preliminary examination may be reexamined once and, for the reexamination, may be required to complete further work. The reexamination must be held no later than 12 months after the first examination. The examination must not be held earlier than two months after the first examination unless the student agrees to a shorter time period. Failure to pass the second exam results in dismissal from the Graduate School.” (*Graduate and Professional Bulletin, section E.5.4 Preliminary Examination*)

Step-By-Step Preliminary Examination Procedures

- 1) Student works closely with advisor and committee members to determine readiness for completing the preliminary examination
 - a. Student may begin researching and writing examination Sections One and Two prior to formal declaration of intent
- 2) Advisor or student submits the SOE-14 form to the SOE Graduate Programs Office declaring the student’s intent to complete the preliminary examination; the form serves as the advisor’s approval for the student to move forward with the examination
- 3) The SOE Graduate Programs Office randomly assigns a Section Three question to the student and notifies them via email within two business days
 - a. The entire preliminary examination (Sections One-Three) are due within 12 weeks of students’ receipt of Section Three question (e.g., student receives Section Three question on August 1, then the final product is due by October 24)
- 4) Student emails final preliminary examination (combining Sections One-Three into one document) to the SOE Graduate Programs Office.
- 5) The SOE Graduate Programs Office forwards the examination to the student’s doctoral committee for review
- 6) The preliminary examination oral defense occurs 3-8 weeks after submitting the written responses
 - a. Student determines date/time of oral defense with committee members
 - b. Student contacts the SOE Graduate Programs Office to reserve a meeting space and/or remote meeting connection
- 7) The doctoral committee signs the Report of Preliminary Examination for the Ph.D. Degree (GS-16) form, indicating pass or fail
- 8) The GS-16 form is signed by the SOE Director and submitted to the CSU Graduate School

Schedule for the Preliminary Examination

Per CSU Graduate School policy, “a preliminary examination shall be administered at least two terms before the final examination to determine whether the student is qualified to continue towards the doctorate” (*Graduate and Professional Bulletin, section E.5.4 Preliminary Examination*). That is, a student must have two semester between the preliminary examination and the final examination/dissertation defense.

In order for the timing to be consistent from year to year, the preliminary examination schedule aligns with the university academic calendar. The schedule is determined by using the first day of the semester and the day before the first day of the next semester. Refer to the university academic calendar for future semester start dates.

Table 1

Preliminary Examination and Final Examination Defense Semesters

Preliminary Exam Oral Defense Semester	Semesters Between Preliminary Exam Defense and Dissertation Defense	Earliest Semester in which Final Dissertation Defense Can be Held
Spring Semester	Spring, Summer	Fall Semester
Summer Semester	Summer, Fall	Spring Semester
Fall Semester	Fall, Spring	Summer Semester

If a student completes their preliminary examination during the spring semester, their final examination/dissertation defense cannot be held prior the start of the fall semester. Spring and summer count as the two terms.

If a student completes their preliminary examination during the summer semester, their final examination/dissertation defense cannot be held prior to the start of the spring semester. Summer and fall count as the two terms.

Appendix A

Section Three Specialization Questions

The purpose of Section Three is to demonstrate knowledge of the student's specialization area within education. Each specialization area is constituted by a body of theory and research which all scholars in the specialization should have familiarity. Each SOE specialization area has constructed a set of questions based on this body of theory and research.

Once a student's Intent to Complete Preliminary Examination (SOE-14) form is submitted to the SOE Graduate Programs Office, they will randomly be assigned a question according to their specialization area. Students will be notified of their Section 3 question via email within two business days of receipt of the SOE-14 form. The entire preliminary examination is due 12 weeks after receiving the Section Three question.

Education Sciences Specialization

- 1) Select a prominent issue in educational practice. Clarify the issue and take a position related to the argument in a manner that could be presented in a professional forum, supporting your position with research and logical argumentation. Address implications of equity and inclusion in regard to the issue.
- 2) Select a state or federal educational policy which you believe needs to be changed. Write an analytical paper on your current understanding of the policy, the changes(s) you recommend to the policy, and the implications of those changes. Support your argument with research and logical argumentation. Address implications of equity and inclusion in regard to the issue.
- 3) Select **one** of the following:
 - a. Focus on theory: Choose two theoretical orientations often used to address a particular educational problem. Compare the affordances and constraints of each of these theoretical orientations. Address implications of equity and inclusion in regard to your response.
 - b. Theory into practice: Construct a solution for how you would approach a problem from two different theoretical perspectives. Address the affordances and constraints in applying these two different approaches. Address implications of equity and inclusion in regard to your response.

Higher Education Leadership Specialization

Higher Education Leadership students who were admitted in 2016 or earlier may choose Question Set A or Question Set B. When requesting the Intent to Complete the Preliminary Exam (SOE-14) form, please include your choice in the request. Questions from either set will be randomly assigned.

Students admitted in 2017 or later will receive a randomly assigned question from Question Set B.

Question Set A

- 1) Choose three distinctively different leadership theories from the array of theories and models that were presented and discussed during your doctoral studies. Discuss the theory and the empirical research that has been conducted related to each of the theories, and present how each of the theories is currently applicable to leadership practice in the face of current higher

education organizations. Choose the one theory that you believe has the most validity for you and your approach to leadership. Explain why you chose this theory or model over the others. Present how you would utilize the theory and its supporting research to understand and explain your engagement in leadership in your higher educational context.

- 2) Discuss the role of leadership in addressing the issues of diversity and inclusion within higher education institutions. What are the key issues and what is the role and responsibility of the leader in regard to addressing these issues? How has current scholarship contributed to advancing the leader's understanding of these issues? Using elements of this scholarship and an ethical framework, discuss how you would utilize leadership to identify, develop and apply strategies to making the campus inclusive and enable all students and faculty/staff to be successful and promote a diverse community of learners and scholars. How would you address the political and possible legal issues that present related to ensuring safety, ensuring inclusiveness and yet balancing the issues surrounding free speech, equal access and the 1st and 14th amendments to the constitution?
- 3) Discuss the role of change in the context of the current higher education enterprise. What is the role of the leader in ensuring successful change in the context of their organization? Discuss how leaders determine the level and focus of the change; what approach to change to pursue; how to ready their organization for change; and how to develop the strategies to pursue to ensure the change process is successful. Identify a change process model that could be utilized for each of the three levels of change. Choose one of these models and discuss how you would apply this model to an identified change that is needed within your higher education context. Explain why it is the best fit for the identified change model and process and why you chose this model. Discuss what the key challenges that could interfere with applying this model to create successful change.

Question Set B

1) Contemporary Challenge

Identify three of the most important contemporary challenges to higher education and/or student affairs. Choose a particular sector (e.g., community colleges, for-profit, research universities, liberal arts colleges) within which to contextualize the challenges you identify. Select one issue to discuss further. In your discussion, attend to the following:

- a) Why is this issue significant?
- b) What is the historical origin of this challenge? What philosophical debates surround how to address it?
- c) Who is impacted and what structural or systemic effects does it have (e.g., human and financial resources, administrative organization, law and policy)?
- d) Who are the major players in addressing this challenge?
- e) How, if at all, is this challenge being addressed currently?
- f) What is one potential solution? What does your solution offer that is not being considered or addressed by existing approaches you have identified above?
- g) What are the budget implications of your solution?

Ensure that your response effectively uses the extant literature to support and provide evidence throughout your discussion.

2) Equity and Justice

Higher education has a long institutional legacy of exclusionary practices and white supremacy which currently contributes to the persistent inequities and racism on college

campuses. As you consider equity and justice work in higher education, choose a current challenge or issue and address the following eight proposals that are instrumental in interrogating structures, processes and practices in transformational change efforts [see Stewart, 2018¹ (<https://col.st/Noiqw>)] in working towards racial equity and justice.

- a) Identify your issues along with its historical origins within higher education/student affairs.
- b) Use each proposal to examine current entrenched inequities and offer a redesigned, revolutionary change to remedy your stated entrenched inequities.
 - i. Open the room
 - ii. Value minoritized voices
 - iii. Reject the traditional norms
 - iv. Prioritize the safety of the minoritized
 - v. Advance equity over equality
 - vi. Design educational programming that showcases critical thinking
 - vii. Award outcomes, not window dressing
 - viii. Reverse disparate policy effects

Ensure that your response effectively uses the extant literature to support and provide evidence throughout your discussion.

3) Theory of Change

Change is constant. In higher education, organizational leaders are confronted with internal and external forces of social, economic, and political changes. Describe a problem facing higher education and present an analysis of the problem, drawing particularly from research and theories on organizational and governance in higher education. Based on your analysis of the problem and your philosophy of higher education, offer a theory of change that might guide leaders (individuals and collective groups) to advance equity-centered solutions in higher education. In presenting your theory of change for addressing this problem, attend to the following:

- a) Why is this issue significant?
- b) What is the historical origin of this challenge? What philosophical debates surround how to address it?
- c) Who are the key stakeholders affected by this problem?

Ensure that your response effectively uses the extant literature from across your coursework (e.g., theory and practice of change, student development theory, ethics, finance, law, policy, etc.) to support and provide evidence throughout your discussion.

Organizational Learning, Performance and Change

- 1) Using an explicitly selected model or framework of HRD, what are the theoretical foundations and how do they inform the model or framework?
- 2) Identify who you perceive as the five most influential scholars and explain why.
- 3) Describe and explain how HRD relates to and integrates with other fields and disciplines.
- 4) What are the emerging ideas in HRD (OD/T&D) that are reshaping perspectives in the field?

¹ Stewart, D.L. (2018). Minding the gap between diversity and institutional transformation: Eight proposals for enacting institutional change. *Teachers College Record*. 120 (14).