

Applied Social and Community Psychology Program Preliminary Exam Requirements

Preliminary Exam Requirements in Brief

The Department of Psychology and the NCSU Graduate School have certain requirements for students taking preliminary exams.¹ Beyond these, program areas in the Psychology Department have wide latitude in determining the structure of preliminary exams.

In the standard format, each Applied Social and Community Psychology student will work with his/her Committee to determine the content and the breadth of areas to be covered in the preliminary exam. Regardless of scope, the students must demonstrate competence with regard to his/her chosen areas in the domains of etiology, intervention, research methodology, and professional roles/ethics. The written requirement may involve a written exam or take-home exam.

In the alternative format, the student can submit a written request indicating how an alternative format (i.e., grant proposal, course plan proposal, book prospectus) can advance his/her training goals and allow assessment of competence in the domains mentioned above (i.e., etiology, intervention, research/assessment/evaluation methodology, and professional roles/ethics.)

Rationale for Preliminary Exam Requirements

The Applied Social and Community Psychology Program gives Committees wide latitude in determining the scope of the material to be examined. This raises the issue of breadth versus depth. The faculty agree that the preliminary exam process should serve as the last major opportunity to assess the student's understanding of the breadth of his/her field before moving on to the very specialized focus of the dissertation.

The faculty allow the content areas to be assessed to vary from student to student, and will work with the student to individualize his/her preliminary exams. However, they agree that mastery of certain conceptual domains should be consistent across all students. The faculty agree that each student should be able to address questions about etiology, intervention, methodology and professional roles in his/her content areas of expertise. More specifically, he/she should be able to discuss:

- *Etiology*: articulate a coherent framework for discussing the causes of the issue or problem (whether that framework be at the individual, family, organizational, or community level); such a framework should be linked to empirical and theoretical work in the relevant field regarding etiology of the problem or issue;
- *Intervention*: articulate a coherent framework for developing and implementing interventions with the previously described kinds of problems or issues; again, this intervention perspective should be linked to empirical and theoretical literature relevant to this area.
- *Research Methodology*: demonstrate an understanding of research methodology relevant to exploring the etiology of problems or issues described above; demonstrate an understanding of research methodology relevant to assessing the efficacy of interventions described above.
- *Professional Roles / Ethical Behavior*: demonstrate an appreciation of the ethical and professional role issues surrounding work in the proposed area. Given the priorities of the Applied Social and Community Psychology Program, there should also be an ability to talk about how his/her approach is influenced by an appreciation of ecological context (e.g., issues of race, class, gender, personal vs environmental views of causation, and so on).

The committee chair will take responsibility to see that the proposed preliminary exam content and questions are consistent with the parameters described above.

¹ Graduate School link regarding Comprehensive Exams:
<http://www.ncsu.edu/grad/handbook/sections/3.6-comprehensive-examinations.html>

Standard Preliminary Exam Option

The committee chair and the student will discuss the proposed preliminary exam process and will consult with the committee members regarding areas of focus. Typically, each committee member will be responsible for a content area and/or domain.

The written exam format for specific questions can involve: (a) a fixed period of time (usually 3-4 hours) to address a specific question or set questions from a committee member; the committee member will specify whether any outside resources can be used in addressing this question; or (b) a take-home assignment in which the student has a fixed amount of time (i.e., 24 or 48 hours) to address a committee member's question(s). The student may draw upon whatever resources s/he sees as relevant, with appropriate citation. Different committee members may negotiate different question formats.

Before the preliminary exam is scheduled, the committee chair must send a memo to the committee members and the student summarizing the content areas to be covered and the question formats that have been agreed upon.

Alternative Preliminary Exam Option***Requesting the Alternative Preliminary Exam Option***

The purpose of the preliminary exam is to assess the breadth of the student's knowledge before he/she moves on to the specialized focus characteristic of the dissertation. The alternative arrangement must allow for assessment of this breadth of knowledge.

The student may request a preliminary exam that uses the alternative format of a book proposal, course plan proposal, or grant proposal by submitting a proposal to their doctoral committee. This proposal must contain the following sections: (a) name of the alternative option s/he is requesting; (b) rationale for how this alternative format advances the student's training goals; (c) rationale for how this alternative format allows for demonstration of competence in domains of etiology, intervention, research methodology, and professional roles/ethics; (d) proposed timeline; and (e) detailed outline or prospectus of the proposed preliminary exam work product.

The committee will convene in a preliminary exam proposal meeting to review the alternate format request. A unanimous recommendation by the student's committee is needed to allow an alternative format option to proceed.

Following the preliminary exam proposal meeting, the committee chair must send a memo to the committee and the student summarizing the decision and any revisions (if any) to the prospectus that must be made before the preliminary exam proposal can be accepted and the preliminary exam scheduled. The memo must also contain a summary of the committee's approach to evaluating the written product (e.g., all committee members reading, and voting on, the entire product, etc.).

Requirements for the Alternative Preliminary Exam Product

The final written product will contain the following detailed information:

Book proposal. The student will complete a prospectus for a complete book (monograph) as well as several complete chapters.

This prospectus document is more detailed than the proposal submitted earlier by the student for approval of the alternative preliminary exam option. This prospectus will include: a rationale that describes the need for the book (both in terms of the intellectual space it fills, as well as the intended audience); a draft introduction; a table of contents; and an abstract for each chapter to be included in the book.

The student will revise the prospectus based on feedback provided by his/her committee. The student will then complete at least 4 draft chapters that are consistent with the revised prospectus.

Course plan proposal. The student will be expected to develop detailed materials for a new course that is beyond an introductory level undergraduate course.

This document will be more detailed than the proposal submitted earlier by the student for approval of the alternative preliminary exam option. This document will include: a rationale that describes the need for the course and the overall intellectual approach taken to this content area; the instructional goals and specific learning outcomes for the course; a syllabus with topics covered and all readings. A detailed lesson plan (including instructional materials / handouts) must be provided for each class.

For learning goals in undergraduate psychology courses, see APA resources (<http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/about/psymajor-guidelines.aspx>).

Grant proposal. The student will be expected to develop a complete grant proposal. The document should attempt to follow the guidelines of an actual Request for Proposals (RFP) or solicitation, but must include the following content: abstract, problem statement, theory, previous research, methodology, as well as project goals, outcome measures, implications for current practices, detailed timeline for implementing the proposed project, budget, and references. The RFP restrictions on page-length for sections are not binding for purposes of this preliminary exam option.

Timeline for the Alternative Preliminary Exam Option

Because of the expanded scope of the written products to be produced by students under this alternate format, they will be given up to 3 months from the date their committee approves their proposal to complete their written product. A signed and dated copy of the student's approved proposal must be placed in their academic file.

The date at which the written product is provided to the committee is considered the start date of the written exam for Graduate School forms.

Additional Formats for the Alternative Preliminary Exam Option

If other formats are proposed that are not currently described within the alternative preliminary exam option, the proposal must be submitted to the department's DGP for approval before it can be implemented.

Grading of Written Exams

In the standard preliminary exam format, committee members have generally functioned as expert examiners in their area of expertise, and commented primarily on the responses to their own question(s). Nonetheless, the chair will take responsibility for seeing that all questions and all answers are made available to all committee members before the oral exam.

In the alternative preliminary exam format, the committee members will have discussed and documented how they will evaluate the written product.

In any case, each committee member must render one of the following judgments regarding the written product: 1) Pass, 2) Conditional Pass, or 3) Fail.

A **Pass** from *each* of the committee members allows the student to move ahead to the orals.

A **Conditional Pass** from *any* of the committee members gives notice to the student that there are serious weaknesses in the responses. These deficiencies are followed up in the orals.

In addition to the judgments above, some written feedback may be given to the student to inform him/her about strengths and weaknesses in coverage of the material, and, as appropriate, recommendation(s) regarding additional study before the orals.

A **Fail** from *any* of the committee members stops the process. The student meets with his/her committee chair to discuss the outcome, and presumably work out a plan for remediation. If the prelims are attempted again, the student must repeat the entire written exam process.

Grading of Oral Exams

Once the student has passed the written exam, he/she advances to the oral exam. At the conclusion of the oral exam, each committee member renders one of the following grades: 1) Pass, 2) Conditional Pass, or 3) Fail.

A **Pass** from each of the committee members means that the student has passed the oral exam. Once the appropriate forms are signed, the preliminary exam process is considered complete.

A **Fail** from any of the committee members means that the student has failed the oral exam and stops the process. The student has the option to work out a plan for remediation. The student would have to petition the committee to ask permission to retake the entire written and oral preliminary exams. If the committee allows the student to retake prelims, the student must wait at least 6 months before retaking prelims, as per Graduate School rules.

A **Conditional Pass** from a member of the committee would mean that he/she saw deficiencies that needed remediation.

In the event of individual recommendations of conditional pass, the committee members must reach an overall committee determination. In some cases, multiple conditional passes from committee members would not be adequate for an ultimate pass and would result in a failure of the exam. This determination is left to the discretion of the committee.

In the case of a conditional pass by the overall committee, the Committee must specify, *before the end of the oral exam meeting*, the exact conditions to be met and the deadline by which they must be met.