Preliminary Examinations

Goals of the Written and Oral Preliminary Examinations

The goals of the preliminary written and oral examinations are to evaluate the student's ability to:
1) demonstrate an understanding of the knowledge and major theories in the core areas of social welfare and social work;
2) critically assess both the strengths and limitations of that knowledge;
3) integrate such knowledge in a scholarly manner;
4) take a stand and argue a position, going beyond the literature in unresolved areas; and
5) apply such knowledge and understanding to a specific area of interest in the field of social work and social welfare.

Written Preliminary Examination Policy

The written preliminary examination is a comprehensive examination covering knowledge in core areas of social welfare and social work and the supporting program. A student must be currently registered in the doctoral program and must have completed and received credit for all required courses in the social work core curriculum of the doctoral program before taking the exam, with the exception of GRAD 8101, Teaching Methods and Educational Issues.

Students are strongly encouraged to complete not only the core social work curriculum but also their supporting program course work prior to sitting for the Written Exam. Students are, however, permitted to sit for the Written Exam after they have completed and received credit for the core curriculum (excluding GRAD 8101), including all social work courses and their statistics requirement. Students who have not completed, or who have incompletes or failing grades in any of these core courses will not be permitted to sit for the exams until such time as they have met this minimum requirement. A student with an incomplete in a core social work course or a course being used to fulfill the statistics requirement must complete and submit all outstanding work to the instructor of that course no later than the first day of instruction of the semester in which the student wishes to take the exam. Students are strongly encouraged to complete all outstanding work prior to the semester in which they hope to take the exam to allow sufficient time for their instructors to evaluate their work and submit a grade change. In order for a student to take the exam, a copy of the formal grade change must be in the student’s file by the deadline for notification to the Ph.D. Program Director of intent to take the exam (one month in advance of the scheduled exam date).

Content

The written preliminary examination has two parts: 1) a general knowledge exam, and 2) a specialized exam. All students are required to successfully complete a take-home generalized written exam consisting of two questions covering the four core areas of social work knowledge and integration across the four areas: 1) research 2) practice, 3) policy, and 4) history. All students are also required to complete a take-home specialized written exam consisting of one question in a specialized area selected by the student. A student has not completed the written preliminary examination until both the generalized and specialized areas of the exam are successfully completed.

Testing for General Knowledge

General knowledge of the field of social work is tested using a written preliminary examination given over a two week period twice each academic year. The student is required to answer two questions over the two week period.

General Knowledge Reading Lists: The preliminary examination committee oversees the development and updating of a reading list for each of the four core areas which, along with course readings, should serve as a starting point for preparing for the generalized exams. Students' preparatory reading for the generalized exams should not be confined to these reading lists or course materials, and it is expected that doctoral students will read well beyond the confines of individual courses and reading lists. The preliminary examination committee uses the reading lists as a basis for asking written exam questions. Bibliographies will be updated once a year during the Spring semester for the following year's exam.
Development and Grading of the General Knowledge Exam: A committee of faculty will be appointed to administer the general knowledge exam twice per academic year. The committee will consist of at least four members of the School of Social Work Graduate Faculty representing expertise in the four core areas. The committee will be responsible for writing the exam questions each academic year. Four additional faculty members will be appointed each term by the Director of the School of Social Work to represent each of the core areas. These faculty members will join in grading the exam answers if their core area is represented in the exam questions given that term. Among the faculty graders in each administration, at least two will be faculty who have taught in the PhD program.

General Knowledge Examination Questions: Students are expected to respond to the general knowledge exam questions by: 1) demonstrating command of the major issues, themes, and works in the core areas; 2) critically assessing the knowledge in the core content areas; 3) demonstrating the ability to use and integrate concepts in a scholarly manner; and 4) using the literature on the preliminary examination bibliographies to articulate and defend a position that represents the student's scholarly thinking. Faculty will evaluate students' responses according to these four expectations. A list of sample questions, at least one in each of the four core areas and at least one representing integration across the four areas, will be updated annually by the exam committee and distributed during the Spring semester for the following academic year’s exams. In addition, a study guide will be provided which lists the basic competencies that a passing answer in each of the core areas is expected to demonstrate. The three exam questions for each administration of that year’s exams will be written by the exam committee and may or may not be selected from the list of sample questions.

Administration of the General Knowledge Exam: The general knowledge written preliminary exam will be administered in a take-home format over a two week period twice per academic year: once in the Fall semester and once in the Spring semester. Students who wish to take the examination must notify the Director of the Doctoral program in writing at least one month in advance of the scheduled exam dates. Students must not register for the examination if they have not completed all requirements. Questions will be distributed at 9:00 a.m. on Monday of the first week and returned by Friday 4:00 p.m. of the second week. Students will receive three questions, and must select two of the three to answer during the two week period. Prior to receiving the questions, students will be required to sign a statement that they will not consult with or collaborate with others in answering the exam questions. Students may refer to books, articles, and chapters from the bibliographies as they write their answers. They may not consult (by phone, in person, by e-mail, or by any other means) with anyone regarding their examination questions and answers during the exam period. Reasonable accommodations will be made prior to the exam for students with disabilities in accordance with University of Minnesota policy.

Submission of Typed Answers: By 4:00 p.m. on Friday of the second week of the exam period, students will submit to the Director of the Doctoral Program, a typed, fully edited manuscript including citations and references. The number of pages for each answer, excluding references, shall be in the range of 10 to 15 pages. Students should place only their assigned identification number on their exam answers. The ID number should be placed on the top right corner of each page. Students should not write their names on the exam answers. Students will submit with their exam a signed statement that they did not consult with or collaborate with others in answering the exam questions.

Grading of exam answers and retake policy: Exam answers will be identified by student ID or some other identifying code number. Exams will be evaluated according to the four criteria listed above. Faculty will expect the answer to articulate complex ideas clearly, logically, and in a well-organized manner. Each faculty reader reviews the student's prelim independently and makes an initial assessment of the total exam. The committee members then convene and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the exam. Next, the committee votes using a secret ballot. If the committee consists of five members, a favorable verdict for passing consists of either a unanimous vote or a vote of 4-1; if the committee consists of six members, a unanimous vote or a vote of 5-1 or 4-2 is needed; if the committee consists of seven members, a unanimous vote or a vote of 6-1, 5-2 or 4-3 is needed. Faculty will review no more than six preliminary examinations in one three hour meeting. The committee then prepares a Consensus Statement about the exam answer. The student and his/her advisor will receive notification of the results of the exam along with a copy of the committee's Consensus Statement normally within about a month of completion, but if there are more than six students taking this examination, then in no more than six
weeks. If a student fails the exam, the Consensus Statement will include feedback from the grading committee on how the student can improve his/her performance in the future. The student may also meet with the grading committee for further feedback. If a student fails the exam, it can be retaken during the next regular administration of the exam. The general knowledge exam may be taken a total of 3 times. If a student fails the exam twice, there will be an official review of the student’s progress by a committee of graduate faculty appointed by the Director of the Ph.D. program. This meeting must be called by the student and the student's advisor, and the student must not sign up for taking the exam again until such a meeting has been held. The student’s advisor will be a member of the committee. If the general knowledge exam is failed three times, the student has failed to qualify to continue in the doctoral program.

**Specialized Preliminary Written Exam**

After passing the general knowledge written exam, students will complete their specialized written exam. The goal of the specialized exam is for the student to demonstrate their mastery of the theoretical and research literature related to their dissertation topic. The specialized preliminary written exam, also known as the specialized exam, should be completed no later than the semester following the general knowledge written exam.

**Specialized Exam Reading List:** The specialized exam will be based on the general knowledge bibliography and a specialized bibliography to be developed by the student and the student’s preliminary exam committee. The specialized bibliography should reflect content on relevant theory and research in the student’s area of specialized interest - preferably the area for dissertation work.

**Specialized Exam Committee:** The student will select a committee of faculty to guide and grade their specialized exam. This three-person committee must consist of two people who are members of the Social Work graduate faculty and at least one person who is a graduate faculty member from another department at the University of Minnesota. All members must have an earned doctorate or equivalent in an appropriate field and be individually approved according to the college’s review process and criteria.

- Two members must be tenured or tenure track.
- No member may have a nonacademic relationship or be working toward a degree at the University (including faculty working toward an additional degree). A nonacademic relationship includes that which is personal or financial that might create a conflict of interest.
- All members must be faculty or staff at the University of Minnesota.

The committee has several responsibilities: 1) to work with the student to develop the reading list, 2) to write and approve an exam question for the student based on the reading list, 3) to provide feedback to the student as s/he develops the exam answer, and 4) to evaluate the exam answer.

**Examination Answers and Evaluation:** The exam answer should demonstrate the student's ability to evaluate the state of current knowledge in the dissertation area, identify needed areas for further research, and identify and describe the critical areas of theory which informs the topic. Students may consult with their specialized examination committee as they prepare their exam answer. The maximum number of pages for the specialized exam answer is 20, excluding references. The specialized exam must be completed within one semester following the successful completion of the general knowledge exam. The exam answer will be evaluated by the student’s specialized exam committee on a pass/fail basis. The chair of the student’s committee will notify the student of the results within four weeks following submission of the exam answer to the committee.

Approved by the Doctoral Committee, 5/6/99
Approved by the Graduate Faculty, 5/13/99
Amendments approved by the Doctoral Committee, 6/3/99
Amendments approved by the Graduate Faculty, 6/10/99
Amendments approved by Doctoral Committee on 11/8/00
Amendments approved by Graduate Faculty on 11/29/00
Amendments approved by Doctoral Committee on 5/2/01
Amendments approved by the Graduate Faculty, 5/16/01
Approved by the Doctoral Committee on 2010
Approved by the Graduate Faculty, 2010

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Oral Preliminary Examination Policy

Students take the preliminary oral examination after passing the preliminary written examination, but prior to writing the dissertation. The examination is administered by the Oral Preliminary Examination Committee approved by the Graduate School, following submission of the Degree Program Form which must be submitted two terms prior to the term in which you plan to take the oral.

Preliminary Oral Examining Committee

The examining committee will include a minimum of four members, three faculty members from the School of Social Work and one from another department at the University of Minnesota in their supporting area. Students should consult closely with their advisor(s) when determining committee make-up and size. See section on advisors and committees for more details.

Changes in the Preliminary Oral Examining Committee

Substitutions on the examining committee, which may be necessitated, for example, by the departure or absence on leave of a faculty member, must be requested by the advisor or the director of graduate studies through the Graduate School office well in advance of the examination.

Scheduling the Preliminary Oral Examination

It is the responsibility of the student to schedule the preliminary oral with the examiners and with the Graduate School office at least one week in advance. The Graduate School must have on file an approved degree program and a report that the student passed the preliminary written examination before the oral examination can be scheduled.

The Graduate School issues the report form for the preliminary oral examination to the student's advisor, and informs both the student and the advisor if course work on the official program has not yet been completed. The preliminary oral will be authorized in spite of such deficiencies, but deficiencies must be completed before the final oral may be scheduled.

Preliminary oral examinations should not be scheduled during the summer unless the members of the assigned committee can be assembled without substitution.

Preliminary Oral Examination Content and Outcome

In addition to the goals described in the written preliminary exam policy, the purpose of the Preliminary Oral Examination is to evaluate the student's ability to integrate, critically assess, and orally communicate to other scholars knowledge from the social work field and from the student's supporting program. As stated in the Graduate School Bulletin, the Preliminary Oral Examination "covers the major field, the minor field, or supporting program, and any work fundamental thereto, including possible plans for thesis research." In the School of Social Work PhD Program the student's answer to the Preliminary Written Examinations (generalized and specialized) serves as a centerpiece for addressing the content in the four core areas. Upon approval and prior agreement with the chair of the Preliminary Oral Examination Committee, the student may furnish the Committee with additional material for discussion, such as a review of the literature in preparation for a dissertation proposal.

Immediately prior to the preliminary oral examination, the committee chair will clearly stipulate the objectives of the examination and, in consultation with other members of the examining committee, determine how the examination is to be conducted. Immediately after the preliminary oral examination, the candidate will be excused from the room and a written vote will be taken before discussion of the examination. Following discussion, a second and final vote will be taken, and the participants will sign in the appropriate place on the report form, which must be returned to the Graduate School no later than the first workday after the examination.

The preliminary oral examination outcome is recorded in one of three ways: pass, pass with reservations, or fail. The voting proportions necessary for these decisions are as follows: if the committee consists of four members, a favorable verdict for passing consists of either unanimous vote or a vote of 3-1; if the committee consists of five members, a unanimous vote or a vote of 4-1. If, to achieve the minimum number of votes to reach a verdict of pass, any vote of pass with reservations is included, then the.

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outcome will be recorded as a pass with reservations. A vote to pass the student with reservations still constitutes a passing vote.

After passing the Oral Preliminary Examination, a student has achieved Candidacy and becomes a Doctoral Candidate.

**Reporting the Results**

The examining committee will report the results of the preliminary oral examination to the Graduate School office. If the committee decides that a student passed the examination with reservations, it must inform the student immediately. The committee has one week, however, to send the student a letter that clearly stipulates the reservations and the steps required to remove them. A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the Graduate School along with the Preliminary Oral Examination Form. A second letter informing the student and the Graduate School that the reservations have been removed and that the student may proceed toward the degree is also required. The chair of the preliminary oral examination committee should write both letters on the committee’s behalf. The final oral examination may not be scheduled until the Graduate School receives a copy of the second letter indicating that the reservations have been removed.

**Failure of the Examination**

Students failing the preliminary oral (a) may be allowed, on unanimous recommendation of the examining committee, to retake the examination or (b) may be excluded from candidacy for the degree. In no case may the reexamination take place before 10 weeks have passed. No more than one re-examination is allowed.

**The Dissertation Proposal**

The oral preliminary examination does not include a formal defense of the student's dissertation proposal. A student may develop a dissertation proposal at any time but may defend his or her proposal to the committee only after successfully reaching candidacy. The dissertation proposal is formally presented and defended in a meeting separate from the oral preliminary examination, of a length defined by the student and his or her advisor. This meeting may be scheduled immediately following the oral preliminary examination in which the student has been voted to candidacy. Formal work on the student's dissertation will only proceed upon approval of the dissertation proposal by a majority of the committee.

Approved 4/6/89 by the Doctoral Committee
Approved 5/26/89 by the School of Social Work Council
Approved 6/3/99 by the Doctoral Committee
Approved by the Doctoral Committee, 5/6/99
Approved by the Graduate Faculty, 5/13/99