

ENVS Preliminary Examination Procedures

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All doctoral students must pass a written preliminary exam prior to defending their dissertation prospectus. The preliminary exam is designed to assess:

- i) critical thinking and analysis
- ii) competence and breadth of knowledge on core concepts in environmental studies.
- iii) that the student has acquired the skills and knowledge necessary to function as an independent scholar in environmental studies and in their chosen field of specialization.

Before taking the preliminary exam, it is necessary for the student to select areas of specialization (usually three). The student's chosen areas of specialization should guide the selection of a committee and the reading list. It is suggested that students begin planning for their preliminary exam during the semester before they plan to take it, as it can take several weeks to finalize your committee and reading list.

1. Exam Administration & Timeline - Exams are administered over a four-day period.

Students should work with their advisor and committee to set an exam date. Once the exam date is finalized, the student or advisor should inform the Graduate Program Manager via e-mail.

Students are expected to complete the preliminary exam by the end of their second year. Students who are completing an MS degree on the way to a PhD should complete the preliminary exam by the end of their third year.

2. Committee composition - The preliminary committee must have at least three members, and may have up to five. ***The Graduate Director must approve the composition of each committee prior to scheduling the exam*** to ensure that appropriate knowledge of ENVS procedures and history are represented. To acquire approval, email the Graduate Program Manager. Once the committee has been approved by Graduate Committee, the student may proceed to the next steps of developing a reading list.

3. Reading list – The student or advisor should submit a reading list to the Graduate Program Manager at least 6 weeks prior to the scheduled exam. A reading list should include material that captures the breadth of the ENVS core classes as well as the student's particular areas of specialization. The format and length of reading lists vary; however, most include the equivalent of approximately 30-50 article-length readings. (Reading lists that contain several books are often shorter.) Most students and advisors find it helpful to provide committee members with a draft reading list that the committee can edit. The committee chair (typically the advisor) and student should work with their committee to determine the best protocol for the student and committee.

¹ Please note that Michelle's official title is Assistant Director of Graduate Student Success and Community Engagement. One of her roles is coordinating the MS/PhD Program.

4. Exam questions – The exam is comprised of three questions. The chair of the exam committee (usually the student’s advisor) will work with the committee to develop and finalize the exam questions. Typically, each committee member is expected to develop one question for the exam; however, in some cases it may be more appropriate for committee members to collaborate on one or more questions. When the questions have been finalized by the committee, the committee chair should submit the questions to the Graduate Program Manager. ***Questions should be submitted no later than two weeks prior to the exam date.***

5. Exam administration - The Graduate Program Manager will deliver the questions to the student by 9am on the first day of the exam. The student will have 4 days to answer the questions, and should deliver their answers to the Graduate Program Manager via e-mail by 5pm on the fourth day. All questions are “open book”, meaning that students may consult with any resources in writing their exams, but they may not consult with other people. Answers should range between 2,000 and 4,000 words each, not including references.

6. Evaluation - After the exam is complete, the Graduate Program Manager will submit the completed exam to the committee. The committee will then have one month to read and score the answers. The committee should meet (without the student) to discuss the student’s answers and decide how each response will be scored. Each answer should be scored as “Meets expectations” or “Does not meet expectations.” To pass the exam, the student must receive “meets expectations” on all answers. A student who does not meet expectations on one or more answers is permitted to take that section a second time. The committee chair should report the outcome of the exam to the Graduate Chair and Graduate Program Manager.

7. Communicating feedback to the student – The committee chair should compile feedback during the committee’s evaluation of the exam and deliver this feedback to the student either in writing or in person. A student may also find it helpful to meet one or more committee members one-on-one to discuss their feedback in more detail.

8. Retaking the exam – A student who wishes to retake one or more sections of the exam should work with their advisor, the Graduate Chair, and the Graduate Program Coordinator to set a new deadline. The committee will use the evaluation procedures described above to assess the revised answers.

9. Completion of Exam - Upon successful completion of the exam, the student may then turn full attention to dissertation research and prospectus design.