

**UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
SCHOOL OF NURSING
ACADEMIC POLICIES AND PROCEDURES
FOR THE GRADUATE PROGRAM**

TITLE OF POLICY: PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION – PhD

PROGRAM DATE EFFECTIVE: MARCH 2007

LAST REVIEWED/REVISED: OCTOBER 2025

POLICY: The PhD Preliminary Examination assesses the breadth of the student's knowledge of the discipline, the student's achievement during the first year of PhD program study, and the potential to apply research methods independently. Students must complete the Preliminary Examination to progress through the PhD Program.

The PhD Preliminary Examination is to be taken upon completion of the first year of full-time PhD study, as scheduled by PhD Progression and Graduation (P&G) Committee. The following courses must be completed prior to taking the preliminary examination:

Required courses for BSN to PhD students:

- NUR 3285: Philosophical Underpinnings of Nursing Research (3 credits)
- NUR 3286: Theoretical Foundations for Nursing Research (3 credits)
- NUR 3287: Research Design & Methods (3 credits)
- NUR 3071: Apprenticeship Practicum (2 credits)
- NUR 3112 Applied Parametric and Non-Parametric Statistics for the Health Sciences 1 (3 credits or equivalent)
- NUR 2113 or NUR 3113 Applied Parametric and Non-Parametric Statistics for the Health Sciences 2 (3 credits or equivalent)
- NUR 2114 or NUR 3114 Applied Regression for Health Science Research (3 credits or equivalent)
- NUR 3288 Research Measurement (3 credits or equivalent)

Required courses for MSN to PhD program students:

- NUR 3285: Philosophical Underpinnings of Nursing Research (3 credits)
- NUR 3286: Theoretical Foundations for Nursing Research (3 credits)
- NUR 3071: Apprenticeship Practicum (2 credits)
- NUR 3112 Applied Parametric and Non-Parametric Statistics for the Health Sciences 1 (3 credits or equivalent)
- NUR 2113 or NUR 3113 Applied Parametric and Non-Parametric Statistics for the Health Sciences 2 (3 credits or equivalent)
- NUR 2114 or NUR 3114 Applied Regression for Health Science Research (3 credits or equivalent)
- NUR 3288 Research Measurement (3 credits or equivalent)

The PhD Preliminary Examination is a one-day, proctored, in-person exam. The exam tests the student's knowledge of theory and research methodology, as applied to the student's area of research emphasis.

Criteria used to review the PhD Preliminary Examination are identified by the PhD P&G Committee and by faculty who are members of the University Council of Graduate Faculty.

Results of the examination are reported to the student's academic advisor, the PhD Program Director, and Student Affairs no later than the last day of the term in which the examination occurs.

The examination is used to 1) identify those students who may be expected to complete a PhD program successfully and to 2) reveal areas of weakness in the student's preparation. Students identified as having specific areas of weakness will be required to engage in remediation activities (e.g., additional coursework, writing activities, directed readings, etc.) as recommended by the PhD P&G Committee and guided by the student's academic advisor, in consultation with the PhD Program Director.

Students must complete any remedial activities targeted to their identified weakness(es) by the end of the subsequent term, or, if additional course work is required, students must complete that course work in the first semester in which that course is offered following the Preliminary Examination. When extenuating circumstances exist, the student may request an extension in writing to the Dean. This request must be accompanied by a letter of support from the academic advisor and the PhD Program Director.

EXAM COMPONENTS:

Annually, the eligible students' advisor will select one research article related to their area of interest for Part I of the exam. The students are presented with the article on the day of the Preliminary Exam. The student will critique the article (Part I) and, based on research gaps identified within the article, develop a specific aims page (Part II). The PhD P&G Committee will select two graduate faculty members to serve as reviewers for each eligible student.

Part I consists of an article critique, completed as a proctored, in-person exam. Students have 3-4 hours to complete Part I of the exam. Students complete a structured critical appraisal form, not to exceed four double-spaced pages in length. Questions are related to the selected article's purpose, research questions/hypotheses, appropriateness of the literature review, design of the study, variables investigated, sampling methodology, internal validity, external validity, variable measurement, data analysis procedures, findings, conclusion, and research gaps. Questions on the structured critical appraisal form and an evaluation rubric are provided to students in advance of the exam.

Part II consists of drafting a one-page, National Institutes of Health style specific aims page, based on one of the research gaps identified from the critiqued article. Students will have 4-5 hours to complete Part II of the exam. The specific aims page should incorporate related literature to describe the significance of the problem, provide a central hypothesis, articulate testable aims, include a brief description of methods, and state the impact of the proposed work.

While use of web-based resources, e.g., PubMed, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is permitted and encouraged, students are not permitted to use Generative AI (GenAI; e.g., ChatGPT) tools.

Students are also not permitted to discuss any portion of the exam until after the conclusion of the exam.

PROCEDURES:

The Preliminary Examination occurs in the Fall of Year 2 of the PhD Program; exceptions for additional semester offerings will be considered upon advisor request to the PhD Program Director. The PhD P&G Committee will identify a date for the Preliminary Exam that accommodates student availability. The one-day exam will be scheduled from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm with an hour break between Part I and Part II and will be proctored by the P&G Committee or designated faculty.

Upon determining that the student is eligible and ready for Preliminary Examination, the student downloads the Preliminary Examination application form from the OneDrive shared folder PhD Program Information / PhD Program Forms and completes the application, which requires a brief description of the student's research area/topic.

The advisor or the PhD student sends the completed Preliminary Examination application form to the PhD Program Director, the PhD Program Manager, and the Chair of the PhD P&G Committee via Docusign no later than one month prior to the scheduled Preliminary Examination date. The PhD Program Manager, in consultation with the Chair of the PhD P&G Committee, provides information

related to the day of the exam (e.g., room location, what is required/permissible to bring, etc.) via email. The PhD Program Manager also creates separate OneDrive folders for each part of the exam and uploads the Preliminary Examination instructions, evaluation rubric, and research articles as appropriate. The PhD Program Manager informs the student of the title of their folders and how to access the folders in OneDrive in advance of the exam.

The PhD P&G Committee members proctor or arrange for proctors for the exam.

On the day of the exam, the PhD Program Manager provides the student with access to their OneDrive folders. The student will complete Part I of the exam and upload to the OneDrive folder prior to moving on to Part II. When the second session is complete, the student will upload the completed Part II of the exam to their designated OneDrive folders. The PhD Program Manager removes access to the OneDrive folder at the conclusion of each session.

After the conclusion of the exam, the PhD Program Manager compiles and anonymizes student exams for review. The PhD Program Manager creates a OneDrive folder with the anonymized exams and shares access with the PhD P&G Committee and two designated graduate faculty reviewers for each student. The evaluation is guided by rubrics and completed evaluations are uploaded to the OneDrive folder. Evaluation is to be completed within a two-week period. Following reviews, the PhD P&G Committee meets to collectively evaluate all exams. Upon evaluation completion, the PhD Program Manager re-identifies student exams and notifies the PhD Program Director of the final decision. The PhD Program Manager, under direction of the PhD Program Director, distributes the decision via emailed letter to the student and their academic advisor.

The student's academic advisor will discuss the results of the examination with the student.

In case of remediation, it is the academic advisor's responsibility to provide evidence of completion of required activities to the PhD Progression and Graduation Committee.

Upon successful completion of the Preliminary Examination, the academic advisor will complete a Status Form for Graduate Programs (Milestones).

Approved by Graduate Council: 2/86, 3/89; 6/92
Approved by PhD Council: 10/94; 3/95; 1/98; 3/2018
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