Guidelines for the Written and Oral Ph.D. Examinations (revised 11/18/15)

In addition to successfully completing the required and optional graduate course work, a Ph.D. candidate will successfully complete three examinations: the written preliminary examination, the oral preliminary examination, and the final oral defense of the dissertation.

**Written Preliminary Examination**

The Written Preliminary Examination is conducted to assure that each student has achieved a comprehensive and detailed knowledge of the chosen area of concentration. The major professor will supervise the student's preparation for the examination. The student, in consultation with the POS committee, will use the Ph.D. Area Declaration form to identify a subject area to be evaluated on for Ph.D. candidacy. The student’s POS committee will create the preliminary examination based on this subject area. If the student is pursuing a graduate minor, the faculty on the committee representing the minor should have the opportunity to incorporate questions reflecting the content of the minor.

**Guidelines**

- Students are encouraged to complete the course work relevant to their subject area prior to taking the written preliminary examination. Students should know that the examination is not merely over course work but also addresses issues and directions of the discipline and its sub-areas. Consequently, students are expected to know the body of literature and the major themes and scholars that make up a subject area.
- The Committee Appointment and Program of Study form must be approved by the Graduate College before the department will allow students to take the preliminary examination. If appropriate, the student should meet with the major professor and contact the Disability Resources Office to arrange for accommodations permitted in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Director of Graduate Education (DOGE), in conjunction with the Disability Resources Office, arranges accommodations.
- Students will receive an overall grade of Pass or Fail on the examination.
• Students will have two opportunities to pass the written examination. Should a student fail twice, he/she may appeal to their POS committee to remain in the program and retake the examination a third time, but it is expected that the student will offer compelling evidence that they are better prepared for a third attempt. The POS committee will substantiate in writing to the DOGE and department chair its recommendation to allow or refuse a third examination. The department chair and DOGE will decide if the student will be allowed to take the exam a third time. Should the student fail the third time, he/she will be dismissed from the program.

**Procedure and Format**

• The student will write a paper of no more than 30 pages (not including references) prepared in accordance with the American Sociological Association Style Guide.

• The paper will be of high quality in writing and organization as expected within the standards of a professional publication. The POS committee, in collaboration with the student, will prepare an assignment for a written paper to be evaluated by the POS committee. The selection of the topic or problem should be a joint decision between the student and the POS Committee. The paper is an opportunity for students to demonstrate the quality of mind described by C. Wright Mills as the sociological imagination. As such the paper should represent a scholarly sociological analysis that draws upon the discipline’s approaches of scientific inquiry.

• The intent of the paper requirement is to provide students the opportunity to demonstrate their mastery of the subject matter they will profess as they enter their careers with a Ph.D. in sociology. It is expected that the paper will serve as an example of the student’s ability to logically present an argument, review relevant empirical evidence, and identify the importance of the argument and evidence for the discipline of sociology.

• The topic of this paper must address theories, methods, and/or applications appropriate to their subject area regardless of the methodological approaches, quantitative or qualitative.
The assignment will be provided to the student after the Ph.D. Area Declaration Form has been submitted to the DOGE and after the DOGE reviews and approves the exam.

The student will have **eight weeks** to complete the paper in the Fall or Spring semester in which the paper will be given and evaluated. Upon receipt of the exam paper topic, students will have a **two working day** grace period to ask questions, get clarification and feedback on issues and concerns related to the paper topic. At the end of the grace period, students are expected to work independently to complete the exam paper. Students are not allowed to receive outside help with the writing of their exam (including editing), from the ISU Writing Center or any other source.

A formal statement of the student’s exam paper assignment will be filed with the DOGE following the two-working day grace period in which the student receives the assignment.

The student will submit the paper to the POS committee at the end of the eighth week in which it was assigned. The POS Committee will notify the Graduate Secretary and DOGE on the day that the student submits the paper for evaluation.

The POS committee will have **two weeks** from the time it receives the student’s paper to determine whether it will receive a grade of pass or fail and prepare comments to the student including strengths and weaknesses along with suggestions on how the paper can be improved. Failure to submit a paper, or a paper deemed unacceptable by the POS Committee will constitute a failure.

A copy of the paper and the POS committee’s evaluation will be retained in the student’s academic file with the graduate secretary.

During the writing of the examination students are expected to follow the Professional Code of Ethics as outlined in the bylaws of the American Sociological Association (see: www.ASAnet.org and follow the link to “Ethics”)

The following elements must be included within the paper: (1) Introduction and Justification, (2) Theory, Concepts, and Previous Research, and (3) Operationalization and Methodology. The POS
committee will decide if additional information is required. Below are suggestions for the content of each section.

Part I. Introduction and Justification (about 5 pages)

In this section describe the topic you intend to explore in your dissertation. Present your research objectives and justify your approach to a sociological examination of your topic.

1. Clearly describe the sociological issue you intend to study in your dissertation. What aspect of this issue will you study? What are their sociological elements? What objectives do you hope to achieve in your dissertation?

2. Present the rationale or need to conduct a sociological study of this topic, specifically articulate how your research will make a unique contribution to sociological knowledge. Why is your dissertation topic important to the discipline? What gaps does it address in existing literature? What are the policy implications?

Part II. Theory, Concepts, and Previous Research (about 12 pages)

In this section, draw upon relevant theories and evaluate previous empirical work related to this topic.

1. Present and discuss major theories or frameworks explaining related to this topic, identifying key concepts related to your dissertation in each theory.

2. Provide a critical review of the research related to this topic. Identify and evaluate the core findings from this body of work that are relevant to your dissertation.

3. Utilizing previous theories discussed above and findings from previous research, present and elaborate a possible conceptual model that could be used to address the research objectives of your dissertation.

Part III. Operationalization and Methodology (about 12 pages)

Based on your reading of the literature, discuss how concepts related to this topic can be operationalized and analyzed in context of the research questions your dissertation addresses.
1. Discuss how your concepts of interest are defined in the literature and how you intend to define the concepts in your study. What are the advantages and limitations of each?

2. Identify and discuss a potential data source or sample that could be used to answer your research question.

3. If a quantitative study, what hypotheses are you proposing to test? What are the indicators (i.e., questions) you will use to represent your conceptual definitions? If a qualitative study, what questions will you ask and/or what procedures will you use to gather your information?

4. If a quantitative study, describe a potential empirical model that relates your dependent and independent variables. Explain how you are going to validate your model choice. If a qualitative study, explain and justify your data analysis technique. Provide some advantages and disadvantages of this technique.

5. If your paper is entirely conceptual, perhaps one that advances theory but with no implied empirical component to the paper itself, then describe how the theory might be evaluated either through a quantitative or qualitative methodology. Describe methodological procedures appropriate for evaluating your contribution to theory. Describe how key concepts might be measured, either with quantitative or qualitative data.

**Oral Preliminary Examination**

- Once the written examination has been passed, the oral examination will be held within six weeks. The oral examination must be satisfactorily completed at least six months before the defense of the dissertation. The student must process the Graduate College Requesting an Oral Examination form at least two weeks prior to the oral examination. These forms are available from the sociology graduate secretary.

- If a student fails the preliminary oral examination, the Graduate College requires six months to pass before the student may retake the examination. http://www.grad-college.iastate.edu/.

**Final Oral Defense of the Dissertation**
• This is a two to three-hour oral examination that focuses upon, but need not be limited to, a defense of the student’s dissertation and is conducted in accordance with Graduate College requirements described in the Graduate College Handbook.

• The student must receive approval from the Graduate College three weeks prior to the examination date. These forms are available from the sociology graduate secretary