Soil Science Policy on the Written Portion of the Preliminary Oral Examination

Statement of Purpose

Successful completion of a preliminary oral examination is required by the Graduate College for a graduate student to be admitted to PhD candidacy. In addition, the Agronomy Department requires a written portion of the preliminary oral examination (hereafter called preliminary written examination). Upon successful completion of both the written and oral portions of the preliminary examination, the student is admitted to candidacy for the PhD degree. The Program of Study (POS) Committee has the responsibility to determine the student’s success or failure in these examinations.

Preliminary written examinations for PhD students in Soil Science are intended to rigorously test the student’s knowledge as well as the student’s ability to critically analyze, organize, and present relevant subject matter. The primary function of the preliminary written examination is to assist the graduate student’s POS Committee in assessing the student’s qualifications for admission to candidacy in a PhD program in Soil Science. Several related functions also accrue:

1. The written examination seeks to assure that the student has adequate depth and breadth of knowledge to pursue a PhD.
2. The written examination gives the POS Committee an opportunity to assess the student’s writing skills, especially with regard to organization, logical presentation of ideas, and clarity of expression.
3. The written examination helps the POS Committee to screen for students who are not yet ready for the oral examination.
4. The written examination encourages the student to review and integrate what has been learned in formal coursework.
5. The written examination helps students prepare for the oral examination.
6. The written examination serves as supporting, formal documentation of the student’s qualifications to enter Ph.D. candidacy.

Statement of Policy

Questions to be posed to the student in the written examination are to be solicited from members of the POS Committee by the major professor. The Agronomy Department, the Soil Science program, and the major professor encourage all committee members to submit written questions to the student. The format of the written portion of the preliminary examination is left open to the members of the POS Committee. Questions may require short or long answers; they may incorporate reading and synthesis of the literature; they may review material from the student’s course work or they may integrate topics from the several subdisciplines of Soil Science. Questions may be formulated as open- or closed-book problems, and a reasonable period for completion may be set by the question’s author. One copy of the student’s responses to all written questions is to be submitted to the POS Committee member and one to the major professor.

The major professor is responsible for proctoring the written exam to ensure that the committee members’ guidelines are followed. The student’s responses to written questions are formally scored or ranked only by the POS Committee member who authored the question, but all responses are shared either electronically or by hard copies with all POS Committee members by the major professor at least one week before the student’s preliminary oral examination.

All written artifacts of the preliminary written examination are to be maintained by the major professor in the student’s permanent record until the student graduates from Iowa State University.
When the student submits to the department’s Director of Graduate Education a request to schedule the preliminary oral examination, the major professor certifies by signing the form that the student has satisfactorily completed a written exam and is ready for the oral examination.

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