



Guide to the Certification Process



Certification is an important milestone in a doctoral student's career. A number of changes in your status take place when you become certified. You are now formally a doctoral candidate. Among other things this means you are eligible to file a dissertation proposal with the office of doctoral studies.

Additionally, **the 'clock' is now ticking on the timetable for graduation.** The Office of Doctoral Studies indicates the number of years you have, from the time you become certified, to complete and successfully defend your dissertation. While it is possible to obtain an extension of a year or two if your advisor certifies you are making significant progress toward completion, **you can be required to retake the exam if sufficient progress has not been made** toward finishing your studies and dissertation.

Overview of the Certification Process

The certification process consists of a written exam and a qualifying paper (QP).

The goal of the written exam is for you to demonstrate your knowledge of the theoretical foundations our field and your ability to draw on that knowledge and to critically think about and discuss the prominent issues and controversies that are part of our professional discourse.

There are three purposes of the qualifying paper. The first is for you to demonstrate your capability in integrating theory, research, and practice. The second is for you to demonstrate your ability to complete a dissertation. The third, and most important, is to serve as a bridge to clarifying your research interests based on an in-depth reading and analysis of literature related to both adult & organizational learning, and to a "content" area of focus for your research.

The exam and qualifying paper assignment are structured in the same format in both ALL and AEGIS. Taken together they represent a comprehensive demonstration of your ability to finish your doctoral studies and assume a position of academic leadership in our field. While the primary goal of the process as a whole is assessment, it also has the educative effect of integrating the various strands of your studies in a holistic way.

The certification exam must be passed before writing the qualifying paper. In either case, the QP must be completed and submitted within six (6) months of the date on which you take the certification exam.

Eligibility for Taking the Exam

College policy is for students in ALL to take the exam when they have completed 70 credits, having 20 credits of remaining course work. You should have completed all of your course work



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having no incompletes in courses that are in the Program Plan you file with ODS. Additionally, you must have a GPA of B or better.

You register to take the exam with ODS and inform our program office of your intention to take the exam. As part of the pre-exam process, program plans must be signed off by your advisor and filed with ODS — with a copy submitted to the program office for your file — before you can register for the exam (program plan forms are available from ODS).

The exam is offered three times a year: early fall, early spring, and in June. You should check the academic calendar or with ODS for the registration deadlines.

Structure and Content of the Written Exam

The exam consists of 4 questions. The first 3 of those 4 questions are required; for the 4th question, you have 3-5 prompts to choose from. The three required questions are drawn from the following content areas: 1) transformative learning, 2) self-directed learning, 3) learning through experience, 4) adult development, 4) social action (and related work on critical theory, power and positionality), and 5) program development. Optional questions come from the following content areas: 1) leadership, 2) organizational learning, and 3) postmodernism as it relates to learning.

Each question typically has several parts, and asks you to draw on your knowledge of the theory as it applies to the work of adult educators in settings and contexts of their choice. You will always have some choice about the theorists you write about and the context in which you apply these ideas. There typically are several parts to each question, but we have revised the exam so that the focus of each question is limited in scope. You won't be asked to compare and contrast several theorists, for example. But it is not unusual to be asked to think about the appropriateness, value, and use of a theory of your choice in a particular setting of your choice. It is important that you answer all parts of the question.

You must have access to a computer to complete the exam (as well as an internet connection to receive and submit your exam).

Some Thoughts About Writing the Exam

Writing the exam is not a “data dump” (i.e. writing down everything you know and hope you have covered the answer). Faculty evaluating your answers will look at the logic of your answer as well as whether you have provided key information about a theory and its use. You should be familiar with the names of scholars, and the key points they make, but you are not required to provide quotations of data for particular books or articles. You may be asked to offer your own critique and to identify underlying assumptions or gaps. It is helpful to outline your answer before starting the essay (however your answer should not be an outline or a series of lists.) In writing your answer demonstrate that you understand the meaning of key terms (i.e. define them and illustrate them in your answer, don't simply list, or ‘throw around’ terms). You don't have to cover every aspect of the topic you are discussing. You do need to utilize the major components of theory (ies) and integrate them into a comprehensive answer relevant to the question.



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Think of yourself as addressing a graduate seminar or professional conference on the question; does your answer hold up to that standard?

Even if you haven't specifically studied for the 'focus' of a particular question, don't get anxious. Think of how the relevant theorists apply. Remember, one purpose of the exam is to demonstrate your competency in drawing on and reasoning from your knowledge of the field. We are interested in what you think as much as we are in what you know.

Some Thoughts about Preparing for the Exam

The beginning of your preparation occurs with the start of your course work when you enter the program. You should keep the suggestions below in the back of your mind as you progress through your studies. Obviously though, you will more formally study for the exam in the months immediately leading up to your taking it.

Focus your attention on the writers who are most prominent in the discourse in each of the content areas. In addition to learning their core ideas and models, compare and contrast them. Where are the important connections among their ideas? What are the significant differences in their positions and theoretical models? How have they critiqued each other?

Consider the critical differences in perspective between the various content areas and the implications of these differences for the field and role of adult educators. How do various content areas inform each other? What is your thinking about the work of these various writers and the issues they raise with each other? What is the basis for your thinking?

As a future leader in our field, you need to communicate your thinking on the issues in a coherent and well-reasoned way. The written part of the exam should demonstrate this ability.

What the Faculty Looks for in Reading Your Answer

Think in terms of four "C's":

- Comprehensiveness (This requires being selective yet thorough, bringing into your answer appropriate ideas, communicating your knowledge of both theory and its relevance to the issues raised in the exam question. Strive to build the reader's confidence in your knowledge and your competence in applying it.)
- Clarity (The answer should be well organized and the writing clear in terms of meaning. We have to understand your answer)
- Critique (Remember, a foundational concept in our program is critical reflection and awareness of assumptions; yours and the assumptions underlying the work of others. Quite apart from this core tenet of our program, a doctoral candidate in any field has to demonstrate how well they think.)
- Correctness (Are you defining and using terms, concepts, and models accurately?)

In short, provide a well-reasoned and lucid argument. We are aware that your answers will not be as polished as if you had time to carefully edit and revise them, and we apply the above criteria as such.



All exams are blind reviewed. We use a three-point scale in grading each answer: 1 (high pass or strong answer), 2 (acceptable), or 3 (inadequate). A score of 1 or 2 is passing on the question. Two faculty members read each person's exam. If one of the two readers fails a question a third faculty member reads the exam. Two faculty members have to agree. All questions have to be passed in order for the student to pass the exam. A student is allowed one retake if he/she fails one or more questions. If you do fail one or two questions, you will be asked to retake that part of the exam. If you fail three or four questions, you need to retake the entire exam. You may not receive the exact same question for a retake, but that question will be on the same topic as the question that was failed (e.g. if you fail a question on X, the retake will focus on X).

The Qualifying Paper

In addition to the written exam you will need to write a qualifying paper. Guidelines can be found in on the program website in the section on Certification Guides. You must turn in the paper to the program office within 6 months of taking the certification exam.

Goal of the Qualifying Paper

As previously mentioned, the qualifying paper has multiple purposes, including an assessment of your capabilities in writing at a professional level, reviewing research, and taking a next step toward exploring a topic that might serve as your dissertation topic. The core of this paper will be your use of the theoretical and research literature in supporting practice (be aware of the differences among theory, research, and position oriented literature.).

Writing the Literature Review

You want to define the issue of the paper in a very focused way. Don't be too general. A helpful approach is to pose a question that comes out of practice around which you want to design a research study. In answering your question build the argument about what is or isn't known about this question, and support it with the relevant literature. This is not a literature essay (i.e. a summary of one or several articles, each summary presented in chronological order), but a literature review in support of an argument (involving a SYNTHESIS of what is known about the research conducted and about key findings across different research studies). In writing the literature review you should be drawing on those parts of each piece of literature that specifically relates to your focus or question.

There are four parts to the essay. The first part sets out the topic/question and discusses the context, current state of practice insofar as one knows it, problems or concerns, and assumptions that one might be using in framing the question. The second part reviews research (and theory as relevant) to the topic from outside the field of adult learning. The third part reviews research (and theory) about one area of adult or organizational learning that is highly relevant to the question/topic. The fourth and final part brings together what was learned from the review and discusses implications for research and, if relevant, practice. It is common to revisit assumptions and the way the question/topic was framed at the beginning of the essay in light of what was learned.



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Use both adult learning/education literature and topic specific literature that is seminal and contemporary. In selecting sources for the review you don't have to include 'everything' that has been written on question, but you do need to provide coverage of key theory and of seminal research. It is important that you build contradictory literature into your review. This is not an advocacy piece.

Follow APA guidelines, including format and citations. [Although we know you would not intend it, please be careful not to plagiarize! Make sure you attribute ideas to scholars who discuss them and to cite sources. **Do not use artificial intelligence (AI) to write your paper.** Plagiarism is a breach of professional ethics, and constitutes grounds for dismissal from the program (see section on academic integrity)]. Think of this assignment as writing a professional paper on the topic.

Passing the Qualifying Paper

This is a 'one chance only' assignment. You can Pass with no changes or receive a Revise and Resubmit Pass that requires further work that is again reviewed so that you can pass after having made some revisions. But your QP has to demonstrate the ability to think and write conceptually as will be demanded in your dissertation. If you Fail the QP, you will not be able to continue in the program.

Take care to revise your paper before you submit it. You can have others read it and give you feedback, but the writing and work must be yours.

Your QP will be read by two faculty using the same guidelines for review that you use for writing the QP. Faculty will then meet to communicate your rating, discuss feedback, and plan next steps.