

Preparing for your Candidacy Examination: Minimizing the Risk

George H. Buck, Ph.D.
Associate Chair and Graduate Coordinator
Department of Educational Psychology

When Should I go for it?

- Normally, starting about one year prior to the anticipated time of the candidacy examination, when the majority of coursework is complete, students will begin to prepare a comprehensive paper for the candidacy examination. You will receive direction from the Supervisor and Supervisory Committee, but the onus will be on you to write and complete the comprehensive paper.
- In professional programs like Counselling, an Internship practicum course can be taken only after the Candidacy.
- Also, discussion with Supervisor and Supervisory Committee is important. (While one may demand the Candidacy without Supervisory support, it is a very risky tactic).
- A Candidacy proposal that meets the approval of the Supervisory Committee.

What do I need for the Proposal?

- A research proposal consisting of 3 main sections or papers:
 - 1) Background and literature review (based on a prescribed reading list as well as references relevant to the proposed research topic);
 - 2) Research method and justification over other approaches;
 - 3) Anticipated data gathering and analysis (where will data be gathered, how, and how will the data be analyzed)
- References with proper citation.
- Sections or papers will be approximately 25 pages (plus or minus 5 pages) in length, and will follow APA format or whichever format is stipulated by your department.

How Much Time Is needed to Prepare?

- Depending upon one's prior knowledge, and the program area requirements, one should anticipate a term for preparing the Candidacy papers/proposal.
- Besides reading and writing the Candidacy papers, one should consult frequently with the Supervisor and Supervisory Committee for direction and feedback.
- One should also discuss the selection of committee members for the Candidacy with the Supervisor.

How Do I Prepare?

- Besides knowing the relevant literature and the content of the Candidacy Papers, one should also:
- Meet with each committee member, if possible, to acquaint them with what you are about, and more importantly, find out their views and perspectives.
- Prepare a 10 minute talk to be delivered at the outset of the Candidacy.
- Rehearse the talk and DO NOT exceed the time allocation.
- (I find that mock Candidacy Examinations are often counter-productive, because they rarely approximate the real thing.)

The 10 Minute Talk

- The purpose is to “break the ice”, and to put yourself at ease.
- You can use PowerPoint, or not, but if using PowerPoint, arrange it so that you are looking at the committee, and that you don't read the points verbatim (most committee members can read).
- Talk should either summarize the main points of what it is you want to do, OR
- Provide a description of the antecedent factors that led to your selecting the particular research topic (research journey).
- It is always advisable to discuss the content with your Supervisor.

The Night Before

- Make sure that you have everything you need:
- copy of the documents;
- PowerPoint presentation (if using one), otherwise talk notes;
- Copies of your CV for each committee member.
- Do not spend excessive time obsessing about what will happen. Rather, get as much sleep as possible.

What should I Take in with Me?

- Copy of the Candidacy Papers.
- Copies of your CV.
- Small water bottle (do not drink too much, or you will end up with other pressure).
- Computer, if necessary, and PowerPoint presentation.
- If a particular reference is of major importance, it is advisable to bring it along (e.g. the DSM-V).
- Dress appropriately (no jeans and t-shirts).

Who should be Present?

- You.
- Supervisor.
- Remainder of Supervisory Committee (usually 2 others).
- Two other examiners, who must be at “arm’s length” (meaning that you have not published or presented with them; not a close collaborator on your thesis topic; not a close collaborator with your Supervisor).
- You may have more than 5 examiners present if you and your Supervisory Committee wish.

Can individuals be Virtually Present?

- While this is possible in a limited way, it is usually not the best experience.
- A committee member may join by telephone or Skype, and will be considered to be present.
- Be aware that technical difficulties will prolong the Candidacy.

What is the Format?

- Usually, Chair of the Committee will outline procedures and order of questioning (usually the most removed from the department to the Supervisory Committee, then the Supervisor).
- A review of your CV will take place.
- Your presentation (do not exceed 15 minutes).
- Two or three rounds of questions.

The rounds

- First round focuses on background knowledge. Usually relies heavily on reading list, key theorists, key works.
- Second round (sometimes merged with the first round) focuses on the research method: why particular method was selected; what do you know of other methods.
- Third round focuses on research questions, proposed data and analysis.
- Justification for design and analysis.
- Do you know anything about similar and different analytical approaches?
- Duration of the Candidacy Exam can be up to 3 hours in length.

What if...?

- If you don't understand what someone is asking, ask for clarification, or re-state the question along the lines, "if I understand correctly, you are asking"
- If you don't have an answer to a factual question, or you forget, be honest.
- If someone disagrees with a response, defend your position respectfully.
- If you need to use the washroom, ask the Chair if you might be excused for a washroom break.

Other Tips for the Examination

- Once the question is asked, take a moment to think about it before crafting your response (it may seem that a long time is passing, but usually it is not).
- If you find yourself not answering the question, ask the examiner to repeat the question asked.
- Avoid emotion as this tends to upset Committee members and may serve as an “eliciting effect”.
- Remember that there is no correlation between time taken in deliberation and the outcome.

Delibertation

- You are asked to leave the room.
- In Ed. Psy., committee members must vote initially before any discussion. A secret ballot is used to prevent influence or coercion.
- Discussion ensues concerning two key questions:
- 1) Is the candidate prepared to undertake research at an advanced level? (Did the candidate answer the questions satisfactorily?)
- 2) Is the proposed research viable and indicative of advanced level research? (Is the proposed research appropriate and reasonable for the level and time available?)

Possible Outcomes

- **Pass:** All or all but one of the examiners must agree to an outcome of Pass.
- **Conditional Pass:** A majority of examiners must agree to an outcome of Conditional Pass. If the candidacy examining committee agrees to a conditional pass for the student, the chair of the examining committee will provide in writing within five working days to the Dean, FGSR, the graduate coordinator and the student: the reasons for this recommendation; the details of the conditions; the timeframe for the student to meet the conditions; the approval mechanism for meeting the conditions (e.g. approval of the committee chair or supervisor, or approval of the entire committee, or select members of the committee); and the supervision and assistance the student can be expected to receive from committee members. Conditions are subject to final approval by the Dean, FGSR .
- **Fail:** All or all but one of the examiners must agree that the student has failed, and the committee chair will provide the reasons for this recommendation to the department.

Usual Result

- If you are prepared, and have worked well with your Supervisor and Supervisory Committee, a pass is most likely.
- Quite often, there will be some suggestions, not entailing a Conditional Pass. These suggestions are intended to be helpful, and are not a criticism.
- Once through the Candidacy, the fun of completing the research and writing the dissertation await.