For the 2013-2014 cycle the Ph.D. Program in Educational Psychology focused on a review of the First Examination.

**Background**

The Ph.D. Program in Educational Psychology offers doctoral degrees in the following specializations:

- School Psychology (*APA Accredited: Inactive*)
- Learning, Development, and Instruction
- Quantitative Methods in Educational and Psychological Research
- Educational Policy Analysis

The Program prepares students to conduct research in the application of psychological theory to key problems in the field of education. In accord with our strong research orientation, all Educational Psychology doctoral students are well trained in the areas of research design, applied statistics, and psychometrics, and are expected to write the first level exams by the time that they have completed 45 credits in the program. Completing of 45 credits and passing the first level exams is required for students to progress to Second Level. The purpose of the first level doctoral exams is to assess whether a student has reached competency in four of the five following areas in Educational Psychology:

- Statistics,
- Research Methods,
- Cognition and Motivation,
- Instruction and Language Development,
- Behavior Modification and Developmental Psychopathology (School Psychology Students)

Students must successfully complete the examinations in Statistics and Research Methods prior to the beginning of the third semester, AND all students must complete two additional examinations. School Psychology students must complete an examination in (a) Cognition and Motivation, and (b) Behavior Modification and Developmental Psychopathology; Learning, Development and Instruction students must complete an examination in (a) Cognition and Motivation, and (b) Instruction and Language Development; and Quantitative Methods and Educational Policy students can choose any two additional examinations, that is, (a) Cognition and Motivation, (b) Instruction and Language Development, or (c) Behavior Modification and Developmental Psychopathology. All students must sit for all four examinations prior to beginning their fifth semester. Students must successfully complete all four examinations to remain matriculated in the program.

**Format and Grading**

All examinations are two hours long with the exception of Statistics and Research Methods exams, which are one and one half hours long. Students write the exams in a computer lab during one of two exam sessions, just prior to the beginning of the Fall and Spring semesters. Compared to the coursework, the examinations are generally more integrative and conceptual. Students are
given a reading list of articles above and beyond that required by coursework, and the exams are based on the reading list, not just the coursework. Scores are:

- **Fail:** Failing any question results in a failure of the exam. This is used because students have choice over which question to answer. The student must retake the exam according to usual departmental rules at the next opportunity to sit for the exam.

- **Pass:** The student can receive one of three passing grades (Borderline Pass/Pass/Pass With Distinction). These are reflected in a student’s academic record and may be used for advising purposes, but receipt of any passing score does not require the examinee to sit for the exam again.

Exams are blindly graded by two faculty members who then compare grades for each exam. If there is a discrepancy in their grades, a third faculty member is asked to grade the exam. Any examination that the student fails must be retaken in the following semester, and **may be retaken only once.** Students are urged to discuss any examination failed with the appropriate faculty member who reviews their exam and provides detailed feedback to the student.

**Evaluation of First Level Exams**

We have begun the process of evaluating and revising our first level exams. A review of grades for the past 5 years indicates an approximate success rate of 92%, indicating that most students are able to successfully pass their first level exams. Furthermore, almost all of the students who do fail an exam the first time, are able to pass when they write it the second time. This suggests that the exams are not serving a “screening” function. However, informal discussions with our students suggest that they do find preparing for the exams to be a useful review process of the foundational material presented during the first few years of the program. The most common complaint has been the amount of time that students invest in reviewing all of the material. Some students have suggested that this time could be more productively spent (e.g., working on research articles, etc.).

**Future Directions**

As a department, we have recently undergone significant change with the phasing out of our School Psychology program. We are in the process of reevaluating both the content and format of the first level exams. A number of ideas have been discussed, including reducing the number of exams and/or allowing for a different format, such as a comprehensive paper, that could more readily translate into a conference presentation or journal article.

At present, our assessment is entirely in the timed, in class format. Each exam has four questions, from which the students choose to answer two. In the future it would be useful to add a component to the assessment that represent higher order expectations that go beyond coursework to what students need to be expected to do in the future:

- **Article Critique:** Read a recent research article and write a written critique of its design and methodology. Students would then need to generate and deliver a 15 minute oral presentation based on the article that is critiqued.

- **Data Analysis:** Students would be given a sample dataset for which they would need to analyze and write a short research report.