

PH.D. DISSERTATION DEFENSES AND FINAL EXAMINATIONS

A Ph.D. dissertation defense and final examination assesses (1) a student's fundamental knowledge regarding existing information, theories and concepts related to their area of study and (2) mastery of and ability to rationally defend their research project including background information, rationale, hypotheses, experimental design, analysis and interpretation of novel results, how their results advance the field, limitations to their findings and potential future directions for the project. Once initiated, an examination must be completed and the student will therefore either pass or fail on the date of the examination.

Although the graduate advisory committee (GAC) is expected to review the dissertation document prior to the defense and should provide suggestions on improvements to the document, the final examination itself focuses on the student's performance in the two areas noted above. A successful defense, therefore, IS NOT a final approval of the dissertation document. The GAC provides final approval (or not) of the dissertation document via the electronic thesis-dissertation (ETD) approval form which is initiated only after a successful defense.

Responsibilities of the Advisor. For Ph.D. dissertation defenses and final examinations, the student's advisor fully participates as a member of the student's GAC and will also:

1. Chair the examination meeting and ensure that the examination process is appropriate, equitable to the student and maintains the standards of excellence in our programs.
2. Instruct the GAC as a whole on the purpose of the exam, focusing on the points above.
3. Together with the other members of the GAC, establish the general protocol for the questioning period (e.g. 10-15 minutes per GAC member and number rounds of questions). If the examination is lengthy (e.g. longer than 2 hours) or if the student is exhibiting signs of distress, the Advisor may call for a brief recess.
4. At the conclusion of the questioning, the Advisor excuses the student and requests a motion and a second of PASS or FAIL for the examination outcome from the other GAC members. The Advisor calls for and participates in discussion from all GAC members. At the conclusion of the discussion, the Advisor calls for a vote on the motion by show of hands. All GAC members including the Advisor must vote either PASS or FAIL on the student's performance. The GAC members including the Advisor are the only persons allowed to vote. More than one negative vote constitutes failure of the examination. The Advisor completes the examination outcome form and gathers all required signatures.

If the student passes the exam, the GAC as a whole should establish a date by which the student should provide them with a final version of the dissertation such that adequate time is allowed for review, ETD routing and (presumably) approval. Allowing at least one week for dissertation review and one additional week for ETD routing/approval is suggested.

If the student does not pass the exam, the Advisor should ask the other GAC members if they support a re-examination and, if so, the approximate date at which a re-examination seems appropriate. The Advisor (or Program Director) is responsible for petitioning for the re-examination to the Associate Dean for Graduate Education for review by the School of Medicine Graduate Programs Committee.

5. The Advisor recalls the student and informs them of the outcome. If the student does not pass the exam, the Advisor relays to the student the recourse decided by the GAC.
6. The examination outcome form indicating whether the student passed or failed the exam must be signed by all GAC members including the Advisor. The Advisor is responsible for returning the signed signature page to the Office of Graduate Education.