

GUIDELINES FOR PH.D. DISSERTATION DEFENSES-FINAL EXAMINATIONS

A Ph.D. dissertation defense requires the student to present their research in a public seminar and defend their dissertation to their Graduate Advisory Committee (GAC). A student must be making satisfactory academic progress to defend. Once initiated, an exam must be completed; a student will therefore either pass or fail on the date of the exam.

Final defenses must be scheduled at a time during which all GAC members are available to participate. If a single GAC member cannot participate in a previously scheduled defense, the student and advisor may choose to reschedule the defense. Alternatively, the student may proceed with the defense if approved by the advisor and the graduate program director with the understanding that the absent GAC member will be counted as a vote to fail the student. If two or more GAC members cannot participate in a previously scheduled defense, it must be rescheduled. A student may present and defend their work via video conference with prior approval of their GAC and program director.

A student, in consultation with their advisor, is responsible for generating a draft of their dissertation. The advisor is responsible for determining that the draft is complete and suitable for review by the GAC. A student must provide their GAC with the draft at least 10 working days (or more as required by the GAC) prior to the defense. Within five working days of receipt, the GAC should review the draft and, if it is insufficient (e.g. incomplete), notify the student that the examination should not proceed. The GAC cannot cancel the exam after the five working day window expires. Proceeding to the defense does not indicate final approval of the dissertation. The GAC provides final assessment of the dissertation via the electronic thesis-dissertation (ETD) approval form, which is initiated after a successful defense.

The defense itself focuses on the student's:

- mastery of the general area of training in their graduate program
- mastery of the background information for their dissertation project and their completed studies including all major analyses and interpretations
- appropriate technical and other care for all major experiments required in their dissertation project
- ability to contextualize their findings relative to the field and suggest appropriate future studies
- dissertation draft that appears will be acceptable after revision

The advisor typically chairs the GAC during the defense; alternatively, the associate dean for graduate education (ADGE) may appoint a dean's representative (DR) to chair the GAC for the exam upon request by: the student, any GAC member (including the advisor), the graduate program director, or at the discretion of the ADGE. The appointment of a specific individual as DR may be challenged with cause by any of the above. The ADGE will consider the challenge and proceed with either the original or an alternate as DR. The DR will be from outside the original GAC, but will be a voting member.

The chair will lead the exam meeting and ensure the process is equitable to the student and maintains the standards of excellence in our programs. The GAC will establish the protocol for the questioning period (e.g. 10-15 minutes per GAC member). If the exam is lengthy (e.g. longer than 2 hours) or if the student is exhibiting signs of distress, the chair may call for a brief recess. At the conclusion of questioning, the chair will excuse the student and request a motion and a second of PASS or FAIL for the exam from the other GAC members. The chair calls for and participates in discussion from all GAC members. At the conclusion of the discussion, the chair calls for a vote on the motion by show of hands. All GAC members including the chair must vote either PASS or FAIL on the student's performance. The GAC members including the chair are the only persons allowed to vote. More than one negative vote constitutes failure of the exam.

If the student passes the exam, the GAC should establish a date by which the student should provide a final, potentially revised, version of the dissertation such that adequate time is allowed for review, ETD routing and (presumably) approval. If the student does not pass the exam, the chair should ask the other GAC members if they support a re-examination. If so, an approximate date for re-examination along with a remediation plan will be determined by the GAC. The Advisor or Program Director is responsible for petitioning for the re-examination to the ADGE for review by the School of Medicine Graduate Programs Committee. The chair recalls the student and provides them with the outcome.

The chair reports the exam outcome to the Graduate Programs Coordinator via email with cc to all other GAC members.