

Procedures for the Final Oral Examination of a PhD Student

I. Overview

The *final oral examination* of a Ph.D. student (informally called the *dissertation defense*) is the event at which the student presents and defends his or her dissertation research. The examination has three sequential parts: (1) a public presentation of the dissertation by the student, (2) a public discussion of the dissertation wherein the student responds to questions from the audience, and (3) a private discussion of the dissertation and related topics by the student and a committee of experts known as the *defense committee*. The defense committee consists of the student's entire *supervisory committee* plus a *graduate faculty representative* (GFR), and may include an *external examiner*. At the conclusion of the final oral examination, the GFR calls for a vote by the voting members of the defense committee to determine the examination result which must be either pass or fail.

II. Supervisory Committee

A defense committee always includes the entire supervisory committee. If a member of the supervisory committee other than the chair cannot be present in person for the final oral examination, and also cannot be present via a real-time electronic connection that enables discourse throughout the examination, then it is permissible for an appropriately qualified person to be appointed by the Graduate College to serve in place of that supervisory committee member on the defense committee. This appointment must be made well in advance of the examination date so that the replacement member has sufficient time to carefully read the dissertation. A defense committee can include no more than one replacement member unless the Graduate College approves a larger number of replacements. The chair of the supervisory committee cannot be replaced by another person and must be present either in person or via a real-time electronic connection that permits discourse throughout the examination. Each member of the supervisory committee is a voting member of the defense committee, except that a member of the supervisory committee who is replaced by another person on the defense committee surrenders his or her vote at the final oral examination to that replacement member.

III. Graduate Faculty Representative

The graduate faculty representative or GFR must be a member of the Graduate Faculty and must have primary affiliation with an academic unit not represented on the supervisory committee. The role of the GFR is to ensure that the procedures of the Graduate College are followed and that the results of the examination are reported to the Graduate College. The GFR must be present in person for the final oral examination, and is charged by the Graduate College with the authority to conduct all parts of the examination, including the disposition of all documents associated with the examination, according to procedures established by the Graduate College and described herein. The GFR does not ask technical questions during the examination and is a non-voting member of the defense committee.

IV. External Examiner

Some defense committees include an external examiner (a person who is knowledgeable about the dissertation topic and is not affiliated with the academic unit responsible for the program). The role of the external examiner is to provide a perspective from outside the academic unit on the quality of the dissertation and the student's ability to present and defend it. An external examiner is appointed to the defense committee by the Graduate College if the program requires an external examiner, or if the academic unit responsible for the program requests the appointment of an external examiner for a specific final oral examination and the Graduate College agrees to that request. In either case, an external examiner is appointed in advance of the final oral examination by a process that begins when the chair of the supervisory committee submits a *Request for Appointment of an External Examiner for a Doctoral Dissertation* to the Graduate College. Ideally, the external examiner participates in the final oral examination in person, but it is permissible for the external examiner to participate via a real-time electronic connection that enables discourse throughout the examination. The external examiner is a voting member of the defense committee.

V. Scheduling

The final oral examination should occur no later than the date specified in the academic calendar. This date is set to allow time for final revision and processing of the dissertation so that a student who passes the final oral examination has a reasonable chance for graduation in the same semester or session. Announcement of the public presentation to the university community is required and should precede the presentation by at least two weeks.

The chair of the supervisory committee or designee is responsible for scheduling the date and location of the final oral examination, announcing the examination to the university community at least two weeks in advance, and arranging the campus visit of the external examiner. It is permissible for the location of the public presentation and discussion to be different from the location of the private discussion with the defense committee. It is also permissible for a short break to intervene between the public and private sessions.

A minimum of three hours should be allowed for the entire final oral examination, although most examinations do not last this long. The examination should begin during normal university business hours (it may begin no later than 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday when the university is in session). The Graduate College strongly advises that a final oral examination not be scheduled during the break between the fall and spring semesters or during the spring break.

VI. Procedure

A. Documents

The GFR should have received the following documents from the Graduate College and should have them at the start of the examination:

- a copy of the dissertation
- a copy of the *Procedures for the Final Oral Examination of a Ph.D. Student* (this document)
- an official *Report of Failure of a Final Oral Examination* form to be used only if the student fails the examination

The student is responsible for bringing the following dissertation approval pages on white paper to the defense:

- one copy of the *Defense Committee Approval* page on white paper
- one copy of the *Final Reading Approval* page on white paper

The student should give these approval pages to the GFR prior to the start of the defense.

B. Presence of the Defense Committee

The GFR must not allow the final oral examination to proceed if any member of the defense committee is not present (in person or electronically as described above under the three sections *Supervisory Committee*, *Graduate Faculty Representative*, and *External Examiner*). If there is a problem of this nature, the GFR should call the Dean of the Graduate College for instructions at (208) 426-3647 or (208) 426-4203.

C. Public Presentation

The first part of the final oral examination is a formal public presentation of the dissertation by the student. The GFR should begin the proceedings by introducing himself or herself as the GFR with the role of presiding over the examination, and by providing very brief welcoming remarks. The GFR then introduces the chair of the supervisory committee who introduces the other members of the defense committee and the student. The student then begins the presentation which should not last more than one hour. Members of the audience may ask questions (this is a perfectly natural impulse in most disciplines), but it is best if the members of the defense committee refrain from asking questions at this time. The GFR should resolve situations in which questions become too numerous or the questions evolve into a discussion that bogs down the public presentation. In situations of this type, it is appropriate for the GFR to remind everyone that there will be ample time for detailed questioning and discussion in the subsequent parts of the examination (sections VI.D and VI.E).

D. Public Discussion

The public presentation is followed by the public discussion phase of the examination. During this phase, members of the audience ask questions and engage in wide-ranging discussion of the dissertation with the student. Although the student will often provide the transition to this second phase of the examination by asking

for questions at the conclusion of the public presentation, the GFR should be prepared to introduce the public discussion phase if it becomes necessary. Similar to the public presentation, it is best if the members of the defense committee refrain from asking questions at this time since they will have full opportunity to question the student in the private discussion phase of the examination (section VI.E). After all questions from the audience are answered and the discussion subsides, or after a suitable period of time (determined by the GFR), the GFR concludes the public discussion phase of the examination by thanking the audience for their attendance. The GFR then excuses everyone from the examination room except for the student and members of the defense committee. It is usually advisable to give the student and the defense committee a short break before beginning the private discussion phase. This break will naturally occur if the private discussion is held in a different room (which is often the case because of the relatively small number of participants in the private discussion and the difficulty of reserving a large room for a long period of time).

E. Private Discussion

All voting members of the defense committee are expected and encouraged to participate in examining the student during the private discussion portion of the final oral examination. No member should be allowed to monopolize the discussion, and the student is encouraged to ask for clarification of questions. The GFR moderates the proceedings as necessary. The GFR should not stifle healthy debate but should make sure that the discussion remains civil and that disagreement does not slow down the examination overlong. And while discussion among defense committee members is a normal component of the proceedings, the GFR is responsible for making certain that the student is the one responding to questions, not the chair or other members of the defense committee. It is permissible for the graduate dean or associate graduate dean to attend the private discussion but as a non-participant in the examination.

F. Vote

At the conclusion of the private discussion, the GFR asks the student to leave the room. The defense committee then discusses the quality of the dissertation and its public presentation by the student, the need for any modifications to the dissertation, and the responses by the student to the questions posed during the final oral examination. The GFR moderates this discussion through to its conclusion, and then calls for a voice vote of the defense committee (the GFR is the only member of the defense committee that does not participate in the vote). Each member must vote either pass or fail on the following proposition:

The student presented the dissertation in an acceptable manner, adequately answered questions posed during the examination, and produced a dissertation that is considered satisfactory for the Ph.D. degree pending any modifications that may be required by the defense committee.

A simple majority determines the outcome unless the academic unit responsible for the program requires a unanimous vote for pass. In the case of a tie vote (i.e., an equal number of pass and fail votes with no abstentions), the student is considered to have failed. A result of pass is immediately documented by the signatures of all members of the defense committee on all copies of the Defense Committee Approval page. A result of fail is immediately documented on a Report of Failure of a Final Oral Examination that is submitted to the Graduate College by the GFR. Once the voting has concluded and the proper documentation has been executed, the GFR invites the student back into the room and informs the student of the outcome of the final oral examination. If the student has failed the examination, the GFR should inform the student of the process for requesting a repeat attempt (see section Repeat Attempt for a Failed Final Oral Examination below). The final duty of the GFR is to oversee the disposition of documents (see sections Disposition of Documents in the Case of Pass and Disposition of Documents in the Case of Fail).

VII. Disposition of Documents in the Case of Pass

If the student passes the final oral examination, the GFR completes the handling of documents as follows:

- The official *Report of Failure of a Final Oral Examination*, the copy of the *Procedures for the Final Oral Examination* of a Ph.D. Student (this document), and the dissertation copy are all returned to the Graduate College. Proper disposition of the dissertation is especially important if the dissertation contains intellectual property that is intended for patent or a book contract.
- The GFR delivers the signed copy of the *Defense Committee Approval* page (on white paper with original signatures of all voting members of the defense committee) to the Graduate College by the close of



business on the next business day after the final oral examination. The *Defense Committee Approval* page will eventually be included in the student file kept by the Graduate College.

- The GFR gives all copies of the *Final Reading Approval* page on white paper to the chair of the supervisory committee. The *Final Reading Approval* page is not to be signed by the chair until after any modifications to the dissertation that are required by the defense committee are completed by the student, and the chair has reviewed the final version of the dissertation and found it to be satisfactory. Since modifications required by the defense committee normally require significant effort by the student, the actual signing of the *Final Reading Approval* pages usually takes place several days or weeks after the final oral examination. The student is responsible for delivering the *Final Reading Approval* page (on white paper with the original signature of the chair of the supervisory committee) to the Graduate College as part of the submission package for the format review by the Graduate College. For delivery of documents, the Graduate College is located in Room 307 in Riverfront Hall and is open 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday-Friday on all days that the university is open for business.

VIII. Disposition of Documents in the Case of Fail

If the student fails the final oral examination, the GFR completes the handling of documents as follows:

- The completed official *Report of Failure of a Final Oral Examination* with original signatures is delivered to the Graduate College by the GFR before the close of business on the next business day after the final oral examination.
- The GFR returns all other documents, including these instructions, the copy of the dissertation, the *Defense Committee Approval* page (no signatures), and the copy of the *Final Reading Approval* page (no signatures), to the Graduate College before the close of business on the next business day after the final oral examination.

For delivery of documents, the Graduate College is located in Room 307 in Riverfront Hall and is open 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday on all days that the university is open for business.

IX. Repeat Attempt for a Failed Final Oral Examination

A final oral examination for a Ph.D. student that is failed on the first attempt can be repeated once but only if a repeat attempt is requested by the student and approved by the academic unit responsible for the program. The student request must be in writing to the head of the academic unit and must be made within five working days after the student is notified of his or her failure. If a repeat attempt is not requested by the student, or if a request is made by the student but not approved by the academic unit, then the student is administratively withdrawn from the program by the Graduate College. If the student's request is approved by the academic unit, then the repeat attempt must occur within twelve months after the first attempt. If the student does not repeat the examination within twelve months after the first attempt, or if the student fails the repeat attempt, then the student is administratively withdrawn from the program by the Graduate College. Any extension of the twelve-month limit on the repeat attempt must be approved by the academic unit and by the Dean of the Graduate College.