

Procedures for Examination of the Doctoral Dissertation

University of Maryland
Baltimore

The Doctor of Philosophy degree (Ph.D.) is the highest degree awarded by the university. The degree is granted to those candidates who demonstrate both a high level of scholarship and the ability to conduct independent research. It is not awarded for the completion of course and seminar requirements alone. The dissertation defense is an essential step in fulfilling the requirements of the Ph.D. The purpose of the defense is to allow the candidate to demonstrate that he or she:

- Has mastered a field of knowledge.
- Has successfully completed a program of research in his or her chosen field.
- Is able to discuss and defend a research question and the results of the research project with colleagues and the general public.

The examination of the doctoral dissertation is conducted by the doctoral examination committee. Described below are the:

- (1) Composition of the Doctoral Examination Committee
- (2) Documentation and Actions Required Prior to the Doctoral Examination
- (3) Conduct of the Doctoral Examination

1. Composition of the Doctoral Examination Committee

The committee must have a minimum of five and a maximum of seven voting members, all of whom must hold a doctoral degree or the terminal degree in his/her discipline. The committee must include the candidate's dissertation advisor, two readers, and one member who is external to the candidate's program, department or discipline. One of the committee members (other than the Chair) is appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School as graduate school representative, and serves as the Dean's surrogate. At least three of the members of the committee must be regular members of the [Graduate Faculty](#).

At least six months prior to the proposed defense date, the committee chair will prepare, and send, a list of potential committee members to the Dean of the Graduate School (*Nomination of Members of Final Doctoral Examination Committee*) for approval. If changes need to be made in committee composition, the committee chair must request approval from the Dean of the Graduate School. If last minute changes need to be made to the membership of the Committee, the Chair is to contact the Office of the Dean of the Graduate School and inform the Office of the needed change and the reason for the change.

• **Committee Chair:** The committee chair must be a regular member of the Graduate Faculty and is normally the candidate's advisor. In the event that a candidate's advisor is not a member of the graduate faculty, the candidate's program director is responsible for appointing a regular graduate faculty member from within the program to serve as the chair. In this case it is expected that the dissertation advisor would serve on the committee as one of the other members.

• **Readers:** In addition to the chair, two members of the committee must be identified as readers. The chair and readers serve to certify that the dissertation is ready to be defended and do so by signing the *Certification of Completion of the Doctoral Dissertation*. This form must be returned to the Graduate School at least two weeks before the proposed examination date (see below Documentation Required Prior to the Doctoral Examination). The candidate will provide the chair and the readers a copy of the dissertation at least two weeks prior to the deadline for submitting the *Certification of Completion of the Doctoral Dissertation*. By signing the Certification, the readers and the chair are indicating that the dissertation is a presentable, interpretable, and complete document. The three signatures attest that the dissertation conforms to these criteria; however, they do not indicate a determination of the ultimate acceptability or approval of the dissertation which can only occur at

the conclusion of the final examination session. The candidate's program director must also sign the Certificate of Completion form. By signing, the program director indicates that all other university and program criteria pertaining to completion of the PhD are satisfied and that the exam may go forward.

- **External Member of the Examination Committee:** One of the members of the committee must be an external member. This individual must be from a separate program, department, or discipline from that of the candidate. The role of the external member is to provide a broader perspective within the examination process. The external member must hold a doctoral degree or a terminal degree in his or her field. The individual may be from within the university or may be a scholar from another institution. If the external member is a member of the graduate faculty, the individual may also serve as the Graduate School representative or as a Reader. If the external member is not a member of the graduate faculty, a curriculum vitae must accompany the nomination.

- **Graduate School Representative:** One member of the committee, designated by the Office of the Dean of the Graduate School serves as the Dean's surrogate. The representative must be a regular member of the graduate faculty and cannot be the committee chair. In addition to the normal responsibilities as a member of the committee, the representative has the responsibility of ensuring that the examination is conducted according to established procedures. Any questions or disagreement over the examination procedure are referred to the Graduate School representative for a decision. Upon designation, the Graduate School representative will receive from the Graduate School a copy of this document.

- **Other Committee Members:** There may be up to seven members of the committee. Beyond the five required members described above, up to two additional individuals may be appointed to the committee. These members may be individuals within or outside the candidate's program and may include scholars from other institutions or other components of the University of Maryland Graduate School, Baltimore. All such members must hold a doctoral degree or a terminal degree in their field. A curriculum vitae must accompany the nomination form submitted by the committee chair to the Dean of the Graduate School for any committee nominees who are not members of the graduate faculty.

2. Documentation and Actions Required Prior to the Doctoral Examination

Prior to the doctoral examination, the following actions need to be completed:

- The **Nomination of Members of Final Doctoral Examination Committee** form must be submitted to the Dean's office at least six months prior to the proposed examination date.
- **Review of the Doctoral Dissertation:** All members of the committee must receive a final version of the dissertation, as described above, at least one month prior to the proposed examination date.
- The **Certification of Completion of the Doctoral Dissertation** form must be submitted to the Graduate School at least two weeks prior to the proposed examination date.
- The **Announcement of Doctoral Dissertation Defense** must be submitted to the Graduate School at least two weeks prior to the proposed examination date.
 - a) After receipt and review of the above required documentation, the Dean of the Graduate School has the responsibility for making all members of the graduate faculty aware of the candidate's doctoral examination at least one week before the examination date.
 - b) Graduate Programs are responsible for notifying their students about the examination. The time and place of the examination will be established by the chair.

3. Conduct of the Doctoral Examination

The doctoral examination normally comprises two components: an open presentation by the doctoral candidate and a formal examination by members of the committee.

- **Open Presentation by the Doctoral Candidate:** Each candidate is expected to give a presentation of his or her dissertation in a forum open to the general public and moderated by the committee chair. The open presentation should take place as close as possible to the time scheduled for the doctoral examination. In many cases the open presentation will immediately precede the formal doctoral examination; however, the exact timing and notice of the presentation will be in keeping with the usual policy of the candidate's program. All members of the committee must be present (see below for definition of 'present') at the open presentation. Those attending the open presentation may ask questions of the candidate within a reasonable time interval set by the candidate's committee.

- **Formal Doctoral Examination Procedures:** The formal doctoral examination is open only to members of the candidate's committee and other members of the graduate faculty who wish to be present and is conducted under the direction of the examination committee's chair. All members of the committee must be present for the examination. In some cases committee members may participate by video conference or by telephone, if necessary. In such cases, arrangements for the member not physically present should be made such that his or her participation can be interactive and that he, or she, has access to all audio and visual materials used by the candidate or committee members during the formal doctoral examination, can ask questions and hear the candidate's answers, and can fully participate in the committee's discussions. This may require that the member not physically present participate by a video connection, or have access to the presentation slides (sent in advance to the member), or that other appropriate arrangements are made to allow the member to be an active member of the committee's deliberations. The Dean of the Graduate School must be notified of an absence and the accommodations made. The formal examination is moderated by the committee chair, and only committee members may ask questions of the candidate. Other members of the graduate faculty who attend the examination do so only as observers. They are not permitted to participate verbally or otherwise in the proceedings.

- The formal doctoral examination has the following components:
 - (i) An initial private discussion among the members of the committee only (the candidate and other graduate faculty members are not present during the discussion). This discussion should determine whether the written document is presentable as a dissertation and hence defensible. If a majority of the committee agrees that the dissertation is not defensible, the examination is canceled. Otherwise, the examination proceeds. The committee then determines procedures for the examination, including the order and manner of questioning.
 - (ii) A presentation of the dissertation by the candidate (if required by the committee) is followed by questions from the committee members. At the discretion of the candidate's Program and the Doctoral Examination Committee, the open presentation may serve as the doctoral examination presentation. In this case, no further formal presentation by the candidate will be required and committee members may immediately begin questioning the candidate. No time limit is set for this period, but it would be considered unusual if the entire period exceeded three hours.

4. Outcome of the Examination

At the end of the examination, the candidate and any others in attendance who are not part of the committee withdraw, and the committee deliberates in private on the acceptability of the written dissertation and the oral performance of the candidate. The chair asks each member for an opinion, and following these deliberations, the members vote on whether the candidate has passed or failed. There are two levels of pass: 1) the dissertation is accepted with very minor changes, if any; or 2) the dissertation requires significant, non-trivial

revisions. In the latter case the committee sets a time-line for completion of revisions and names the committee members who will certify satisfactory completion of the revisions. The members sign the report of the committee and register their votes. The affirmative votes of a majority plus one of the committee members constitute a successful defense of the dissertation; this means that the required number of affirmative votes is either four from a five-member committee or five from a six- or seven-member committee.

The candidate may be failed if the committee finds that either the quality of the written dissertation or the candidate's presentation is wanting. The committee may find that, in spite of a decision that the dissertation document was defensible, it has defects that prevent it from being accepted. If these defects are minor in nature, the committee may vote to accept the dissertation pending remedial modifications. If the defects are more serious, the committee may decide to fail the candidate and require a new examination. Alternatively, the dissertation document may be determined to be sound but the candidate's defense inadequate. In this case the committee must decide on a date for a new examination.

The Report of the Examination Committee form signed by the committee must be returned by the Graduate School representative to the Graduate School office no later than two working days following the examination. The candidate's program director must also be provided with a copy of the report.

The candidate should be informed of the decision as soon as possible. In the event that the candidate fails the examination, the Graduate School representative will submit a letter within two working days to the dean of the Graduate School stating that the candidate has failed, the reasons for the failure, the decisions concerning necessary remedial action and approximately when a new examination is to be held. The Graduate School representative must return the letter with the signed Report of the Examination Committee. Copies of the letter must be provided to the candidate, the chair, and the Graduate Program Director. The new examination must be conducted within one year from the date of the defense of the first examination. The chair must notify the Graduate School of the date of the second examination so that the necessary paperwork may be sent to the Graduate School representative. The candidate may present himself or herself for the doctoral examination at most twice.