Duquesne University
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Department of Counseling, Psychology and Special Education
Executive Doctoral Program in Counselor Education and Supervision (ExCES)
Ph.D. School Psychology
Psy.D. School Psychology
Special Education Ph.D. Program
Department of Foundations and Leadership
Ed.D. in Educational Leadership
Department of Instruction and Leadership in Education
Doctoral Program in Instructional Technology and Leadership

DISSERTATION/THESIS GUIDELINES FOR CANDIDATES

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, the dissertation/thesis has been considered the capstone experience in a student’s academic career. It is an addition to a body of knowledge and stands as an original piece of work marking the student as an expert on a topic in a specific field.

Duquesne University’s School of Education is a living, growing, vibrant community dedicated to enhancing the practice of educational leadership. Faculty in the doctoral programs of the School of Education (ExCES, Ph.D. School Psychology, Psy.D. School Psychology, Special Education Ph.D. Program, Ed.D. in Educational Leadership, Doctoral Program in Instructional Technology and Leadership), share the belief that the dissertation/thesis should be a significant piece of work that demonstrates the student’s skills as a researcher, communicator, practitioner, and innovative leader. This position reflects the professionalism of the Duquesne University School of Education. Faculty members trust that program participants embody the same professionalism.

The dissertation/thesis topic must make a contribution to professional knowledge and practice. It should encompass the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that students have gained from their course work, readings, discussions, and field-based experiences. Most often, a contribution to knowledge is best made after developing a thorough understanding of an educational issue or
practice as a result of reading the significant research literature available, then posing questions, the answering of which advances the knowledge base and/or practice of the discipline. The student should have a passion to understand the issue or practice and to increase others’ understanding of it through his or her research.

Dissertations/theses will be individual projects. Students wishing to work together may address two related research questions, may share information from literature reviews, and/or may share data sets, but they will not co-author the same dissertation/thesis.

These guidelines represent common standards across all doctoral programs in the School of Education. Where these guidelines are silent, each program may provide more specific guidelines unique to their particular process so long as they are not in conflict with these common guidelines. The reader should refer to the guidelines specifically developed for the program in which the student is enrolled regarding topics on which these guidelines are silent.

PLANNING FOR THE DISSERTATION/THESIS

Although all of the steps taken in the development and completion of various research papers apply to the dissertation/thesis, there are several differences. One difference lies in the depth and scope of the work; a second lies in the amount of time it will take to complete the project. Since the dissertation/thesis experience is worth at least 6 credits, it is reasonable to expect that a dissertation/thesis will take at least a year to complete. Another difference is the fact that students must defend a dissertation/thesis orally before a committee composed of faculty members and expert practitioners. This defense is a public event open to participation by scholars, and attendance by other interested individuals at the discretion of the chair.

A student in a doctoral program cannot wait until the last moment to begin planning a dissertation/thesis. Upon entering the program, thought should be given to identifying important research questions about which the student has a significant interest. The student must consider such factors as available resources, timeliness, accessibility, logistics, scheduling, and personnel. Preliminary planning and contingency planning are encouraged, since planning is considered to be a requisite to good leadership.

INITIAL DISSERTATION/THESIS PROCEDURES

The doctoral program supports each student’s research interests through the program’s structure. All students will be required to complete and defend a dissertation/thesis. Students seek faculty members and eligible practitioners to comprise the dissertation/thesis committee. This process is not a race to “sign up” favorite faculty members before others do. Students need to complete prerequisite background reading and skill development in order to engage in informed discussion about their dissertation/thesis study with potential committee members. While an ability to work together is important, both students and prospective committee members must consider carefully the combination of attributes which enable successful doctoral study: methodological expertise; knowledge of the content area from both a practical and scholarly view; analytical writing and critiquing skills; willingness/ability to commit sufficient time; and ability to engage in respectful yet challenging dialogue. Not all committee members must meet all these needs individually, but...
students should seek a collective that brings all these skills to bear in order to produce the highest quality of dissertation/thesis study.

Students may develop a talking paper, a research prospectus or a pre-proposal paper. This scholarly paper demonstrates the students’ understanding of the scope of the work that they propose to undertake; an ability to develop one or more well-formulated research questions relevant to the intended topic; a sufficient review of related literature to engage in informed conversation and writing; and an ability to consider plausible methodological approaches to the proposed study. A well written, well developed talking paper or prospectus could eventually evolve into the dissertation/thesis proposal and serve to secure a dissertation/thesis chair. The Committee Chair should be secured before other committee members are invited, so that the chair may be involved in the selection process.

The decision to serve on the committee is based on the potential committee member’s interest in, and/or expertise regarding, the student’s research interest or methodology. This interest is usually based on the potential committee member having read and discussed the talking paper with the student. At the initial stage of the dissertation/thesis process, faculty members and eligible practitioners indicate their intent to serve as dissertation/thesis committee members. Those individuals will indicate their willingness to serve with signatures on the **Intent to Serve on a Dissertation/Thesis Committee** form. These committee members will then work with the student to develop a full dissertation/thesis proposal, consisting of the chapters of the dissertation/thesis that introduce the study, review the literature, and describe the methodology. After the dissertation/thesis proposal is completed and a formal overview meeting of the proposal is held, approval is signified with committee signatures on the **Dissertation/Thesis Proposal Approval** form. The student must then obtain approval from the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) before proceeding with data collection.

**THE DISSERTATION/THESIS COMMITTEE**

Dissertation/thesis committees will be comprised of not less than three members and no more than five, including the Chair. At least one of the committee members must be a full-time member of the Duquesne University School of Education faculty. Committee members must meet the School of Education qualification Criteria for Doctoral Dissertation Committee Service as outlined in the Policy and Procedure Manual and must be approved by the Program Director and Dean’s Office. Committees must also include at least one program faculty member. The majority of the committee members (at least two members of a three-person committee and at least three members of a four- or five-person committee) must be full-time Duquesne faculty. The minimum number of qualified members is three.

The student will invite the Committee Chair before approaching other prospective committee members. The Chair must be a full member of the School of Education faculty who has a strong professional preparation and history of professional writing so as to represent the quality interests of Duquesne University. Ordinarily, the Chair will represent the program in which the student is enrolled. A Co-chair may also be selected by mutual determination of the student and the Chair. Co-chairs will be considered only if one is a full-time faculty member of the School of Education.
Students may not select relatives for their committee. Students may not select committee members with whom they have dual professional relationships that would compromise academic judgment. Students may not select a member of their own cohort, even if that person has completed the program. Students may recruit committee members from outside the Duquesne University School of Education faculty in the case where dissertations center on interdisciplinary topics; students are encouraged to seek content experts from universities, agencies, corporations, school districts, government units, professional organizations, and the like. A relevant and appropriately credentialed practitioner may be added with the approval of the Dissertation/Thesis Chair.

Any requests for exceptions to these membership requirements must be made in writing to the Program Director. The Program Director maintains the prerogative of disapproving any prospective member.

It is anticipated that the discussions between student and Chair to plan committee formation will result in identifying clear roles for each committee member. Expectations should be made clear to all during the committee formation process. In the unlikely event that either the student or a committee member is unsatisfied with the proceedings after expectations have been clarified, the Chair is the first recourse. For example, a student may find a committee member’s feedback inappropriate or contradictory or a committee member does not find student responses appropriate. The Chair will meet with the student and committee member in question to try to resolve the issue. In the event of an emergency circumstance (e.g. committee member has a medical emergency, or moves, etc.) the Chair and student will work together to decide on an appropriate accommodation or replacement. The intent is that the student will be able to maintain expected progress. Any disputes arising out of the constitution or operations of the student’s dissertation/thesis committee will be submitted first to the Program Director for resolution. If the dispute is not resolved, the matter will be submitted to the Department Chair, the Graduate Student Research Committee (GSRC), and then to the Dean. If the issue is not resolved, the student may utilize the University student appeals procedure.

Suggested responsibilities and expertise of committee members appear below. Students should review program-specific guidelines for any additional program requirements.

1. Responsibilities of the Committee Chair include, but are not limited to the following items:
   a. To help the student clarify and refine the dissertation/thesis proposal.
   b. To help the student with the selection of other committee members.
   c. To help the student establish and maintain a dissertation/thesis time line.
   d. To guide the student through the proposal process, issue formal approval with the support of the other committee members, and sponsor the student’s application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects if the dissertation/thesis involves human subjects.
   e. To talk the student through the structure of the respective dissertation/thesis chapters.
   f. To ensure that professional standards of academic integrity and excellence are maintained.
   g. To nurture and support the student’s transition to an independent researcher.
   h. To encourage the student to continue to contribute and share scholarly work with the larger professional community through presentations and publication.
2. Among the total membership of the committee including the chair, the following areas of expertise and roles should be included. Please note that these roles and areas of expertise may overlap:

a. **Content expertise.** At least one member of the committee, who may or may not be the chair, will have expertise in the field of study most closely related to the student’s dissertation/thesis topic. If other than the chair, it is the student’s responsibility to find a qualified individual for this position in consultation with the chairperson. Responsibilities of this person include, but are not limited to the following:

   - To serve as the subject matter expert in guiding the student’s literature review.
   - To advise other committee members on the importance and timeliness of the student’s topic.

b. **Research methodology expertise.** At least one person on the committee, who may or may not be the chair and who may or may not be the content expert described above, will have expertise in the research methodology used in the dissertation/thesis study, typically representing the School of Education faculty. If other than the chair, it is the student’s responsibility to find a qualified individual for this position in consultation with the chairperson. Responsibilities of this person on the committee include, but are not limited to the following items:

   - To provide support to the student in the area of research methodology.
   - To support the committee chair in the performance of his or her responsibilities (unless the chair is the expert in research methodology).
   - To ensure appropriate research methodology.

c. **Specialized needs.** Beyond the three required committee members, additional committee members may be added to fill specialized needs of the dissertation/thesis, in consultation with the chair. They may include anyone whose credentials meet the requirements described in the beginning of this section. The student, in consultation with the chair, will select this member based upon the dissertation/thesis topic, the research methodology to be employed, and the availability to serve. Responsibilities of additional committee members include, but are not limited to the following:

   - To review the dissertation/thesis proposal for educational significance or for expansion of knowledge in the specific content area.
   - To assist with the development of the dissertation/thesis proposal and final dissertation/thesis.

d. Students may, optionally, also identify a reader who will read the proposal and dissertation/thesis, provide formal feedback, but not have the responsibilities of a formal committee member.
THE DISSERTATION/THESIS PROPOSAL

The dissertation/thesis proposal is a working agreement between a student and the committee. The student will be expected to complete the dissertation/thesis as specified in the approved proposal, unless the student and members of the committee mutually agree to a change. It should be recognized, however, that the research itself may lead to some minor revisions in the proposal chapters. For example, the research may cause the student or committee to suggest additional review of specific literature related to the research findings. Therefore, it is especially important for the student to make the proposal as complete and detailed as possible. Questions and concerns not completely addressed by the proposal will only slow the approval process and delay the time when the student can seek IRB approval and begin implementation.

The proposal is a major piece of scholarly work typically consisting of the chapters of the dissertation/thesis that introduce the study, review the literature, and describe the proposed methodology. Each member of the student’s committee will independently evaluate the dissertation/thesis proposal. The Chair of the student’s committee will coordinate obtaining approval of the proposal from the other members of the committee during an “overview meeting.” This overview meeting will allow the student to describe and summarize the proposed dissertation/thesis. The committee may accept the proposal as presented or require revisions to the proposal. When the committee determines that the student may proceed with the research study, they will indicate their proposal approval by signing the Dissertation/Thesis Proposal Approval form. This completed form is required before the candidate can seek approval from the University’s IRB or collect data. (See section below on IRB Policies and Procedures.)

To summarize, the following steps initiate the dissertation/thesis process:

1. Gather information and ideas by reading, researching and talking with knowledgeable people.
2. Read widely, read deeply.
3. Learn about potential committee members’ training, writing, scholarship, practical knowledge and interests.
4. Make a preliminary match between potential committee members and research topic.
6. Using the pre-proposal papers as a vehicle for discussion, identify a faculty member with relevant interest and expertise to serve as Committee Chair.
7. Consult with the Chair to identify committee members who will complete the committee (see p. 3-5). Committee members will read the Talking Paper to help determine their interest and willingness to serve.
8. Have Chair and committee complete Intent to Serve on a Dissertation/Thesis Committee form.
10. Participate in an Overview Meeting with committee.
12. Secure IRB approval if necessary.
13. Initiate research as approved.
DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY IRB POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

All research conducted at or sponsored by Duquesne University that involves human subjects must be approved by the Duquesne Institutional Review Board (IRB) before data collection or use of existing data begins and, when necessary, reviewed periodically during the course of the project. Please follow IRB policies and procedures.

Students must have their dissertation/thesis proposals accepted, with appropriate signatures on the Dissertation/Thesis Proposal Approval form, before seeking IRB approval. IRB approval must be granted before data collection can begin or before existing data can be used. In order to seek IRB approval, students and their dissertation/thesis directors must successfully complete the online National Institute of Health (NIH) training certification program and print out copies of their completion certificates to include in the application package. All IRB applications must be reviewed by a minimum of two persons (one School of Education representative and the chair of the University IRB) and in many instances by three reviewers and/or the full IRB. After being submitted, IRB applications usually require some editing in order to bring them into compliance with federal guidelines. Therefore, students should anticipate that the process would require a minimum of one month to complete. In cases where the application must undergo full review by the University IRB, or when substantive revisions must be made to the original application, the review process may take more than one month.

In anticipation of seeking IRB approval, students and their directors may take the online NIU training certification program, which requires approximately 1½ hours to complete. Students may also have their IRB application prepared before their proposal meeting, but the application will be subject to any changes requested in their proposal by the committee so that it accurately represents the dissertation/thesis study as approved by the committee.

Students who fail to comply with university policies and procedures may have their IRB approval suspended and be subject to disciplinary action by the Academic Vice-President for Research.

CONDUCTING THE STUDY AND WRITING THE DISSERTATION/THESIS

Once a dissertation/thesis proposal has been accepted by the doctoral committee and approved by Duquesne University IRB, a working agreement exists between the student and the committee. The thoroughness and quality of the proposal will determine, to a great extent, the difficulty of the implementation. A well-planned, detailed proposal will greatly facilitate the student’s work. Successfully completing the proposed study requires planning, time management and discipline. As stated by Mauch and Birch (1998), there is a dangerous tendency to relax and lose momentum once the overview is approached. It is advisable that students develop their own personal time line for performing the tasks necessary to complete the study. A “TO DO List” is often useful in keeping on task and meeting deadlines. It is critical that the students think through all of the dimensions of the proposed study. The student’s committee may require the student to create and validate specific research instruments and/or to conduct a pilot study. Frequent meetings with the Committee Chair will keep the students apprised of these conditions.
During the implementation of the dissertation/thesis, the student will meet periodically with the committee chair. The number of meetings will vary from student to student, depending upon the nature of the project. The purpose of these meetings is to provide incentive to keep the student on track and to offer advice and encouragement.

THE DISSERTATION/THESIS FORMAT

Students should carefully review and follow the Dissertation/Thesis Style and Format Guidelines (available online) adopted by all Duquesne programs. On matters of style, students should follow the most current edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association. On matters of format, students should follow How to File Your ETD: Guidelines and Submission Information for Graduate Students from the Gumberg Library section of the website.

Perhaps no other document that the student has ever prepared will represent the student more thoroughly or derive as much scrutiny as the dissertation/thesis. Similarly, no document produced by students in their programs will represent our doctoral programs more thoroughly than the dissertations/theses of our students. Consequently, students must expect their writing to be thoroughly and critically judged.

THE DISSERTATION/THESIS DEFENSE

Students should carefully review the sequential timelines for completing the dissertation/thesis process. They are on the School of Education website, and will be followed by all doctoral programs. Other than highly unusual situations that would be considered by the respective Program Director on a case-by-case basis, non-compliance with the specified timelines will result in a postponement of completion. Students must place a defensible copy of the dissertation/thesis in their program office no less than two weeks in advance of their scheduled dissertation/thesis defense.

The dissertation/thesis committee will evaluate the dissertation/thesis document representing the completed research study, and the committee will participate in an oral discussion at the dissertation/thesis defense. Additionally, the Dean may select an external reviewer from either inside or outside the School of Education to provide additional independent feedback regarding the content and process of the dissertation/thesis defense.

The purpose of the oral defense is to demonstrate the extent of the student’s knowledge in the field. The student should expect oral questions that are thorough and critical. The student should plan to begin the defense of the dissertation/thesis with a brief (20 minutes or so) overview of the problem and research questions. The student’s Chair will then generally ask the first question. Each member of the student’s committee will probably have questions for the student and, with the student’s thorough knowledge of these people; the student should be able to anticipate those questions. Beyond that, the student may be asked other questions from people attending the defense, if invited to do so by the Chair.

The defense is an open event publicized on campus. It is intended to be an important academic event as well as a milestone in the student’s education. While visitors may be welcome to attend at the discretion of the dissertation/thesis chair, it is important to maintain an atmosphere of
academic inquiry. It is inappropriate to set up a reception ahead of time and treat the defense as a party or social event. Students who wish to celebrate successful defenses must schedule social events at other times and places than at the defense itself. Dissertation/thesis chairs maintain final authority regarding who may attend and/or participate in dissertation/thesis defenses.

Several outcomes may result from a defense: (a) The committee may agree on the spot that the work is of outstanding quality and needs no editorial or substantive revisions, and may sign the Dissertation/Thesis Approval Signature Page indicating final approval. (b) The committee very often finds some minor changes that members believe will strengthen the dissertation/thesis. The student will be asked to make those changes before committee members officially sign the Dissertation/Thesis Approval Signature Page indicating final approval. (c) The committee may feel additional substantive work is needed, return the dissertation/thesis for additional work, and ask the student to schedule another defense when the work is completed.

When all committee signatures are secured and the dissertation/thesis has final approval, the student will submit one copy of the final version to the Office of Educational Services for required format approval (see Format Guidelines). The Program Director will not record a P for the final dissertation/thesis credit (on the grade roster sent to the registrar’s office) until final copies are in. Format approval, through the Office of Student and Academic Services, UMI submission, etc. must all be complete. When a student is completely finished with all these requirements, the Program Director will release the final P and the student will officially be finished with the program. Students should carefully review the checklist contained in these guidelines and any additional program specific requirements. The timeline has been designed so that students who follow it can defend, and graduate in the same semester.

Once all program obligations are completed, students will be able to append the title “Dr.” to their names. Students are encouraged to join in the formal graduation ceremony in May or December. Having one’s dissertation/thesis Committee Chair place a doctoral hood over one’s head in front of family, friends, and colleagues is an important professional milestone.

In order to march in commencement exercises, a student must have earned committee approval and obtained full signatures on the Dissertation/Thesis Approval Signature Page (“must have defended successfully”). In addition, the student must have completed all substantive and formatting changes, and satisfied all financial obligations in a timely manner. The Research Advisory Council determined that the requirement or lack thereof for students to provide a bound copy of their dissertations to the program or department will be set by each program. In order to receive a diploma, the student must have passed all coursework including the final dissertation/thesis credit, have removed all I grades and F grades from the transcript, and have met all financial obligations.

CONTINUED ENROLLMENT

All students are expected to complete all requirements: coursework, practica/internships/field experiences, mentoring, talking papers, proposals, all required forms, the dissertation/thesis, IRB approvals, the dissertation/thesis defense, formatting and other changes, payment of all financial obligations, and any other relevant requirements, according to the Statute of Limitations Policy and the Continuous Enrollment Policy.