Guidelines for the Conduct of a Dissertation Defense

These guidelines are descriptive, not prescriptive. They describe the general conduct of a dissertation defense in the Duquesne University School of Education from a normative (what is usually done) point of view. The responsibility for the defense belongs to the dissertation committee chair, and departures from these typical guidelines will occur for various reasons. Nevertheless, the Graduate Student Research Committee has been asked to articulate common approaches and practices for this capstone event.

What is a defense? A dissertation defense is an oral presentation and discussion of a dissertation study. The purpose is to share the results of the study and to demonstrate to the committee and the academic community that the author has done work of sufficient quality to receive the doctoral degree and is able to speak to it in an open forum.

Dissertation chairs in the School of Education do not allow candidates to schedule defenses until the quality of the dissertation document is good and it is expected that if the candidate speaks to his or her study as well as he or she has written about it, he or she will be successful in the defense.

What are the historical origins of the modern dissertation? The history of theses and dissertations in western higher education revolves around two very different conceptions of what advanced students were to know and demonstrate. For approximately six hundred fifty years (1200-1850) advanced students defended a thesis by demonstrating mastery of the classic authors. The demonstration was through the disputation using the method of syllogistic argument.

As the industrial revolution advanced through Europe and the accompanying scientific advances were disseminated through practical applications, the German universities started to include scientific, technical and business curricula. This change in content was accompanied by a much larger change that altered the role of faculty and advanced students. That change was the move to independent research tested by publication, peer challenge, statistical and other changes in truth making. The role of faculty and students evolved to that of creator of new knowledge, skills and beliefs that improved the arts and science of western life.

The University of Berlin led this revolution. As United States students studying abroad returned home, they brought the new perspectives with them. This change helped create the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, the first modern American research university. Cornell, Michigan and Harvard quickly adapted with new curricula. From this emphasis on pure and applied research came the modern American dissertation: a written discourse that demonstrates mastery of previous work and that advances the status of a field or discipline by the discovery or application to the art and craft of that discipline through the creation of new knowledge, skills or applications.

Who attends? The doctoral candidate and his or her committee members attend the dissertation defense. Sometimes, one committee member attends via a conference call if the logistics of attendance make it too difficult to schedule his or her presence (for example, if the committee member is at quite a distance). A majority of the committee should be present. External readers, if there are any, may attend.

Dissertation defenses are open to any interested member of the academic or professional community (other program or non-program faculty members, other program students or graduates, and so on). Only the presentation and questioning portions of the defense are open; individuals who are not members of the official committee will be excluded from other portions of the defense. Academic and professional guests
may participate as observers, and they may, at the discretion of the committee chair, be invited to ask questions after the committee has done so (see “order of events” below).

Personal guests (adult friends or family members) have sometimes attended, but this should be approved by the committee chair ahead of time. Personal guests who attend should realize they are attending a professional meeting as observers and do not ask questions.

Appointing a “dean’s designate” or “graduate school representative” to read the dissertation and attend the defense is a strategy that GSRC is discussing at the moment – while this is not the current practice, it would be a good practice if we could figure out a way to logistically do it!

What is the order of events? This varies and will depend in large part on discussions between the committee chair and the doctoral candidate. The most common practice is to begin with the chair welcoming the attendees, and then the candidate making a presentation based on the dissertation. The purpose of the presentation is not to substitute for the committee’s reading – typically they have not only read the document but also written feedback on it, which they often give to the candidate to inform revisions after the defense – but rather to demonstrate that the candidate can speak to what he or she did. Speaking about one’s research is in itself an academic skill that is different from writing the study. Presentations have been done in many formats: seated at a table with the committee, standing in front of a large or small audience, with overheads or PowerPoint, with handouts or posters, and so on. The format itself is not as important as the substance and should reflect the most effective way to communicate to the audience. Some chairs, in consultation with candidates, allow questions during the flow of the presentation, others prefer to hold questions to the end. The chair will inform participants at the start of the defense how questions will be handled.

After the presentation, the dissertation committee asks questions designed to (a) explore further some of the candidate’s methods, findings, or theoretical and interpretations and practical applications of results; (b) allow the candidate to demonstrate what he or she knows about the general topic; (c) probe what the candidate learned in general, or about his or her professional practice, from conducting the study. The questions may range quite broadly, from very specific to very general. They may be retrospective, intended to ask about something that was already done in the study, or prospective, intended to get the candidate thinking about future possibilities or uses for the findings. They may include open-ended questions to which there is no known or “right” answer as well as closed questions about particular literature, theory, methods, or findings. It is not “mean” to ask “hard” questions. The intent is for the candidate and all the attendees to learn as much as possible about the study, the new knowledge the candidate’s study has generated, and the candidate’s fitness for the degree.

Other academic and professional attendees sometimes may be invited to ask questions. This may happen while the committee is still in attendance, or the committee may excuse themselves and leave the room to deliberate while other attendees continue to discuss the dissertation. At some point, however, the committee usually either excuses the candidate or excuses themselves in order to discuss whether the candidate should pass and the dissertation defense form should be signed. There are several levels of merit. Sometimes the entire committee approves, any changes are deemed editorial and/or cosmetic; in this case, they sign the signature page and the candidate proceeds with final editing and subsequent format approval. Sometimes the committee requests specific changes but gives the chair the responsibility of seeing that they are made; in this case, the committee members with the exception of the chair sign the signature page, and the chair waits until he or she is satisfied with the revisions before signing. It is possible that the committee would decide that the candidate’s defense was not of sufficient quality to merit passing and that he or she needed to repeat the defense; in this case, no one would sign the signature page.
In summary, the following basic script is a recommended process. Time spent on each segment varies. The order, format, flow, and timing of the defense will be finalized and formally approved by the chair before the defense to insure a complete, clear presentation of the study and examination of the candidate.

- Presentation by candidate
- Committee members ask questions and discuss study
- Open forum, questions from other academic and professional guests (either while the committee is still in attendance or while the committee adjourns for final evaluation)
- Post-meeting announcement of outcome of committee deliberations, often including a conference between the candidate and committee chair (sometimes the whole committee) to review required changes in the dissertation document.