

Preparation & Defense of the Dissertation Proposal

These policies govern the preparation and defense of the dissertation proposal, which is required by both the Graduate College and the Environmental Science Graduate Program for admission to doctoral candidacy. The dissertation proposal is a student-generated prospectus for the conduct of a doctoral research project that will culminate in a dissertation. The ESGP program is an interdisciplinary program and thus the students' research efforts are expected to address an environmental problem from multiple perspectives, which may include social and/or economic approaches.

All doctoral students must submit a written proposal to their Advisory Committee and **submit a copy** to the ESGP Program Coordinator to be deposited in the student's file. The student must defend the dissertation proposal before their committee, and all committee members must participate in the proposal defense, either in person or via telecommunications. The Research Advisor is responsible for the scheduling and conduct of the dissertation proposal defense. The student should work with the Research Advisor to assemble the proposal and prepare for its defense. The student is responsible for submitting the dissertation proposal to all committee members but must seek the approval of the Research Advisor before doing so.

The dissertation proposal serves as a vehicle to provide confidence that the student has thoughtfully and comprehensively prepared a research agenda that is likely to achieve success. The more detail offered at this stage, the more useful will be the committee's reactions and suggestions. It is important to note that the committee's approval does not guarantee research success; however, a good proposal will minimize chances of failure.

Timing

Once approved by the Research Advisor, the student must submit the final defensible draft of the proposal to other committee members *no later than* two weeks before the defense. The student should consider scheduling the proposal defense immediately following the comprehensive exam, but *in no case can the proposal be defended before passing the comprehensive exam*. The ESGP Program Coordinator should also be notified if there is a need to reserve a room for the defense; additional advance notice is needed if teleconferencing or videoconferencing is necessary.

Format

Table of Contents: Include a table of contents that reflects the anticipated contents of the entire dissertation. This informs the committee about how the student intends to organize the dissertation report. The contents must also include references to compliance documents, such as the approved Institutional Review Board form that is required if research on human subjects is proposed.

Chapter 1. The Research Question: This chapter presents the problem that the dissertation will address, refines the problem into a statement of one or more research questions, and presents an argument of why the solution to this problem is important. This chapter need not be a lengthy one; 3-5 pages will often suffice.

Chapter 2. The Literature Review: This chapter presents an organized and coherent review of relevant literature that frames the problem, reports on findings reached so far, and points out holes and deficiencies in the literature. This chapter could be quite long (e.g., 20 pages).

Chapter 3. The Research Methodology: This chapter presents and defends the student's proposed data collection and analytic methodologies as well as hypotheses, conceptual frameworks, models, and so on. The student must also provide a table that includes the major milestones and associated completion dates for the conduct of the research and the preparation and defense of the dissertation. This allows the committee to provide comments on the timeline and to plan their own schedules.

Chapter 4. Anticipated Results: This chapter presents the student's plan for displaying and interpreting the results that will emanate from the research and allows the committee to determine how well the student has thought through how best to present those results.

Defense

The dissertation proposal defense normally lasts about two hours. The student should dress in business attire and should consult with the Research Advisor for additional suggestions (e.g., scheduling of time and place, modest provision of snacks and beverages, etc.). The defense typically begins with a 30-40 minute professional presentation by

the student of the dissertation proposal. The presentation is followed with questions from committee members. Suggestions for improvement are offered. It is important to keep in mind that this defense is not an examination but rather an opportunity to gain reaction from the entire committee and to seek formal approval for the planned research.

The defense will conclude with one of two outcomes:

1. The student may proceed with the planned research after incorporating changes suggested by the committee and in accordance with directions given by the Research Advisor. The student must complete, and committee members sign, an [Admission to Doctoral Candidacy form](#) and submit it to the Program Coordinator, who will submit it to the Graduate College. Official admission to candidacy occurs upon signature by the Graduate Dean.
2. The student must substantially revise the proposal and defend the revision before the committee. This outcome is the result of the committee's judgment that the proposal is not sufficient or complete enough to evaluate satisfactorily. While there is no limit to the number of times that a student can re-defend, *the committee can decide that the student is not able to develop an acceptable dissertation proposal and thus recommend that the student not be allowed to continue in the program.* If this is the conclusion reached by the committee, the Research Advisor (and Committee Chair, if different) must inform the Program Director by email of their conclusion.