

Best Practices: Advisory Committees and Defenses

This document is to provide guidance aligned with National best practices about the roles of Oklahoma State University Graduate Faculty in their capacity as Advisory Committee Members and about expectations surrounding academic milestones, such as thesis and dissertation defenses. It is a companion to the overarching best practice principles for OSU graduate education endorsed by Graduate Council in 2013 – [*OSU Graduate Education Best Practices*](#).

The Council of Graduate Schools' [*Ph.D. Completion Project*](#) identified several best practices for promoting graduate student success. Faculty mentoring is a critical element in graduate student satisfaction and degree completion. A common concern among graduate students, who struggle to finish their degree or who have difficulties along the way, is the lack of effective mentoring. In fact, many graduate students do not receive the level of mentoring that they desire or need. Improving the quality of the graduate student experience through effective mentoring is a National best practice that OSU's graduate programs are encouraged to achieve. This document provides guidance to Graduate Faculty in their roles as Advisory Committee Members for setting expectations for graduate students.

Master's Degrees

Advisory Committee Member Composition

Upon recommendation of the Graduate Program Coordinator and approval of the Dean of the Graduate College, an Advisory Committee of no fewer than three members of the [Graduate Faculty](#) with committee privileges will be appointed. The Chair of the Advisory Committee need not necessarily serve as the student's Advisor, but must hold an OSU faculty appointment, be a member of the Graduate Faculty with master's committee chairing privileges and have familiarity with the academic requirements of the graduate degree sought.

Graduate students must work collaboratively with their Advisor, Advisory Committee Chair and/or Graduate Program Coordinator to recommend membership for their Advisory Committee. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to successfully complete a graduate degree with an Advisory Committee composition that is not supported by the Advisor. Recommendations for Advisory Committee membership should be based on the expertise of the faculty member and his/her ability to positively contribute to the graduate student's education and not other intangible factors or perceptions.

Graduate Advisory Committee Members' Role and Responsibilities

Advisory Committee members should actively participate in the academic endeavors of graduate students. It is best practice for Advisory Committee members to regularly meet with students to provide guidance and input. In many programs, the frequency of the meetings will change as the

student moves from coursework to the research, creative component or final report phase. Advisory Committee members should be part of the Plan of Study (POS) development and contribute to the required annual evaluation process. In the case of graduate degrees where there are a series of academic milestones, such as seminar presentations, qualifying or comprehensive examinations and defenses, the engagement of the Advisory Committee is imperative at these stages. More specific roles and responsibilities are detailed below for master's committees. Please note that this does not negate the fact that graduate students are ultimately responsible for degree progress and completion. Graduate students should consult the members of the Advisory Committee frequently and keep them informed on the progress of their work.

Master's Advisory Committee

Upon recommendation of the graduate program and approval of the dean of the Graduate College, an Advisory Committee of no fewer than three voting members of the Graduate Faculty will be appointed. The roles of the Advisory Committee members are Chair, Advisor and Expert Member(s). The general duties of the Advisory Committee include advising the graduate student and assessing the student's progress as follows: (1) meeting regularly, (2) assisting with developing the POS as well as its approval and revisions, (3) assisting with the planning, conducting and/or redirecting of the research, (4) supervising the writing of the research document (i.e., thesis, final report, or creative component), (5) conducting the defense of the research document, and (6) approving the final research document. The student and the members of the Advisory Committee should consult regularly to review the progress of the student's work.

Chair: The Chair's primary responsibility is to monitor the progress of the student toward degree completion. In the case of research degrees, the Chair is commonly the research Advisor, but this is not a requirement. Irrespective of other considerations, the Chair must have a strong familiarity with the academic requirements appropriate to the degree sought. The Chair must hold an appropriate OSU Graduate Faculty appointment, typically a tenure-track appointment in the academic unit in which the graduate degree is housed. The Chair's duties include convening meetings of the Advisory Committee, as appropriate; ensuring compliance with University and Graduate College policies, procedures and requirements; overseeing the POS and research document submission processes; and ensuring that the research topic undertaken is appropriate to satisfy degree requirements with the results openly accessible. The Chair serves as the representative of the Graduate College and ensures a high level of integrity in the processes that the Advisory Committee utilizes to review and evaluate the student throughout the graduate program. If the Chair is not also the Advisor, the Chair should serve as a liaison with the Advisor with regard to progress of research in fulfillment of degree requirements.

When the Advisor is not a member of the OSU faculty, the Chair should ensure compliance with applicable research regulations, such as Responsible Conduct of Research training and Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements for research involving human subjects.

Advisor: The Advisor's primary responsibility is as a mentor. As a result, it is expected that the Advisor will establish the closest working relationship with the student. As mentioned previously, the Advisor is typically the primary resource for the graduate student in identifying potential committee members for the student's Advisory Committee. The Advisor may also serve as the Chair of the Advisory Committee. The Advisor must hold an appropriate OSU Graduate Faculty appointment but need not hold an OSU faculty appointment if not serving as Chair. The Advisor guides and counsels the student in the research or scholarly effort, ensuring compliance with applicable research regulations, such as Responsible Conduct of Research training and Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements for research involving human subjects. The Advisor is responsible for reporting to the Advisory Committee on the student's progress. It is the Advisor's responsibility to mentor the student toward a research, scholarly or creative project that is original and worthy of the degree sought. The Advisor is typically involved in the preparation of scientific or creative presentations, manuscripts for publication, etc. which may be a degree requirement in some graduate programs.

Expert Member(s): The Advisory Committee must include at least one Expert Member whose expertise and counsel serve the graduate student in attaining the research, scholarly, creative or professional preparation goal that is worthy of the degree sought. Expert Members must hold an appropriate OSU Graduate Faculty appointment. The [Graduate Faculty Database](#) is an excellent resource for identifying potential Expert Members. Typically, such individuals are faculty members in the student's graduate program. An Expert Member's responsibilities include guiding the research, scholarly or creative activities throughout the process, approving the POS, reviewing draft documents, attending regular meetings of the Advisory Committee, and interacting regularly with Advisory Committee members to facilitate and monitor degree completion progress.

Selection of the Potential Advisory Committee: The selection of the potential Advisory Committee members should be a collaborative activity between the student and their Advisor and/or Committee Chair. Although the student has the ultimate responsibility for recommending his/her Advisory Committee membership, his/her Advisor is a valued resource that can provide insight that will help the student make informed decisions. The student should meet with potential Advisory Committee members prior to recommending them to better understand their experience, availability, mentoring style and willingness to serve as an Advisory Committee member.

Non-thesis Option

The requirements for the non-thesis Master's degrees vary slightly among graduate programs in which this option is available. The quality of the work expected of the student is identical to that expected for the thesis option. The role of the Advisory Committee is the same as the thesis option and includes the Chair, Advisor and Expert Member(s).

Preparation of the Thesis

The thesis should be prepared according to the Graduate College [Thesis/Dissertation Guidelines](#). Thesis-option master's students are required to meet the thesis format review deadline by either attending a thesis format workshop or viewing the online version of the workshop by the deadline specified in the Graduate College academic calendar for the semester they intend to graduate. Completion of the workshop requirement at least one semester before they intend to graduate is ideal and recommended.

The draft thesis that is distributed should include the title/signature page, literature citations and the body of the document (i.e., all chapters from the introduction through the conclusions). The inclusion of the “front matter” (Table of Contents, List of Tables and Figures, Acknowledgments, etc.) is at the discretion of the Advisory Committee, as the pagination of these items may change depending on the necessary edits.

Thesis Draft Distribution

With the Advisory Committee Chair's and/or Advisor's approval, the defense copies (paper or electronic copies of the thesis draft as preferred by each Advisory Committee member) should be provided to all Advisory Committee members at least two full weeks prior to the defense day. Holidays and breaks when the University is closed should not be counted in this two-week minimum requirement. Ideally, Advisory Committee members should inform the Advisory Committee Chair at least 48 hours in advance of the scheduled defense time if they find the document indefensible in its current state. An explanation should be provided about the concerns so that a substantive discussion can occur, and appropriate measures can be taken.

Thesis Defense

The thesis defense should be publicized within the graduate program at least one week prior to the event, and the Graduate College strongly encourages advance notification for our posting on the College website. The defense should only take place during the standard semesters and sessions (Fall, Spring and Summer). Given Advisory Committee members' extensive obligations, the defense should be scheduled well in advance to ensure all members will be available and present. The student should bring official copies of the signature pages to the defense for the Advisory Committee Chair. See additional information about Advisory Committee member signatures below.

Format: OSU allows each graduate program to choose between two types of general formats for a master's thesis defense. One has the entire defense open to the public and the other is a two-part process, in which the public presentation is separated from the “examination” portion which is conducted as a closed session. Irrespective of the format, the structure of the defense should be determined by the graduate program and uniformly applied and communicated to graduate students and Advisory Committee members.

Oral Presentation. Most master's thesis defenses have a public presentation, which may range from 15-60 minutes depending on the culture of the graduate program, nature of the work, etc. The Advisory Committee Chair should advise the student on what is expected for the presentation. The presentation is open to the public and should be held in a space that allows others, beyond the Advisory Committee, to attend. In a two-part format, the presentation portion may occur earlier than the defense examination. For example, an oral presentation may be incorporated into a departmental seminar. Separating the public presentation from the examination does not preclude the requirement that Advisory Committee members attend both the public presentation and the examination. Questions from the audience at the public presentation are welcomed and encouraged.

Questioning. In a two-part defense format, the examination is a closed session with the student that is generally only attended by the Advisory Committee. In addition to the Advisory Committee, only members of the Graduate Faculty may attend the closed examination portion of the defense without permission of the Graduate Dean. When the public presentation and examination are scheduled together, the exam usually begins after a short break following the public presentation. The exam is generally a series of questions by the Advisory Committee members that are orally answered with communication aids, such as white boards and an occasional PowerPoint slide.

Scheduling: Given the nature of faculty work, it is best to obtain Advisory Committee members' general availability at the beginning of the term in which the defense will take place. Defenses should be scheduled in such a manner to ensure enough time is allowed for the presentation and examination. The length of the questioning generally does not go beyond two to three hours. If it does extend beyond two hours, a break is expected. It would be highly unusual for the examination portion of the defense to last more than three hours or extend to another day.

Attendance: All required Advisory Committee members, Chair, Advisor and Expert Member(s), and the graduate student are expected to be present for the thesis defense. However, there may be scheduling challenges due to travel, illness, etc. Technology, such as teleconferencing and videoconferencing, may be used to address scheduling challenges. Additionally, the student's desired format (e.g., in-person vs. virtual) should be given the most consideration; however, this does not imply that students should avoid in-person, public presentations, especially if they lack this experience. Also, no recordings/transcription should be made of defenses without the expressed consent of all persons present, including audience members. In exceedingly rare cases where scheduling is particularly challenging, a change of Advisory Committee member may be necessary. For example, when an original Advisory Committee member cannot be available in any format for an extended period of time. In such circumstances, a conversation should occur with the affected committee member prior to selecting a replacement committee member for consideration by the Dean of the Graduate College. A [Committee Change Request Form](#) is available for these situations and requires signature approval of all Committee members. Submission of questions via another Advisory Committee member is not an acceptable way to

participate in the final thesis defense, and virtual defenses do not change the requirement that all committee members must participate.

Advisory Committee Members' Signatures

There are two aspects of the thesis defense that require signatures – the oral defense and the written thesis.

Oral Defense Outcomes

At the close of the defense after the candidate has been excused, the members of the Advisory Committee should discuss the student's defense of the research associated with the thesis. There are two possible outcomes of a thesis oral defense: Pass – Student has satisfactorily completed the final defense and Fail – Student has not satisfactorily completed the final defense. Each member of the Advisory Committee must sign under one of the above statements recommending either a satisfactory or unsatisfactory defense. To be considered a passing thesis defense, **no more than one member** of the Advisory Committee may cast a dissenting vote on the [Oral Defense Results Form](#). The form must be signed and returned to the Graduate College **immediately** following the defense, irrespective of the outcome. If the oral defense is judged inadequate, a re-examination decision will be made by the Advisory Committee in accordance with Graduate College and graduate program requirements. Generally, only a single re-examination is permissible. Graduate programs may impose more stringent requirements. The result of the thesis defense does not indicate approval of the thesis document, but only the oral defense of the student's work.

Thesis Document Outcomes

Ideally, signatures may be obtained at the defense for the thesis signatory pages. If extensive corrections are necessary, the Advisory Committee Chair can hold the signed forms until members have given their approval of the final document. This will prevent the difficulties of obtaining signatures at a later date. However, Advisory Committee members may choose to wait to sign the thesis signature page until after the corrections are deemed satisfactory. To be considered an approved document, **no more than one member** of the Advisory Committee may decline to sign the signatory page. It is rare not to have all Advisory Committee members' signatures, indicating approval of the document.

Due to scheduling challenges, "signatures" may not be easily obtained. If another person is signing for an absent Advisory Committee member with his/her written permission and permission of the Advisory Committee Chair, the signature should include clear initials of the individual signing (ABC) for the Advisory Committee member (Jane John Faculty) as follows:

Jane John Faculty by ABC

DOCTORAL DEGREES

Advisory Committee Member Composition

Upon recommendation of the Graduate Program Coordinator and approval of the dean of the Graduate College, an Advisory Committee of no fewer than four members of the [Graduate Faculty](#) with committee privileges will be appointed. The Chair of the Advisory Committee need not necessarily serve as the student's research Advisor, but must hold an OSU faculty appointment, be a member of the Graduate Faculty with doctoral chairing privileges and have familiarity with the academic requirements of the graduate degree sought. Each doctoral Advisory Committee must have at least one member of the Graduate Faculty from outside the student's graduate program and academic unit, who is the Graduate College Representative on the Advisory Committee.

Graduate students must work collaboratively with their research Advisor, Advisory Committee Chair and/or Graduate Program Coordinator to recommend membership for their Advisory Committee. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to successfully complete a graduate degree with an Advisory Committee composition that is not supported by the research Advisor. Recommendations for Advisory Committee membership should be based on the expertise of the faculty member and his/her ability to positively contribute to the graduate student's education and not other intangible factors or perceptions.

Graduate Advisory Committee Members' Role and Responsibilities

Advisory Committee members should actively participate in the academic endeavors of graduate students. It is best practice for Advisory Committee members to regularly meet with students to provide guidance and input. In many programs, the frequency of the meetings will change as the student moves from coursework to the research phase. Advisory Committee members should be part of the Plan of Study (POS) development and contribute to the required annual evaluation process. Because doctoral degrees involve a series of academic milestones, such as seminar presentations, qualifying or comprehensive examinations and defenses, the engagement of the Advisory Committee is imperative. More specific roles and responsibilities are detailed below for doctoral Advisory Committees. Please note that this does not negate the fact that graduate students are ultimately responsible for degree progress and completion. Graduate students should consult the members of the Advisory Committee frequently and keep them informed on the progress of their work.

Doctoral Advisory Committee

Upon recommendation of the graduate program and approval of the dean of the Graduate College, an Advisory Committee of no fewer than four voting members of the Graduate Faculty will be appointed. The roles of the Advisory Committee members are Chair, Advisor, Expert Member(s) and Graduate College Representative. The general responsibilities of the Advisory

Committee include advising the graduate student and assessing the student's progress as follows: (1) meeting regularly, (2) assisting with developing the POS as well as its approval and revisions, (3) preparing and examining the student for candidacy, (4) assisting with the planning, conducting and/or redirecting of the research, (5) supervising the writing of the dissertation, (6) conducting the dissertation defense, and (7) approving the final research document. The student and the members of the Advisory Committee should consult regularly to review the progress of the student's work.

Chair: The Chair's primary responsibility is to monitor the progress of the student toward the degree completion. The Chair is commonly the research Advisor, but this is not a requirement. Irrespective of other considerations, the Chair must have a strong familiarity with the academic requirements appropriate to the degree sought. The Chair must hold an appropriate OSU Graduate Faculty appointment, typically a tenure-track appointment in the academic unit in which the graduate degree is housed. The Chair's duties include convening meetings of the advisory committee, as appropriate; ensuring compliance with University and Graduate College policies, procedures and requirements; overseeing the POS and dissertation submission processes; and ensuring that the research topic undertaken is appropriate to satisfy degree requirements with the results openly accessible. If the Chair is not also the Advisor, the Chair should serve as a liaison with the Advisor with regard to progress of research in fulfillment of degree requirements.

When the Advisor is not a member of the OSU faculty, the Chair should ensure compliance with applicable research regulations, such as Responsible Conduct of Research training and Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements for research involving human subjects.

Advisor: The Advisor's primary responsibility is as a research mentor. As a result, it is expected that the Advisor will establish the closest working relationship with the student. The Advisor may also serve as the Chair of the Advisory Committee. The Advisor must hold an appropriate OSU Graduate Faculty appointment but need not hold an OSU faculty appointment. The Advisor guides and counsels the student in the research effort, ensuring compliance with applicable research regulations, such as Responsible Conduct of Research training and Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements for research involving human subjects. The Advisor is responsible for reporting to the Advisory Committee on the student's research progress and hooding the student at commencement. It is the Advisor's responsibility to mentor the student toward a research project that is original and worthy of the degree sought. The research Advisor is typically involved in the preparation of presentations and manuscripts for publication, which may be a degree requirement in some graduate programs.

Expert Member(s): The Advisory Committee must include at least one Expert Member whose expertise and counsel serve the graduate student in attaining the goal of original research that is

worthy of the degree sought. Expert Members must hold an appropriate OSU Graduate Faculty appointment. The [Graduate Faculty Database](#) is an excellent resource for identifying potential Expert Members. Typically, such individuals are faculty members in the student's graduate program. An Expert Member's responsibilities include guiding the research throughout the process, reviewing the draft dissertation, participating in examinations per Graduate College and graduate program requirements, attending regular meetings of the Advisory Committee, and interacting regularly with Advisory Committee members to facilitate and monitor degree completion progress.

Graduate College Representative: The Advisory Committee must also include one member who serves as *Graduate College Representative (Grad College Rep)* and ensures a high level of integrity in the processes that the Advisory Committee utilizes to review and evaluate the student throughout the doctoral graduate program. The Grad College Rep serves as an advocate for the student. The Grad College Rep must be a member of the OSU faculty and Graduate Faculty. The [Graduate Faculty Database](#) is an excellent resource for identifying potential Grad College Reps. The Graduate College Rep must not be a faculty member from the academic unit or graduate program of either the graduate student, Advisor or the Chair of the Advisory Committee. The Grad College Rep ensures that appropriate academic standards are applied in evaluating the student, and that the student is dealt with in a fair manner consistent with OSU policies. The Grad College Rep also provides expert advice when appropriate to the student in the conduct of research and writing of the dissertation.

Selection of the Potential Advisory Committee: The selection of the potential Advisory Committee members should be a collaborative activity between the student and his/her Advisor and/or Committee Chair. Although the student has the ultimate responsibility for recommending his/her Advisory Committee membership, his/her Advisor is a valued resource that can provide insight that will help the student make informed decisions. The student should meet with potential Advisory Committee members prior to recommending them to better understand their experience, availability, mentoring style and willingness to serve as an Advisor Committee member.

Admission to Doctoral Candidacy

Admission to doctoral candidacy marks the transition into the research phase of a doctoral degree and indicates agreement that the student has demonstrated the ability to do acceptable graduate work and that satisfactory progress has been made toward a degree. Consideration for candidacy requires the presentation of a written research proposal for doctoral research to the doctoral Advisory Committee, who will assess the proposal and offer the student pertinent counsel, advice and feedback. The approval of the research proposal by the Advisory Committee is the basic requirement for admission to doctoral candidacy; individual programs will normally

impose additional requirements, such as the successful completion of oral and/or written comprehensive or qualifying examinations. These additional requirements may occur in conjunction with the presentation of the research proposal, or they may occur at different times within the course of doctoral study.

Research Proposal

The composition of the required written research proposal for doctoral candidacy is at the discretion of the graduate program. It need not be, and probably should not be, complete chapters of the proposed dissertation, as Advisory Committee input should be sought throughout the development of the dissertation. Requiring complete dissertation chapters moves the doctoral candidacy process to the end of the degree program, which is inconsistent with National best practices. A basic candidacy proposal may include a literature review, definition of the research subject/problem to be examined, preliminary data and outline of the proposed research. The written document should give the Advisory Committee a good understanding of what the student has proposed to do to make an original contribution to the field.

Timing

With best practices, time-to-degree, degree completion and student debt in mind, graduate students need to move through their program requirements in a reasonable time frame. Ideally, students would complete the admission to candidacy process by the end of the second to third year in the doctoral program, depending on the expected time to degree for the discipline. This allows the student and institution to make judicious decisions about resource allocation. Graduate programs should set and disseminate their expectations about the amount of time it takes typical students to reach candidacy and obtain degrees. Time-to-candidacy and time-to-degree expectations will support degree completion.

Outcomes

Admission to doctoral candidacy is conferred with the approval of the Dean of the Graduate College acting upon the recommendation of the Advisory Committee and graduate program. It is the responsibility of the Chair of the Advisory Committee to notify the Graduate College when admission to candidacy is granted by submitting the [Admission to Doctoral Candidacy Form](#). To be considered for admission to doctoral candidacy, the Advisor must vote in the affirmative and **no more than one member** of the Advisory Committee may cast a dissenting vote on the [Admission to Doctoral Candidacy Form](#).

Professional Doctorates

The requirements for professional doctorates with “culminating experiences” rather than traditional dissertations varies among graduate programs. The quality of the work expected of the student is identical to that expected for those in the dissertation option. The role of the Advisory

Committee is the same as the dissertation option and includes the Chair, Advisor, Expert Member(s) and Graduate College Representative.

Preparation of the Dissertation

The Dissertation should be prepared according to the Graduate College [Thesis/Dissertation Guidelines](#). Doctoral students are required to meet the thesis format review deadline by either attending a dissertation format workshop or viewing the online version of the workshop by the deadline specified in the Graduate College academic calendar for the semester they intend to graduate. Completion of the workshop requirement at least one semester before they intend to graduate is ideal and recommended.

The draft dissertation that is distributed should include the title/signature page, literature citations and the body of the document (i.e., all chapters from the introduction through the conclusions). The inclusion of the “front matter” (Table of Contents, List of Tables and Figures, Acknowledgements, etc.) is at the discretion of the Advisory Committee, as the pagination of these items may change depending on the necessary edits.

Pre-Defense Meeting

Given the high stakes of the dissertation defense, it is advisable to have an Advisory Committee meeting a few months (e.g., three months) prior to the intended defense date to identify any major issues that should be addressed prior to the defense. This meeting can include a brief informal presentation by the graduate student of results to date, an update on progress, outline of the dissertation document, etc. The incorporation of a pre-defense meeting is to support and facilitate the success of the student.

Dissertation Draft Distribution

With the Advisory Committee Chair and/or research Advisor’s approval, the defense copies (paper or electronic copies of the dissertation draft as preferred by each Advisory Committee member) should be provided to all Advisory Committee members at least two full weeks prior to the defense day. Holidays and breaks when the University is closed should not be counted in this two-week minimum requirement. Ideally, Advisory Committee members should inform the Advisory Committee Chair at least 48 hours in advance of the scheduled defense time if they find the document indefensible in its current state. An explanation should be provided about the concerns so that a substantive discussion can occur, and appropriate measures can be taken.

Dissertation Defense

The dissertation defense should be publicized within the graduate program at least one week prior to the event, and the Graduate College strongly encourages advance notification for our posting on the College website. The defense should take place during the standard semesters and sessions (Fall, Spring and Summer). Given Advisory Committee members’ extensive obligations, the defense should be scheduled well in advance to ensure Advisory Committee members will be available and present. The student should bring official copies of the signature

pages to the defense for the Advisory Committee Chair. See additional information about Advisory Committee members' signatures below.

Format: OSU allows each graduate program to choose between two types of general formats for a master's thesis defense. One has the entire defense open to the public and the other is a two-part process, in which the public presentation is separated from the "examination" portion which is conducted as a closed session. Irrespective of the format, the structure of the defense should be determined by the graduate program and uniformly applied and communicated to graduate students and Advisory Committee members.

Oral Presentation: Most dissertation defenses have a public presentation, which may range from 15-60 minutes depending on the culture of the graduate program, nature of the work, etc. The Advisory Committee Chair should advise the student on what is expected for the public presentation. The oral presentation is open to the public and should be held in a space that allows others, beyond the Advisory Committee, to attend. In the two-part format, the presentation may occur earlier than the defense examination. For example, an oral presentation may be incorporated into a departmental seminar. Separating the public presentation from the examination does not preclude the requirement that Advisory Committee members attend both the public presentations and the examination. Questions from the audience at the public presentation are welcomed and encouraged.

Questioning: In the two-part defense format, the examination is a closed session with the student that is generally only attended by the Advisory Committee. In addition to the Advisory Committee, only members of the Graduate Faculty may attend the closed examination portion of the defense without permission of the dean of the Graduate College. When the public presentation and examination are scheduled together, the exam usually begins after a short break following the public presentation. The exam is generally a series of questions by the Advisory Committee members that are orally answered with communication aids, such as white boards and an occasional PowerPoint slide.

Scheduling: Given the nature of faculty work, it is best to obtain Advisory Committee Members' general availability at the beginning of the term in which the defense will take place. Defenses should be scheduled in such a manner to ensure enough time is allowed for the presentation and examination. The length of the questioning generally does not go beyond two to three hours. If it does extend beyond two hours, a break is expected. It would be highly unusual for the examination portion of the defense to last more than three hours or extend to another day.

Attendance: All required Advisory Committee members (Chair, Advisor, Expert Member(s) and Grad College Rep) and the graduate student are expected to be present for the thesis defense. However, there may be scheduling challenges due to travel, illness, etc. Technology, such as teleconferencing and videoconferencing, may be used to address scheduling challenges.

Additionally, the student's desired format (e.g., in-person vs. virtual) should be given the most consideration; however, this does not imply that students should avoid in-person, public presentations, especially if they lack this experience. Also, no recordings/transcriptions should be made of defenses without the expressed consent of all persons, including audience members, present. In exceedingly rare cases where scheduling is particularly challenging, a change of Advisory Committee member may be necessary. For example, when an original Advisory Committee member cannot be available in any format for an extended period of time. In such circumstances, a conversation should occur with the affected committee member prior to selecting a replacement committee member for consideration by the Dean of the Graduate College. A [Committee Change Request Form](#) is available for these situations and requires signature approval of all Committee members. Submission of questions via another Advisory Committee member is not an acceptable way to participate in the final thesis defense, and virtual defenses do not change the requirement that all committee members must participate.

Advisory Committee Members' Signatures

There are two aspects of the dissertation defense that require signatures – the oral defense and the written dissertation.

Oral Defense Outcomes

At the close of the defense, after the candidate has been excused, the members of the Advisory Committee should discuss the student's defense of the research associated with the dissertation. There are two possible outcomes of a dissertation defense: Pass – Student has satisfactorily completed the final defense and Fail – Student has not satisfactorily completed the final defense. Each member of the Advisory Committee must sign under one of the above statements recommending either a satisfactory or unsatisfactory defense. To be considered a passing dissertation defense, **no more than one member** of the Advisory Committee may cast a dissenting vote on the [Oral Defense Results Form](#). The form must be signed and returned to the Graduate College **immediately** following the defense, irrespective of the outcome. If the oral defense is judged inadequate, a re-examination decision will be made by the Advisory Committee in accordance with Graduate College and graduate program requirements. Generally, only a single re-examination is permissible. Graduate programs may impose more stringent requirements. The result of the dissertation defense does not indicate approval of the dissertation document, but only the oral defense of the student's work.

Dissertation Document Outcomes

Ideally, signatures may be obtained at the defense for the dissertation signatory pages. If extensive corrections are necessary, the Advisory Committee Chair can hold the signed forms until members have given their approval of the final document. This will prevent the difficulties of obtaining signatures at a later date. However, Advisory Committee members may choose to wait to sign the dissertation signature page until after the corrections are deemed satisfactory. To be considered an approved document, **no more than one member** of the Advisory Committee

may decline to sign the signatory page. It is rare not to have all Advisory Committee members' signatures, indicating approval of the document.

Due to scheduling challenges, "signatures" may not be easily obtained. If another person is signing for an absent Advisory Committee member with his/her written permission and permission of the Advisory Committee Chair, the signature should include clear initials of the individual signing (ABC) for the Advisory Committee Member (Jane John Faculty) as follows:

Jane John Faculty by ABC

Endorsed by Graduate Council on August 28, 2015; updated on January 22, 2016; updated on October 28, 2016; Pandemic and advisor's vote update August 10, 2020; Update post-pandemic April 21, 2023.