



Policies & Procedures for Dissertation Committee Membership, Dissertation Proposal, and Final Defense

The purpose of this document is to provide information and guidance about the dissertation process for nursing PhD students. Faculty and students should also refer to relevant documents from the Graduate School including:

- Academic Policies & Procedures [Committees (Doctoral), Dissertation, Dissertation Abstracts, Dissertator Status, Final Oral Examination, Final Oral Examination Committee, Five-Year Rule, Publication of Dissertation]
- Guide to Preparing Your Doctoral Dissertation, and Degree Deadlines.

The PhD is a research degree that is never conferred solely as a result of successful course work. The PhD degree indicates that one has the ability to conduct an independent investigation as demonstrated by the preparation and presentation of a dissertation which involves original research and creative scholarship. Once a student officially completes the preliminary candidacy examination, the student will be considered a dissertator and will register for 3 credits of research. Nursing PhD students will register for 3 credits of N990 Thesis Research under their major professor's conference number. (See [Continuous Enrollment Requirement](#)).

Dissertation Committee Membership

Graduate School policy specifies the following with regard to dissertation committees:

Dissertation committees advise and evaluate satisfactory progress, administer preliminary and final oral examinations, evaluate a dissertation, and/or sign a degree warrant. A student arranges a committee with appropriate expertise to afford the breadth and depth needed in degree examinations. In all cases, a student's advisor (major professor) chairs the committee. The executive committee (or its equivalent) is responsible for approving the composition of all dissertation committees.

Minimum Graduate School requirements for the dissertation committees are as follows:

1. *The chair or co-chair of the committee must be Graduate Faculty* from the student's program.*
2. *PhD dissertation committees must have a minimum of 4 members, 3 of whom must be UW–Madison graduate faculty, former UW–Madison graduate faculty up to one year after resignation or retirement. At least 1 of the 4 members must be from outside of the student's major program or major field (often from the minor field).*
3. *The chair may designate 1 of the 4 members of the committee as a non-reader*
 - a) *Readers are committee members who commit themselves to closely reading and reviewing the entire dissertation. While graduate programs cannot have fewer than three readers, they may require all members to be readers. The rationale for specifically designating non-reader status is to facilitate faculty participation in dissertations without automatically expecting the level of commitment associated with deeply engaging a PhD thesis. Given faculty workloads, designating a non-reader in some cases may permit faculty participation where engagement would otherwise be impossible.*
4. *The required 4th member of a dissertation committee, as well as any additional members, all retain voting rights.*

** Graduate Faculty are those who hold tenure track appointments. Non-tenure track faculty (e.g., CHS professors) may participate as 4th or extra committee members, but do not count toward the four "Graduate Faculty" members.*

The student and major professor should work together to identify dissertation advisory committee members with appropriate breadth and depth of knowledge. In addition to the *Minimum Graduate School requirements for the dissertation committees* outlined above, the School of Nursing has additional expectations for committee membership:

1. At least 2 members will be from the School of Nursing faculty.
2. In general, all committee members will serve as readers. However, in line with UW-Madison Graduate School Policy and Procedures of Graduate Advisor Committees, the chair may designate 1 of the 4 members of the committee as a non-reader.

The [UW-Madison School of Nursing PhD Dissertation Committee Membership Approval Form](#) must be completed no later than 6 weeks prior to the dissertation proposal defense date. Committee membership must be reviewed and approved by the School of Nursing Executive Committee prior to the dissertation proposal evaluation and oral examination. Any changes in membership during the course of the dissertation study must also be reviewed and approved by the School of Nursing Executive Committee.

Changes in committee membership must be approved with the [PhD Change in Dissertation Membership Approval Form](#).

The chair of the dissertation committee will route all approval forms to the faculty Executive Committee. After approved and signed by the chair of the Executive Committee, the chair of the dissertation committee will route the signed form to the Graduate Academic Services Coordinator to record in the student file.

Dissertation Proposal Defense

The student, with guidance of the major professor, will prepare a dissertation proposal. When the proposal is complete, and approved by the major professor, the student will distribute it to the approved dissertation committee members. All dissertation committee members are expected to review the proposal and complete a written evaluation, using the approved [School of Nursing Dissertation Evaluation Rubric](#). The student will arrange a meeting of the dissertation committee for oral examination and discussion of evaluation comments. Students, in consultation with the chair of their dissertation committee, may decide if they want the oral examination to be open or closed. At the meeting, the student will be called upon to summarize briefly the proposed work and to answer questions from the committee members. Questions are intended to assure sufficient knowledge of the literature as well as adequate rigor in the design and methods proposed for the dissertation study. The committee chair will collect all verbal and written comments from committee members and complete a summary (see final page of evaluation rubric). The chair will circulate the summary to committee members for confirmation. After confirmation of the summary comments, the chair will then share it with the student, typically within one week of the dissertation proposal meeting.

Committee members will sign the [Dissertation Proposal Approval Form](#) if the student's oral examination and written proposal together are determined to meet expectations. These expectations include, but may not be limited to, the overall content and delivery of the presentation, breadth of knowledge, originality of ideas, quality of theory/science, quality of response to questions, contribution to nursing and possibly other disciplines, and quality of writing. The student will submit the signed approval form and a copy of the proposal to the Graduate Academic Services Coordinator for inclusion in the student's permanent record.

If any committee member identifies a deficiency (i.e., “does not meet expectations”), in one or more areas indicated on the form, the process for addressing the deficiencies, will be discussed within the committee and an agreed upon course of action to resolve the concern will be determined before the student begins the dissertation study. If the concerns are substantial (e.g., “does not meet expectations” noted by 2 or more committee members in 2 or more areas of evaluation), the student must revise the written proposal and re-schedule and repeat the oral examination. Typically, students will be allowed two attempts to pass the dissertation proposal defense (i.e., two attempts to obtain the committee’s approval). The student may petition the PhD Subcommittee of GPC to allow a third attempt, if there are extenuating circumstances (e.g., committee member leaves the university or committee recommendation for major change in direction of the work).

Although students may submit and receive funding for dissertation work in advance of the proposal defense, the approved dissertation committee has the final responsibility for evaluating and approving the dissertation study. “Scientific review” by other committees, such as the IRB or funding committees (external or internal), is not a sufficient substitute or proxy for evaluation by the dissertation committee.

Students should be aware that if they seek IRB approval for their dissertation studies prior to passing proposal defenses that they do so at their own risks. There is always the potential that the committee will suggest improvements to the conceptual foundation of the study or methods; indeed, this is one purpose of the defense. Changes may be needed in the proposal and in the research plan. These may be minor or major and could require an IRB change of protocol or even withdrawal of the IRB application.

When the proposal has been approved by the committee, the major professor has the primary responsibility for guiding the student in the research. The other members of the committee continue to be available for consultation with the student and should be kept informed of progress, *especially at critical decision points*.

Dissertation Defense / Final Oral Examination

When the student has completed the dissertation study and written the dissertation thesis or manuscripts, the student will distribute these materials to the dissertation committee members and schedule the Final Oral Examination. All dissertation committee members, who are identified as readers, are expected to review the dissertation thesis/manuscripts and complete a written evaluation, using the [School of Nursing Dissertation Evaluation Rubric](#). At the Final Oral Examination, the PhD student will make a public presentation of the research. After the public presentation and brief questions, the meeting will be closed. The student will answer questions from the committee members in private. Questions are intended to assure sufficient knowledge in the area of the dissertation study, nursing (i.e., how knowledge from core courses is relevant to dissertation work), and the minor area(s) of study.

Committee members will evaluate the student’s final oral examination and written thesis/manuscripts overall and consider the following: content and or delivery of the oral presentation, breadth of knowledge, originality, quality of theory/science, quality of response to questions, contribution to nursing and possibly other disciplines, and quality of writing. They will rate the student’s dissertation work as “does not meet”, “meets”, or “exceeds” expectations; they will record their vote on the Final PhD Degree Warrant. The warrant request form is generated annually by the Graduate Academic Services Coordinator. Request this at least 6 weeks in advance. To be awarded the PhD degree, students must receive no more than one dissenting vote from their committee on the final degree warrant. The student should submit the signed warrant and a copy of the thesis/manuscripts to the Graduate Student Services Coordinator for inclusion in the student’s permanent record. The student should follow Graduate School policies (Guide to Preparing Your Doctoral Dissertation, and Degree Deadlines) on formatting and depositing the dissertation.

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