

**To: Chairs of PhD Final Oral Examination Committees**

**From: Dean Melissa Sturge-Apple**

The presentation and defense of a significant dissertation is the capstone of the work for the PhD degree. All other work toward the degree is preliminary to this presentation. The final oral examination results not only in a judgment on a single work of scholarship but also implicitly on the quality of the whole graduate education of the candidate. Because the final oral examination has this wider meaning, it is important that the committee satisfy itself that a significant thesis has been successfully defended. -Graduate Regulations ([page 12](#))

### **Role of the Chair**

Your function as chair is to protect the fairness and rigor of the oral examination for the PhD degree. The chair facilitates the examination and committee deliberations and reports back on the process. You may or may not have expertise in the candidate's subject area. You are free to judge the quality of the work within the limits of your knowledge and experience but your main responsibility as chair is to oversee the quality of the oral defense process.

### **Actions Prior to Defense**

Each member of the dissertation advisory committee has signed off on this dissertation as ready for defense but, as voting member of the committee, if you find the written work wholly unacceptable, you must contact both the Graduate or Associate Dean in the school offering the student's degree and the University Dean of Graduate Education to indicate that the defense must be postponed. These offices will consult and will take responsibility for notifying the candidate and committee.

### **At the Oral Defense**

While these cases are rare, if a member of the committee does not appear for the examination, you must notify Dean Melissa Sturge-Apple via text message immediately at 585-507-8949 so we can participate in the decision on whether to proceed with the defense. If Dean Sturge-Apple is unable to respond to the message, we then encourage you to text the graduate school dean of the home program for the student who is defending.

Arts, Sciences, and Engineering: Nick Vamivakas- 585-831-0690

Eastman School of Music: Matthew Ardizzone

School of Medicine and Dentistry: Rick Libby- 585-354-8544

School of Nursing: Lydia Rotondo

Simon Business School: Christian Opp or Jim Brickley

Warner School of Education and Human Development: Cynthia Callard - 585-355-2088

The minimum attendance is two faculty members from the candidate's degree program (one of whom must be the principal advisor) and one member from outside the degree program. If the minimum is not present, generally the examination must be postponed but, in some cases, alternate arrangements can be made.

Guests at the closed examination are rare but must have been approved by the University Office of Graduate Education in advance. Guests are simply present to observe, they do not have a vote and may not influence the vote by participating in discussion. The chair is authorized to ask guests to leave the room if unduly influential.

### **A note on remote defenses:**

At the discretion of the Director of Graduate Study (DGS) of the program, and with the agreement of all members of the committee and the student, exams may be held either in person or online via appropriate, high-quality electronic audio and video conferencing during the oral defense. All members of the oral defense committee are expected to participate in the oral defense synchronously. Committee members may participate live or remotely. If the defense is to take place remotely, instructions for access to online exams must be made available to all members of the oral defense committee via the PhD Completion system.

Some schools and programs may not allow for remote defenses.

It is the candidate's program's responsibility to provide equipment and staff to set up and maintain the remote connection. You should feel comfortable that the system is working well before the closed defense begins. Both video and audio contact in both directions must be maintained for the duration of the oral defense and deliberations afterward. If any member present says that the technology is interfering with the defense, you are empowered to halt the proceedings and ask that the exam be rescheduled.

To begin the closed defense, ask the candidate and any approved guests to leave the room.

Then, lead a brief discussion of ground rules on the approximate length of time for the examination and the order and time limits of questioning. Review the oral dissertation rubric and discuss with the committee how the rubric will be completed and how it impacts/is incorporated into the oral defense. Some committees prefer to proceed together through the dissertation inviting questions from all members as each chapter is discussed. Others prefer that the time be divided among members with each member having a turn to ask all his/her questions.

Determine from the degree program faculty whether the closed examination should begin with a summary by the candidate and, if so, how much time will be allotted. When the rules are agreed upon, invite the candidate and any permitted guests back into the room and proceed with the examination.

### **Conducting the Defense**

The overall goal is to facilitate equitable and open discussion that enables the candidate to display their ability and the committee to make a fair appraisal of the work. Keeping the exam moving along and protecting each member's questioning time is a key aspect of your role. You also can contribute to a positive and scholarly tone.

With the student present, explain the time allotments for the candidate's summary, if applicable, and for the questioning by the committee. Adhere to this plan by politely calling for a halt when time is reached.

1. **Aim for fair turn-taking during questioning.** Each member of the committee should have a reasonable opportunity to pose questions and make comments. You are responsible for implementing the committee's prior agreement on the allotment of time and order or approach to questioning. A member may continue to question beyond their allotted time or infringe on another's questions by persistent interruptions. As chair, you are empowered to halt the questioning and only permit a member to interrupt or cut into another member's time with that member's permission.
2. **You are not required to question the candidate.** However, if you have relevant expertise or interest and have significant questions, feel free to ask them while maintaining fair turn-taking.
3. **Dealing with digression from the exam purpose:** Members of the committee may engage in prolonged discussion among themselves leaving the candidate out of that discussion, or veer into content areas far from the dissertation topic. Steer the members back to the defense purpose which is to determine the candidate's ability to defend the dissertation work.
4. **Promoting Professionalism:** Promote respectful and scholarly behavior during the defense process by avoiding overly assertive advocacy, personally demeaning critique, or excessive display of emotions. In the event that a committee member interrupts and comes to the candidate's aid before they have a chance to

respond to a question, it is advisable to politely interject and request the candidate to provide their own response directly. Should a committee member engage in critique directed at another member or the candidate on personal grounds rather than scholarly considerations, it is important to professionally communicate that such comments are inappropriate and redirect the discussion back to the academic subject matter at hand. In instances where emotional outbursts hinder rational discussion, it may be necessary to call for a temporary 'time out.' Following a brief five-minute break, kindly encourage members to reengage in the discussion. However, if participants are unable to resume the discourse in a calm and composed manner, it may be prudent to announce that the defense needs to be temporarily halted and subsequently rescheduled for a more appropriate time.

### **Rubric for Evaluating Dissertation and Oral Defense**

The oral defense committee completes an evaluation (rubric) of the rigor of the defense process and of the candidate's degree of achievement of the University's PhD Learning Outcomes. Because the PhD degree is granted by the University rather than by the individual schools, end-of-program PhD learning outcomes that apply to all disciplines are identified and assessed at the University level. The Chair is responsible for gathering the feedback from the committee, finding consensus, and submitting along with the final report on the oral exam.

### **Concluding the Defense**

When the agreed-on time limited has been reached or when all the members have asked all the questions they wish to ask, request that the candidate and any guests leave the room.

Ask the committee for comments on whether the candidate has passed. If needed, to affirm the outcome of the exam, poll each member in order of lesser to greater influence: first the outside member(s), then the department member(s) other than the main advisor, proceeding from junior to senior if more than one, and then the candidate's advisor. Last, express your vote. Your vote is less an endorsement of the content of the work and more an endorsement of the fairness of the process.

### **There are three final outcomes:**

A vote of 'pass' means the student has adequately met the committee's expectations for the written work and oral defense. Minor revisions may be requested but, if the work is passable at the time of the defense, it should be judged as 'pass.' As an FYI, students who pass with minor revisions are expected to make the revisions within 3 months of the defense.

Major revisions are required before the work can be considered passable. These are usually an extensive rewriting of large sections of content, sometimes with additional data analysis. On the final report form, indicate the name of the member(s) who will be responsible for overseeing and approving the major revisions. As an FYI, students who pass with major revisions are expected to make the revisions within 6 months of the defense. The University Graduate Education office will forward a form to those individuals requesting the final sign-off.

Although unlikely, if major flaws are found at the defense, the candidate should be failed. A second examination may be scheduled only after the candidate has reworked the dissertation according to the committee's specifications. The standard procedures and deadlines for registration and defense apply to repeat defenses.

For the candidate to pass, all committee members must agree. If one or more members vote for failure, the decision must be to fail the candidate. This decision may be appealed to the University Council on Graduate Education by other members of the committee or by the candidate and the Council may pass or fail the candidate by majority vote.

All committee members, including yourself, must sign the examination form attesting the outcome of the exam, that

the dissertation is or is not acceptable and that the candidate should or should not be recommended for the degree. Member(s) participating remotely should verbally express their agreement to the members present and sign the examination form with their digital signature. You may indicate on the form what that vote was expressed to be.

After the vote has been taken, invite the candidate back into the room and confirm the outcome. He or she will receive an email from University Graduate Education the day after the defense which includes all the final requirements for the degree.

### **After the Defense**

Return the signed PDF report form and rubric via email ([UnivGradEducation@UR.Rochester.edu](mailto:UnivGradEducation@UR.Rochester.edu)) or interoffice mail to the address at the bottom of the form. If the result was failed, please notify us promptly by email at [UnivGradEducation@UR.Rochester.edu](mailto:UnivGradEducation@UR.Rochester.edu).

If you have specific urgent concerns or comments about this defense that warrant prompt reporting or response, please email the University Dean of Graduate Education ([melissa.sturge-apple@rochester.edu](mailto:melissa.sturge-apple@rochester.edu)) directly.

The PhD oral defense is a major checkpoint where we affirm the strength of scholarship of the candidate as well as the degree program. As chair, you provide an important contribution to maintaining and monitoring the quality of graduate education at the University and we thank you for serving in this role.