

Guidelines for the Doctoral Dissertation Process (2016)

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Institutions with graduate programs involve faculty participation in the important process of guiding students in high-level work towards doctoral degrees, a highly specialized form of teaching in which faculty and students engage closely and one-on-one far more than in other teaching responsibilities. As a result, faculty advisors, committee members, and students bear specific responsibilities to help make the process successful.

A doctoral dissertation committee performs the essential functions of reading, evaluating, and providing feedback on theses, dissertations, and the proposals that precede and frame research; if after agreeing to serve on a committee, faculty are unable to perform these basic duties, they should assist the student in finding a replacement.

Committee members verify that doctoral dissertations present original research, and that the thesis as a whole meets the expectations of the department, the institution, and the discipline.

Doctoral dissertations have distinct phases, and with each of these advisors and committee members have distinct responsibilities. During sabbatical leaves, arrangements should be made that do not prevent a candidate from reasonable progress towards completion. Candidates and advisors should respect these arrangements given the imperatives of both to maintain the progress of their research and writing.

In the early stages of the process, committee members help students devise an appropriate topic for a PhD thesis (this often happens through a distinct procedure, such as a prospectus defense). Committee input on the scope and ambition of a project, its feasibility, and its potential contribution(s) to a field(s) are all crucial.

Once a topic has been established, committee members (or a select subset of the committee, including the advisor) offer advice on where pertinent archival and other materials may be found and, where necessary, facilitate entry to those collections. They should also advise on proper and sensible use of archives and archival materials.

Committee members advise and comment on students' applications for research support, and write letters of recommendation for these competitions. Committee members should provide students with a timeline that makes clear how far in advance they require the materials necessary for writing recommendations. In most cases, this will be a minimum of two weeks prior to the submission date. Advisors are likely to want to see drafts of applications at an earlier stage as well.

At the writing stage, committee members assess the logic and clarity of the work and the relevance of the evidence to the arguments, as well as commenting on style and writing. They offer timely feedback, and should make clear to students how much time they require to read submitted work. Committee members should establish when they agree to join a committee whether they will be willing to read draft chapters and/or a draft dissertation. Not all members of a committee are obliged to do so, but it is common for more than just the advisor to be reading drafts of a dissertation in progress.

In institutions that require both a prospectus defense and a dissertation defense, it is increasingly common to have the entire committee meet with the student at least once between these two defenses. Institutions adopting this strategy have largely found it productive.

At each of these stages, the advisor takes a lead role in supporting the student. Advisors should vet a complete draft of the dissertation before a defense, and should delay the defense if the dissertation is not likely to be approved for submission, even with major revisions. Committee members who, after reading a drafted dissertation, have serious reservations should contact the advisor prior to the defense date, and ideally at least a week beforehand.