

Dear Directors of Graduate Education,

Graduate Council requests that Directors of Graduate Education complete the attached questionnaire about policies and procedures in your respective doctoral programs. The rest of this note explains the request.

In Fall 2017, Dean Graves shared with GC a number of issues, brought forth by students and faculty, about the integrity of dissertations and final oral exams. These issues ranged from incidences of students treated disrespectfully, unfairly, and sometimes with malice by committee members, including major professors, to incidences of committees passing students as a matter of convenience when the written product and/or oral defense demonstrated significant evidence that a pass might not be warranted. GC agrees with Dean Graves that these issues are a significant cause for concern.

A GC subcommittee (GCSC) was thus formed with the intent of studying the role of POSC “outside members” (currently vaguely defined by the Graduate College) to see if the issues may be addressed by changing the official Graduate College description and duties of the “outside member”. For instance, could the “outside member” be (a) assigned by the Graduate College or (b) mandated to be in a different department than the home major? Could this “outside member” then be charged with overseeing the integrity of the dissertation and/or oral exam?

As is probably apparent, there are a range of ways the Graduate College could mandate “outside member” status and a range of duties the Graduate College could assign an “outside member”. In addition to the plethora of possibilities, all of which have affordances and constraints, the GCSC noted that one complicating factor in deciding on a tightly bound policy about “outside member” designation and duties is that across majors there are, necessarily, different approaches to doctoral education, POSC roles, and student requirements because of differences between disciplines and fields. In short, it became clear that the question of the designation and duties of an “outside member” must be addressed as part of a broader consideration of the processes of doctoral education within individual doctoral majors. It also became clear that GC did not have enough information about the range of approaches to doctoral education in the University to begin such broad consideration.

GC would thus like DOGEs to collect the requested information as part of an effort for GC and DOGEs to broadly consider student and faculty concerns with processes of doctoral education, including, but not limited to, potentially assigning specific roles to POSC members to address these concerns. GC also believes that this data collection effort will provide an opportunity for each doctoral major to ensure that all students and faculty can easily access current doctoral education policies and procedures; some concerns may be addressed by simply making policies and procedures more transparent. Ultimately, GC believes that an analysis of this data will enable GC and DOGEs to develop a better understanding of similarities and differences of doctoral education policies and procedures, as well as discipline and field specific practices and objectives. This understanding will significantly help inform discussions about Graduate College policies and procedures.

Thank you for your consideration of this request,

Graduate Council

Doctoral Education Process, Policy, and Procedure Questionnaire

The following questions cover six milestones in the doctoral education process. There are also two final questions about procedures for students and faculty to raise concerns about the process.

Milestone 1: Selection of Major Professor

1. Are students assigned a faculty member as a temporary advisor when they enter the program or are they advised by someone else, e.g., departmental advisors, when they enter the program?
2. When and how do students choose a major professor?
3. What must a student do to change major professors?

Milestone 2: Program of Study and POSC Formation

1. When do students form a POSC? Is there a specific policy stating when POSC formation should/must occur?
2. How many specific courses are required in a program of study?
3. What is the role of the major professor in selecting and approving the remaining coursework?
4. What is the role of the POSC in selecting and approving the remaining coursework? For instance, though the POSC must technically sign-off on coursework, does the POSC actively participate in a discussion of coursework or does the POSC sign-off on coursework agreed upon between the student and major professor?
5. What are the program guidelines for selecting an “outside member”? For instance, must the “outside member” be in a different department? Does the student select the “outside member”?
6. What is the role of the “outside member”? For instance, is the “outside member” expected to bring particular subject and/or methodological expertise?
7. What is the process for changing members of the POSC?
8. Is it common for students to change members of the POSC? For instance, do students often have different POSC members during coursework and exams than during dissertation writing and defense? If so, what is the rationale?

Milestone 3: Preliminary Examination Format

1. When do students take preliminary exams? Is there a specific policy stating when preliminary exams should/must occur?
2. What is the format for preliminary exams? Are there multiple format options?
3. Who determines the format of the preliminary exam? For instance, if there are multiple options does the student decide in consultation with just the major professor or is the POSC involved in the process?
4. Who determines the process for the preliminary exams? For instance, does the doctoral major prescribe specific processes, e.g. sit-down exams lasting X hours or take-home exams lasting Y weeks? Do students in consultation with the major professor/POSC determine what is asked in the preliminary exam, e.g., the topics or specific questions the student will answer?
5. Who determines how/when/if the preliminary exam is ready for defense?

Milestone 4: Preliminary Oral Examination

1. Is there a prescribed format for oral examinations? If so, what is it? If not, what are some examples of the types of formats an oral exam may take?
2. Do members of the POSC have specific roles?

Milestone 5: Dissertation

1. What is the process for a dissertation proposal? For instance, do students work on a proposal with a major professor and then hold a dissertation proposal meeting with the POSC?
2. What criteria are used by major professors to determine that a dissertation is ready to move to defense? For instance, is it assumed that the major professor would only approve a dissertation for defense because they believe the dissertation is good enough to successfully defend?
3. Is there a mandated number of days/weeks prior to defense that a student must submit the dissertation to the POSC? If not, are there assumed best practices?

Milestone 6: Final Oral Examination/Dissertation Defense

1. Is there a prescribed format for oral examinations? If so, what is it? If not, what are some examples of the types of formats an oral exam may take?
2. Do members of the POSC have specific roles?

Final Questions

1. If students have concerns about the integrity of any part of the doctoral education process, who is the student encouraged to inform? Is there a formal grievance procedure?
2. If faculty have concerns about the integrity of any part of the doctoral education process, who is the faculty member encouraged to inform? Is there a formal grievance procedure?