Teachers College
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
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Faculty and Candidate Guide to the Dissertation Oral Defense

Introduction

The Dissertation Oral Defense serves two purposes in addition to fulfilling the institutional responsibility to examine a candidate on their major piece of work. First, it serves as the culminating intellectual experience of a candidate's doctoral studies, and, in one sense, brings closure to a period in the student's life. In another sense, it often results in additional questions for further thought and, potentially, study.

Second, the Oral Defense may be one of the few times in the individual's life that a group of thoughtful and able people will devote their full attention to their ideas and work. Students often remember the Dissertation Oral Defense as a stimulating, challenging, and even exhilarating experience.

Preparation of the Dissertation Manuscript

The dissertation is a formal academic work and, as such, is expected to follow the conventions of scholarly writing. As the author of the document, the candidate is responsible for their own writing.The dissertation, when submitted to the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee, is expected to be in final form. It must be complete and free of errors in form, style, spelling and grammar. The manuscript must follow the guidelines in the style manual issued by the Office of Doctoral Studies titled *General Instructions for Preparation of the Dissertation for Doctoral Degrees: A Manual of Style.*

For Ed.D./Ed.D. CTAS candidates, it is the candidate's responsibility to produce copies of the dissertation manuscript for each member of the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee at least three (3) weeks prior to the Dissertation Oral Defense. For Ph.D. candidates, the manuscript must be distributed at least four (4) weeks prior to the Dissertation Oral Defense. The candidate should contact each member of the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee to determine themember's preference for receiving the dissertation in paper and/or electronic format, and should deliver the dissertation to the member's desired location.

Please Note: Prior to scheduling the Dissertation Oral Defense, candidates are to have completed all other requirements for the degree as outlined in the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education, Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education (College Teaching of an Academic Subject), or Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy bulletins.

Composition of the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee

In most instances the Ed.D. Dissertation Oral Defense Committee will consist of four members: the Dissertation Advisor and second committee member who served on the Dissertation Proposal Committee, and two additional faculty who will serve as external examiners. In some cases, the dissertation proposal committee may consist of three official members, and, in those cases, the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee will have five members: the Dissertation Advisor and two committee members who participated in the dissertation proposal hearing, and two additional faculty who will serve as external examiners. The candidate and the Dissertation Proposal Committee will select both external examiners. One committee member must be from outside the candidate's department. A maximum of one member may be from outside Teachers College or Columbia University.

In all instances, the Ph.D. Dissertation Oral Defense Committee will consist of five members: the Dissertation Advisor and second committee members who served on the Dissertation Proposal Committee, a Defense Moderator, and two external examiners. In some cases, the dissertation proposal committee may consist of three official members, and in those cases, only two external examiners will need to be found. The Dissertation Advisor and student are responsible for forming the entire committee. A maximum of two members may be from outside Teachers College or Columbia University.

Eligibility to Serve on a Dissertation Oral Defense Committee. Eligibility for service on the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee extends to all professorially ranked faculty members on appointment (assistants, associates, professors) in every faculty and school within Columbia University, including the Union Theological Seminary. In addition, with approval from the Department Chair and the Office of the Registrar, individuals on appointment at Teachers College as Lecturers, Visiting Professors, or Adjunct Faculty in professorial rank (assistant, associate, or professor) may also serve on the Oral Defense Committee. At least two members of the Oral Defense Committee must be faculty members on regular appointment in professorial rank (assistant, associate, or professor) at Teachers College.

For Ph.D. candidates, the Dissertation Advisor, Oral Defense Moderator, and Third Reader must be GSAS approved faculty as noted on the following link: https://gsas.columbia.edu/student-guide/dissertation/doctoral-dissertation-sponsors. The three inside members are expected to all be from the same TC Department. If not, a petition for an exception must be submitted by the Dissertation Advisor to ODS. In addition, one of the members of the committee must be from outside Teachers College.

Requests for faculty members who are not from Teachers College or Columbia University to serve on an Ed.D. doctoral committee must receive prior approval by completion of the External Committee Member Request Form. This request must include a copy of the faculty member's curriculum vitae (CV). Such requests for Ph.D. committees may be made by the Dissertation Advisor sending the CV to the Office of Doctoral Studies to forward to GSAS with the Application for the Dissertation Defense form.

Ed.D. defenses may be held either in person or fully remotely. If the defense will be held in-person, the doctoral candidate, Dissertation Advisor, and Oral Defense Moderator must be physically present at the dissertation defense.

For Ph.D. defenses the doctoral candidate, Dissertation Advisor, Oral Defense Moderator, and one other member MUST be physically present at the dissertation oral defense. Other members may petition to serve remotely (via teleconference, Skype, Zoom, etc.) by the Ph.D. Dissertation Advisor, prior to signing the Application for Ph.D. Defense form, ensuring that the remote participation box is checked by that member's name on the form. If not done, that member will be expected to be physically present. All remote members will have all forms signed by the Oral Defense Moderator.

In the case of a sudden absence prior to, or on the oral defense date, doctoral Dissertation Advisors should reach out to the Office of Doctoral Studies as soon as possible for assistance.

The Oral Defense Moderator. One member of the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee serves in the role of Defense Moderator. As their primary duty, the Oral Defense Moderator should maintain reasonable and professional proceedings within the committee. The Oral Defense Moderator normally calls the defense to order, notes the end of the candidate's presentation period, and ensures the questioning proceeds smoothly and professionally. Typically, the Oral Defense Moderator calls on the Dissertation Advisor to begin the first series of questions, proceeds to the other Dissertation Committee member(s) and then to the Third and Fourth (and, if applicable, the Fifth) Examiners. The Defense Moderator also ensures that Committee members signthe appropriate forms and transmits those forms to the Office of Doctoral Studies upon the completionof the defense, in addition to whatever supplemental information or explanatory notes that may be required.

The Defense Moderator of the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee is generally the external examiner selected by thecandidate and the Dissertation Proposal Committee. However, the Oral Defense Moderator may NOT be from an institution outside of Teachers College. In addition, the Defense Moderator should have prior experience as anOral Defense Committee member at Teachers College. The Defense Moderator of the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee will be noted on the Dissertation Oral Defense Request to Schedule form (Ed.D.) or Application for the Dissertation Defense form (Ph.D.). For Ed.D. committees, if the external examiner who was selected by the candidate and the Dissertation Proposal Committee does not meet these criteria,the selection of the acting Oral Defense Moderator will be made by the Office of Doctoral Studies after the candidate's Intention to Defend the Dissertation has been approved by the Office of Doctoral Studies and the second external examiner has been selected.

For Ph.D. committees, the Defense Moderator must be GSAS approved faculty without exception.

Important Note*: A Dissertation Oral Defense should not be held unless the Dissertation Committee is satisfied that the manuscript is acceptable.* If any member of the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee finds something in the dissertation that they consider to be clearly unacceptable, the committee member should immediately notify the Dissertation Advisor. If the Dissertation Advisor concurs with the judgment, the Dissertation Oral Defense should be postponed until the issue has been addressed. In this situation, the dissertation defense should be re-scheduled once the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee is satisfied with the document's quality. If the Dissertation Advisor does not concur, then the dissertation defense may proceed as scheduled.

The Nature of the Dissertation Oral Defense

The oral defense is normally a closed defense. Only members of the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee and the candidate may be present. Family members of the candidate, unofficial committee members and other guests are not allowed. In addition, any recording of the defense is not permitted.

OPTION: If approved by the candidate and all committee members, the candidate's presentation may be made open and public. This is by no means mandatory. ODS does not need to be informed of this decision to make the presentation open or not.

The Dissertation Advisor is responsible for informing the candidate about the nature of the Dissertation Oral Defense, the presentation that the candidate should make at the beginning of the defense, and the kinds of questions that are likely to be asked. If there are particular issues that the Dissertation Advisor wants the candidate to address, these too can be discussed prior to the Dissertation Oral Defense.

Opening Presentation. A Dissertation Oral Defense usually consists of four parts. In the first part, the candidate is asked to make a short presentation setting forth the purpose of the candidate's undertaking, explaining why the study is important, how it was conducted, what was found, and, to some extent, what the results mean. The candidate should assume that all Committee members have read the dissertation; the initial presentation is intendedto serve as a recap of the dissertation and to orient the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee members toparticular aspects of the project that the candidate and Dissertation Advisor feel may warrant discussion. Specific requirements include:

- A formal presentation of 20–30 minutes, summarizing the candidate's research objectives, methodology, findings, and implications.
- Followed by a brief Q&A session for attendees to ask general or clarifying questions.
- Open to all members of the Teachers College and Columbia University communities, and potentially invited external guests. (**Only if open presentation was approved)**

If the presentation was approved to be open, then upon completion of this portion, all but the candidate and the committee must leave the defense location and wait until the defense is fully complete before returning.

Examination and Discussion. The largest part of the Dissertation Oral Defense should be devoted to the questions presented to the candidate. The candidate should be speaking for most of the time during the Dissertation Oral Defense; Committee members should not lecture during this time, nor should they converse with one another without the candidate's participation - the purpose of the defense is to examine the candidate.

Questioning procedures can be flexible. While the Oral Defense Moderator will call on each Committee member for questions[1] it is quite proper for one Committee member to follow up or expand on another Committee member's statements. For example, after a candidate has answered a question put by the Dissertation Advisor, an External Examiner may wish to carry the same line of questioning further while the topic is still fresh, instead of waiting for their turn.

[1] Typically beginning with the Dissertation Advisor, followed by questions from other members of the Dissertation Committee, and then by the External Examiner(s).

Normal courtesy should allow the questions to proceed in a reasonable way. Questions should be substantive in nature and deal with the purpose, methods, results, conclusions, and implications of the candidate's work. In many cases, the questions and discussion may go beyond the dissertation and deal with implications of the dissertation and its possible consequences for theory, policy, and/or practice. At this point, the Dissertation Oral Defense becomes a high level discussion among a group of intellectual peers. It is possible, during this stage, that the candidate may not know the answer to a particular question; in fact, no one may know the answer. This is perfectly acceptable. The candidate, however, is expected to at least address the issues raised by the committee members in their questions and draw on their knowledge of the relevant literature and major field, even if a complete or conclusive answer is not possible.

Questions on language usage, spelling, grammar and the like should be avoided. It is common practice for each member of the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee to note such stylistic or technical flaws either in their copy of the dissertation or on a separate sheet of paper, and submit them to the candidate or to the Dissertation Advisor, who will then pass them on to the candidate as part of the revision process.

Committee Deliberation. The next part of the Dissertation Oral Defense consists of the deliberations among the members of the Committee. The Oral Defense Moderator asks the candidate to step out of the room so that the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee can deliberate about the quality of the candidate's performance during the Dissertation Oral Defense and the quality of the dissertation. The Dissertation Oral Defense Committee makes two assessments: the first is substantive and determines the overall outcome of the defense; the second is technical, and determines the extent to which the manuscript may require editing for consistent and accurate usage of appropriate style manual, format, grammar, syntax, etc. The Committee members discuss their respective evaluation of the dissertation, and then each Committee member must choose between the four following possible outcomes:

Line 0. Approved as submitted (PASS):

The committee may ask that minor revisions or corrections be made before the dissertation is deposited. A written description of those minor revisions should be provided to the candidate at the defense. The expectation is that the deposit will be made by the next upcoming degree conferral period after the defense.

Line 1. Approved pending revisions (PASS):

The committee may ask that revisions be made before the dissertation is deposited. A written description of those revisions should be provided to the candidate at the defense or shortly afterward. The expectation is that the deposit will be made within the next two degree conferral periods after the defense.

Line 2. Referred:

The committee believes that substantial work must be undertaken on the dissertation by the candidate before it can reach a recommendation to award the degree. A detailed written description of the reservations about the examined dissertation should be provided to the candidate at the defense or shortly afterward. At the time of the defense, a subcommittee composed of at least two (for Ed.D.) or three (for Ph.D.) unanimously agreed upon members of the original committee (and including the Dissertation Advisor) will be formed. A statement from the candidate indicating the specific changes made in response to the committee's request for revision must accompany the revised version, and both be sent to the Dissertation Advisor. The Dissertation Advisor will share the statement and the revised version with the members of the defense subcommittee, each of whom must communicate explicitly to the Dissertation Advisor their appraisal of the revisions undertaken. The expectation is that the deposit will be made within the next three degree periods after the defense. A majority of the subcommittee must approve the revised version for the candidate to be recommended for the degree. The dissertation will then be recommended for award of the degree.

Line 3. Fail:

The committee believes that the dissertation is not acceptable, and the candidate will not be recommended for the degree. No candidate may have a second defense unless the Teachers College Provost (Ed.D. students) or the Dean of GSAS (Ph.D. students) concludes, upon evidence provided either by the candidate or by a member of the committee that procedural irregularities occurred during the defense.

If the majority of the Committee concur that the dissertation meets the expectations for a PASS, the Committee discusses the extent to which the manuscript may require editing for consistent and accurate use of appropriate style manual, format, grammar, syntax, etc. If poorly formatted, the Dissertation Oral Defense Committee may strongly recommend that the candidate employ the services of a dissertation editor.

If the majority of the Committee agrees that the dissertation warrants a **Fail** assessment, the candidate may have the privilege of another Dissertation Oral Defense only by permission of the Provost and Ed.D. Faculty Committee (Ed.D.) or the Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (Ph.D.). No more than two Dissertation Oral Defenses are allowed.

When this discussion is completed, the candidate is invited back into the room and informed of the outcome of the Committee's deliberations. Please see Appendices A and B to compute voting assessments.

Depending on the committee vote, the candidate should meet all requirements for graduation by the deposit deadline of the next degree conferral period following their Dissertation Oral Defense (If defense occurs in Spring, Summer term is not counted as the following term). If the candidate does not complete all requirements within this time frame, the candidate must register for doctoral dissertation advisement in the next term. Further, the candidate resumes obligation for continuous registration for doctoral dissertation advisement each Autumn and Spring term until all degree requirements are met.

Reporting Oral Defense Outcome. A majority vote of the committee determines the outcome of the Oral Defense. As the Committee reports its deliberations to the candidate, the Oral Defense Moderator takes notes on the corrections, additions, and/or changes that the Committee requests for the dissertation manuscript, recording them in a document which is given to the candidate after the defense. Each Committee member states their vote either verbally or in an e-mail (if remote) to the Defense Moderator to indicate their assessment. The Oral Defense Moderator then fills out the Adobe pdf form (Final Oral Defense Report (Ed.D.) or Final Examination for the Doctoral Degree (Ph.D.)) including clicking the appropriate radio buttons to indicate the votes of each committee member and then electronically sign the bottom. The Defense Moderator should provide this form electronically to the appropriate Assistant Manager (Ed.D. or Ph.D.) within the Office of Doctoral Studies immediately after the defense. Each Committee member should return the copy of the dissertation manuscript to the candidate including the Committee member's comments and suggested edits.

NOTE: The voting results form may not be presented to the student and only the voting outcome (as noted in Appendix A) should be given. Individual committee member votes are personal and are not required to be shared with the candidate.

Appendix A – Committee Voting Assessment Matrix

Four Member Committee (Ed.D. or Ed.D. CTAS students only)

Four-Member Committee				
Assessment				
Approved as Submitted	Approved Pending Revisions	Referred	Fail	Outcome
4	0	0	0	Approved as Submitted
3	1	0	0	Approved as Submitted
3	0	1	0	Approved Pending Revisions
3	0	0	1	Approved Pending Revisions
2	2	0	0	Approved Pending Revisions
2	1	1	0	Approved Pending Revisions
2	1	0	1	Approved Pending Revisions
2	0	2	0	Referred
2	0	1	1	Referred
2	0	0	2	Fail
1	3	0	0	Approved Pending Revisions
1	2	1	0	Approved Pending Revisions
1	2	0	1	Referred
1	1	2	0	Referred
1	1	1	1	Referred
1	1	0	2	Fail
1	0	3	0	Referred
1	0	2	1	Referred
1	0	1	2	Fail
1	0	0	3	Fail
0	4	0	0	Approved Pending Revisions
0	3	1	0	Approved Pending Revisions
0	3	0	1	Referred
0	2	2	0	Referred
0	2	1	1	Referred
0	2	0	2	Fail
0	1	3	0	Referred
0	1	2	1	Referred
0	1	1	2	Fail
0	1	0	3	Fail
0	0	4	0	Referred
0	0	3	1	Referred
0	0	2	2	Fail
0	0	1	3	Fail
0	0	0	4	Fail

Five Member Committee
(all Ph.D. students and Ed.D./Ed.D. CTAS students w/3 mbr Dissertation Proposal Committees)

Five-Member Committee				
Assessment				
Approved as Submitted	Approved Pending Revisions	Referred	Fail	Outcome
5	0	0	0	Approved as Submitted
4	1	0	0	Approved as Submitted
4	0	1	0	Approved as Submitted
4	0	0	1	Approved Pending Revisions
3	2	0	0	Approved as Submitted
3	1	1	0	Approved Pending Revisions
3	1	0	1	Approved Pending Revisions
3	0	2	0	Approved Pending Revisions
3	0	1	1	Referred
3	0	0	2	Referred
2	3	0	0	Approved Pending Revisions
2	2	1	0	Approved Pending Revisions
2	2	0	1	Approved Pending Revisions
2	1	2	0	Referred
2	1	1	1	Approved Pending Revisions
2	1	0	2	Referred
2	0	3	0	Referred
2	0	2	1	Referred
2	0	1	2	Referred
2	0	0	3	Fail
1	4	0	0	Approved Pending Revisions
1	3	1	0	Approved Pending Revisions
1	3	0	1	Approved Pending Revisions
1	2	2	0	Approved Pending Revisions
1	2	1	1	Referred
1	2	0	2	Referred
1	1	3	0	Referred
1	1	2	1	Referred
1	1	1	2	Referred
1	1	0	3	Fail
1	0	4	0	Referred
1	0	0	4	Fail
0	5	0	0	Approved Pending Revisions
0	4	1	0	Approved Pending Revisions
0	4	0	1	Approved Pending Revisions
0	3	2	0	Approved Pending Revisions
0	3	1	1	Referred
0	3	0	2	Referred
0	2	3	0	Referred
0	2	2	1	Referred
0	2	1	2	Referred
0	2	0	3	Fail
0	1	4	0	Referred
0	1	3	1	Referred
0	1	2	2	Referred
0	1	1	3	Fail
0	1	0	4	Fail
0	0	5	0	Referred
0	0	4	1	Referred
0	0	3	2	Referred
0	0	2	3	Fail
0	0	1	4	Fail
0	0	0	5	Fail