

Graduate Committees

Committee Structure

Committees for program completion exams are recommended by the major department and approved by the dean of the Graduate School.

Master's Program. Final oral defense examinations are required of all students presenting theses or research projects. A thesis committee is composed of a minimum of three and a maximum of five graduate faculty, including the chairperson who must be a regular Graduate Faculty member¹. Faculty holding Affiliate Graduate Faculty status may cochair a thesis committee upon approval of the graduate dean and as long as the committee chair holds regular Graduate Faculty status. At least one committee member, the graduate dean's representative, must be from an academic department outside the major department. A majority of the committee members must be from the major department. No more than one committee member may have Affiliate Graduate Faculty status.

Doctoral Program. Final oral defense examinations are required for all students presenting dissertations. The supervisory (dissertation) committee is composed of a minimum of five graduate faculty, with at least four having regular Graduate Faculty membership, including the chairperson. Faculty holding Affiliate Graduate Faculty status may cochair a dissertation committee if the chair holds regular Graduate Faculty status. At least one committee member, the graduate dean's representative, must be from an academic department outside the major department. A majority of the committee members must be from the major department. No more than one committee member may have Affiliate Graduate Faculty status. In addition to guiding the student to successful completion of the dissertation, this committee conducts the final oral defense examination.

Once the supervisory committee has approved the dissertation proposal (via the proposal form submitted to the Graduate School), changes do not normally occur in the committee structure. If committee membership needs to be altered after proposal approval, the committee chair requests such a change via memo to the graduate dean indicating the membership change and the rationale for such a change.

In general, once a major advisor (thesis or dissertation committee chair) has been identified for the student (via plan of study or other document sent to the Graduate School), that advisor stays in place for the duration of the thesis or dissertation. Thesis and dissertation students considering a change in their major advisor should consult departmental guidelines for doing so. Doctoral students changing major advisors would likely need to submit a new proposal.

The oral defense of the thesis or dissertation is scheduled (via the Request to Schedule Oral Defense form submitted to the Graduate School) when the committee chair makes the determination that the student is ready to defend. The Request to Schedule Oral Defense form should be submitted to the Graduate School two weeks prior to the requested defense date. The defense must be held on or before the published deadline for the semester of graduation.

The defense examination is a public oral examination normally lasting about two hours, at which the candidate presents and defends the dissertation or thesis. The examination is chaired by the committee chair. All members of the examining committee (or substitutes appointed by the dean of the Graduate School) are expected to be present throughout the examination. One negative vote from a committee member (not the committee chair) on the examining committee (including substitutes) may occur, and the candidate would still be considered as having passed the examination. A failed oral

defense may be retaken based on departmental guidelines. The thesis or dissertation manuscript must be delivered by the student to the committee members at least two weeks before the date of the oral defense.

¹ See Graduate Faculty (<http://catalog.wichita.edu/graduate/graduate-school/graduate-faculty/>) for definitions of graduate faculty status.

Committee's Role

Responsibilities of the Thesis/Dissertation Committee

Graduate faculty members are called upon to serve on student committees such as those constituted for master's theses, master's and doctoral oral examinations, and doctoral dissertations. The degree of committee involvement in the planning of the student's work varies from program to program. However, at the very least, committee members in oral examinations, thesis defenses and dissertation defenses are expected to have given a thorough and thoughtful reading to all materials. They will have prepared questions to test the student's knowledge, originality and independence of thought so that the faculty member will be able to ascertain the student's success in meeting standards expected for graduate-level performance. Of course, graduate faculty members are expected to exercise independent critical judgment in evaluating students, to use fair and reasonable standards for the level of graduate work being evaluated and to refrain from introducing personal bias.

In general, the committee ensures that students are completing quality research specifically in terms of defining the research question, appropriateness of the research methods, and accuracy of the conclusions drawn from the research (via approval of the research proposal and approval of the student's readiness to defend the completed research). In addition, the committee ensures that the presentation of the document conforms to the writing standards expected for scholarly documents in the discipline (via final copy approval on the Recommendation for Degree form).

Responsibilities of the Committee Chair

Supervision (chairing) of graduate students' research takes many forms—guiding the development of research proposals, helping plan master's theses or doctoral dissertations, and determining students' readiness to take written and oral examinations. Although the traditions of different disciplines vary in the closeness of working relationships between graduate students and advisors during thesis, dissertation and exam preparation, advisors are expected to maintain active knowledge about students' plans, work and progress, to read drafts of written work, to give prompt feedback, and to help students shape their work until it meets the standard of quality expected in the field. These qualitative standards range from details of form to more general standards of originality and integrity. The degree to which the chair involves other committee members in the initial stages of the student's research varies across the disciplines. However, at the very least, the research proposal should be approved by the entire committee, and the proposal should contain sufficient substance and detail to determine the quality of the research being proposed.

The committee chair is specifically charged with the following duties:

1. Informing the student of applicable Graduate School regulations;
2. Approving, in consultation with other committee members, the research proposal;
3. Approving, in consultation with the student, those who will serve on the committee;

4. Assisting the student in preparation of the thesis/dissertation document in a format consistent with that expected of a scholarly document in the discipline;
5. Determining, in consultation with other committee members, that the student is ready to defend the thesis or dissertation. Assuring that the student provides the manuscript to the committee members at least two weeks in advance of the oral examination date;
6. Filing the student's request to schedule the oral defense with the Graduate School. The defense examination is a public oral examination normally lasting about two hours, at which the candidate presents and defends the dissertation or thesis. It is generally the student's responsibility to contact committee members and determine a date and time for the oral defense;
7. Assisting the student in announcing the oral defense date and time to the university community;
8. Chairing the oral defense; and
9. Handling the completion of the form: Recommendation for Degree. This form allows committee members and the committee chair to sign off on two substantive items:
 - a. Student's performance during the oral defense (pass/fail), and
 - b. Readiness of the document (thesis or dissertation) for final copy. In this step, committee members ensure that changes in the thesis or dissertation document, requested during the oral exam, are included in the document by the student. Requested changes may pertain to:
 - content issues, and/or
 - formatting/grammatical corrections needed.

Committee members who also wish to see those changes in the document may request to review the document again before the final copy is produced.

In the case of terminal projects (versus theses and dissertations), departmental documentation should clarify the responsibilities of the project chair and committee.

Responsibilities of the Outside Committee Member

Although the outside member's area of expertise may not directly pertain to the defense topic, his or her role is very important. As an outside member, the primary responsibility is one of oversight on behalf of the Graduate School assuring that the thesis or dissertation meets the standards of graduate scholarship, that committee members and the student abide by Graduate School regulations, and that the committee treats the student appropriately during the oral defense (e.g., asking questions only germane to the topic, treating the student professionally). Therefore the outside member evaluates the candidate's performance and casts a vote just as other committee members do. In addition, the outside member completes a formal evaluation of the oral defense process by completing an Oral Defense Evaluation form on which the following elements are evaluated:

1. The final exam was conducted in an orderly manner;
2. The oral examination process was fair and reasonable; and
3. The quality of the student's work was consistent with institution-wide expectations and standards.

The completed evaluation form is returned to the Graduate School within three weeks after the oral defense.