

Doctoral Dissertation

The culminating experience of the Psychology PhD program is a doctoral dissertation project. This project resembles the Master's Thesis, but should involve much more independence on the part of the student. Students become eligible for enrollment in Dissertation hours (PSYC 7960) after earning doctoral candidacy. A student should consult with his or her primary academic advisor in order to ensure all requirements have been completed prior to signing up for dissertation hours.

“Dissertation” is broadly defined. Faculty members are willing to consider a wide range of options for a dissertation. Projects such as meta-analyses, analysis of archival data, organizational interventions, and experimental laboratory work, could all be considered appropriate, but must be empirical in nature, not just a theoretical or literature review paper. The dissertation should make an original contribution to psychological science. Preferably the student designs a study and collects original data for the dissertation. And, building on the premise of the preliminary project which demonstrates the student's ability to conduct research independently, the dissertation should originate from the student and be conducted and carried out accordingly.

In addition to the standard format for doctoral dissertations, the Department of Psychology allows for the use of an alternative format that consists of a series (three or more) of conceptually coherent, publication-ready articles, in journal format, as the main basis for the dissertation. This format is rare, but can be proposed. A student wishing to pursue the alternative format dissertation must meet several criteria, including 1) being in good-standing academically, having successfully progressed through all coursework, clinical training or teaching experiences, (clinical) capstone and milestone projects according to the established program timeline; and, 2) gaining the approval of his/her primary academic advisor, the Ph.D. Program Faculty, and from all members of the Dissertation Committee at the time that doctoral candidacy form is filed. Importantly, the choice of which dissertation format to adopt should be decided prior to the dissertation proposal meeting. Moreover, should the student, in consultation with his/her advisor, decide that it would be preferable to alter the format of the dissertation following the proposal meeting, the student is required to obtain approval for this change from all members of his/her committee and to document the change with a revision to the *Doctoral Candidacy Form*.

In this alternative format, the packaged series of studies must be bounded by both a (1) substantial General Introduction section, comprising a comprehensive and critical review of the literature that sets the context for the thematic research, and (2) General Discussion section that synthesizes and critically analyzes the key issues which arise from these studies. These General Introduction and Discussion sections serve as “bookends” and are in addition to (not in place of) the specific Introduction and Discussion sections contained within each article. When preparing a dissertation in the alternative format, a student must: 1) include a separate abstract for each paper of the series, in addition to the always-required general dissertation abstract; and, 2) separate reference lists for each paper, in addition to a master list of references for the entire dissertation document. Reference styles for the non-manuscript portions of the document, including the General Introduction, General Methods and General Discussion should adhere to the guidelines of the latest APA Style Manual; however, for the individual series papers, the structural and reference/citation styles should adhere to those of the journals selected for submission, which should be identified prior to, and identified at, the proposal meeting. When necessary and appropriate, supplemental supporting materials are to be presented in Appendices. If the student and advisor select the alternative format, the student must also provide summary overviews of each proposed article within the series at the dissertation proposal meeting. Each summary overview should include: 1) brief background and significance of the literature, 2) statement of the problem; 3) hypotheses; 4) methods, including the specific procedures, measures/techniques, and analyses for each proposed article, and, 5) intended target journal(s) for publication. The student should prepare these summary overviews with the intent to follow them through to completion. After the formal proposal, and as the dissertation process progresses, if changes are required to any of the article-series components, it is the expectation that the student will keep all dissertation committee members informed. If the committee determines that the proposed changes represent a substantial alteration to the proposed project, a meeting of the Committee members may be necessary to approve the proposed changes.

In some cases, a non-empirical paper may be desirable as part of the series; in this case, it is acceptable with the approval of the Dissertation Chair and Committee, if one of the three papers constitutes a critical review of the literature, theory development, case study, meta-analysis, or a policy paper. Although components may differ (e.g., there may not be a traditional Method section), the same type of summary overview as provided for an empirical series

manuscript must be provided for these types of non-empirical manuscripts, prior to the proposal meeting.

Only papers for which the student is the sole or primary contributor may be included. If the alternative-format dissertation is selected, secondary coauthors should be determined early in the process and documented in the Proposal meeting to avoid any conflicts of interest. If the dissertation chair will be a coauthor of any manuscripts from an alternative-format dissertation, a traditional advising role must be maintained to ensure that the manuscripts fulfill the dissertation requirements, with publication being a secondary goal. Neither the advisor nor any other coauthor who is a member of the student's dissertation committee may compose any portion of the first draft of the dissertation or any of its component manuscripts for which the student is the first author. If a paper is co-authored, that should be acknowledged in a footnote to the chapter title(s) in the dissertation, and a release letter from each coauthor not on the dissertation committee must be included in an Appendix. In all cases, the majority of the work, taken as a whole, must be done by the student, and the student's contribution to each article must be clearly identified. Manuscripts within the proposed series must be previously unpublished work.

As with the traditional format, an alternative format dissertation must meet all other Program and ETSU criteria. As with the traditional format, a committee of at least four members is formed, and a dissertation proposal and defense are held according to existing policies. The student must follow all of the steps for a traditional doctoral dissertation. Like the traditional doctoral dissertation, the manuscript based dissertation will be judged as: pass, conditional pass, or fail.

General Policies about Dissertations in the Psychology Department

1. Dissertation Committee chairpersons will be full-time psychology faculty with appropriate graduate faculty status.
2. Students in collaboration with the dissertation chair should devise a dissertation committee. The dissertation committee will be composed of four members, all of whom must be full-time, tenured or tenure-track faculty members, with an earned doctorate or a terminal degree in their field, and holding at least temporary ETSU Graduate Faculty status. Of these, at least two must be designated faculty within the student's concentration (i.e., clinical, experimental), and at least one must be designated faculty from the other concentration (i.e., clinical, experimental) within the Department of Psychology. The fourth member can be from outside of the Department of Psychology.

3. Once a dissertation committee has been formed, any change in committee membership should be discussed with all involved parties; the *Graduate School Committee Form* must be amended if changes are made. It is the student's responsibility to see that the formal changes are made.
4. File a *Graduate School Committee Form* with the departmental executive aide who will deliver it to the graduate school.
5. Faculty reserves the right to decline to serve on graduate advisory committees. If a student has difficulty finding faculty to serve or must replace a committee member, the DCT/DET will provide assistance.
6. Dissertation defenses are expected to be:
 - a. Announced (time and place) to Psychology faculty and graduate students two weeks ahead of time. Notify the DCT/DET and post a notice on the "Psychtalk" listserv.
 - b. Open to all members of the university community;
 - c. Judged according to a reasonable standard of rigor;
 - d. Evaluated on a pass/fail vote by the Dissertation Committee members;
 - e. Restricted to a maximum of two occasions. A second failure may result in dismissal from the program.
7. As part of the completion of a successful defense of the dissertation project, each student's oral defense will consist of an examination oriented toward the student's dissertation research area and issues relevant to clinical psychological science.
8. After a successful defense, the student should get all forms signed and submitted to the departmental executive aide. It is the student's responsibility to bring appropriate forms to dissertation defense to avoid delays in securing signatures.
9. Specific guidelines on the typing, layout, and deadlines for presenting the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate School are available in the Graduate School.

The Dissertation: Practical Considerations

1. Approval of the proposal is an implicit contract. The faculty is agreeing that if the student diligently and professionally completes the work in the proposal and satisfactorily analyzes the results and conclusions, that they will consider the project to be an adequate dissertation. The student is agreeing to carry out the work as proposed. Both parties agree that there should be no major changes after the approval of the proposal.
2. Students should keep committee members informed of progress. Some chairs and committee members expect to follow the progress of the dissertation very closely.

Others, particularly non-chair members, may not expect intermediate reports. Expectations should be clarified. Students should tailor the frequency of meetings with individuals or the whole committee to student and faculty needs.

3. After gaining the chair's approval of the final draft, a defense should be scheduled. A copy of the dissertation should be given to the committee members two weeks before the date of the defense. The defense should be announced publicly by the departmental executive aide, which typically should occur at least one week before the final defense.
4. Students are responsible for filling out forms with the graduate school to make sure there is an outside observer in attendance.
5. Decided by a departmental vote, students are discouraged from bringing food for their committee to their proposal and defense meetings.
6. Faculty may not be available during summers. There is no formal expectation that faculty will remain involved in thesis work at times when they are not under contract. The contract period for 9-month faculty ordinarily extends from 8/15-5/15. Students should clarify with the chair and committee members their availability during the summer. If faculty members are willing to help during the summer, they are doing it as a favor (they are not on contract with the university).
7. Students should review the additional practical information about theses provided earlier in the handbook, as similar issues apply to dissertations and submit them to the departmental executive aide.

Oral Defense of Dissertations

The student, upon completion of the Dissertation, will be required to orally defend his or her project before the full committee. The purpose of the Oral Defense of the Dissertation is: 1) to evaluate the student's knowledge and understanding of subject matter covered in the dissertation document (emphasis may be placed on topics in which the student's responses are judged to be weak); 2) to evaluate the student's ability to respond, in a scholarly and professional manner, to a variety of verbal inquiries; 3) to evaluate the student's ability to address limitations of prior research with future research ideas; and 4) to evaluate the student's application of theory and research to application through an emphasis on translational work; 5) to evaluate the student's level of ability to design and carry out independent research.