Department of Educational Studies and Research

Dissertation Manual

Revised Spring 2012
Dissertation Manual

The Dissertation

The dissertation must be an original and significant contribution to knowledge in the chosen field. It is an original research enterprise that incorporates appropriate research methodology (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, historical) and is able to pass critical scholarly inspection. The dissertation is a “capstone” test of students’ ability to apply knowledge gained in the program and should demonstrate new knowledge (general and/or specific) when compared to literature on the subject. This research should be guided by a theoretical framework and by clearly stated Research Questions/Hypotheses/Objectives unless the dissertation employs emergent research techniques or is of a historical nature.

Students must be able to demonstrate that their topic is both “original” and a “significant contribution” to gain approval. The dissertation chair and committee members must approve the dissertation topic as well as all components of the dissertation.

Dissertation Timelines

The actual time it takes to complete the dissertation depends on many factors including the scope of the study, the methodology used, and the skill level, motivation, and time investment of the student. A typical dissertation within the department is generally completed within 1.5-2 years.

Time limitations: The final dissertation must be defended after the completion of coursework and successful completion of the comprehensive exams and must occur within eight (8) calendar years of the initial enrollment into the program.

Deadlines: Students must allow ample time to work with the dissertation chair to develop an appropriate draft of each document related to the dissertation. Most documents will require multiple drafts. After the chair has approved the circulation of a draft to the committee, students must allow a minimum of 10 working days for committee members to review each document. This includes the pre-proposal, proposal and dissertation documents. This will be a major factor in meeting dissertation deadlines. The dissertation chair may require the student to provide documents to committee members farther in advance under certain circumstances (e.g., lengthy documents).

Students are responsible for meeting the dissertation deadlines that are listed on the thesis-dissertation deadline schedule in the Bulletin and on the Web at http://www.usm.edu/graduateschool.

Registration and Continuous Enrollment

Registration: The student must complete a minimum of twelve (12) hours of ADE/HE/REF 898 (dissertation) and must register for a minimum of three (3) dissertation hours in both the semester he/she proposes the dissertation (prospectus) and the semester he/she defends the dissertation. If a student fails to meet the final defense and submission deadline of the semester he/she expects to graduate, his or her degree will be awarded the following semester during which the student must enroll for one (1) or more hours of ADE/HE/REF 898.

Continuous Enrollment: After a doctoral student completes his or her comprehensive examination, continuous enrollment in at least one (1) semester hour must be maintained during each fall and spring semester until the student successfully defends the dissertation. Failure to maintain continuous enrollment will result in the student having to reapply to be admitted to the program. This continuous enrollment allows the student to remain in the program and use University resources.

Dissertation Process

1. Committee Selection
2. Successful Completion of Comprehensive Exams
3. Pre-proposal
4. Proposal (prospectus)
5. Dissertation Defense
1. Committee Selection

Dissertation committees should be constituted to reflect the expertise needed for the topic under study and the methodology likely to be used. Qualified individuals from within and without the university may serve on the committee if they have specialized knowledge needed by the student and are approved by the Graduate Council.

Committee members must have appropriate committee or chair status as designated by the Graduate School. See the Graduate School website – “Graduate Faculty.” Dissertation chairs must have Regular – Level 3 status (R3).

The dissertation committee generally consists of at least four (4) members including the chair. At least 3 members must be full-time, tenure-track faculty from within the ESR department. A fourth member may be solicited from outside the ESR department when they have relevant expertise (provided this individual is awarded appropriate committee status). At least one member of the committee should be asked to serve the role of statistician/methodologist. Commonly this role is filled by a committee member, but may be the dissertation chair. (See roles and responsibilities section.)

It is customary within the ESR department for students, near or at the end of coursework, to initiate the process of committee selection by inviting a faculty member within the department to serve as committee chair and then working with that individual to select other members of the committee. Once committee members have been identified, the student should see http://www.usm.edu/graduateschool - Progress toward degree and complete a Graduate Committee Request Form. After securing appropriate signatures, the form should be forwarded to the ESR department chair for approval.

Continuity of committee membership throughout the dissertation process is extremely important; however, a member can resign or be changed for various reasons. Should committee membership drop below four members, the student, in consultation with the dissertation chair, should find a suitable replacement. A modified Graduate Committee Request Form must be submitted to the Graduate School via the Department Chair.

2. Comprehensive Exams

The comprehensive examination should be successfully completed before the first formal proposal (prospectus) meeting and must be within six (6) calendar years from initial enrollment. Students must register for three (3) hours of coursework during the semester in which they take their comprehensive examinations. The format of the comprehensive exam varies by program. Contact the program coordinator for information.

3. Pre-Proposal

The Pre-Proposal is the initial step toward the completion of the dissertation. An approved pre-proposal must precede the dissertation proposal (prospectus) and generally is submitted no later than the end of the semester prior to the anticipated proposal meeting.

Students should consult with their dissertation chair in developing the pre-proposal document which must be approved by the dissertation chair before being circulated to members of the committee. A committee member may either allow the student to proceed to the proposal (prospectus) stage or ask the student to modify and/or resubmit the Pre-Proposal document prior to granting approval. Once a majority of members have approved the Pre-Proposal, the student may proceed with the development of the proposal (prospectus). The student should share all committee feedback regarding the pre-proposal with the dissertation chair.

4. Proposal (Prospectus)

The proposal typically consists of the first three chapters of the subsequent dissertation and should follow the format of the dissertation as directed by the dissertation chair. The proposal should be paginated and include a title page, table of contents, appendices, and references along with the chapter texts. Students work closely with their chair to develop an appropriate proposal and may not send the document to individual committee members until the chair, in consultation with the committee’s statistician/methodologist, determines the proposal is ready for review by the committee. The student must provide copies of the draft proposal to each committee member at least 10 working days prior to the proposal meeting.
The Proposal (Prospectus) Meeting: Unless directed otherwise by his/her dissertation chair, the student generally arranges for the reservation of the room and supplies any A/V equipment (as needed) for the proposal (prospectus) meeting. The meeting will be open to any member of the graduate faculty and, at the discretion of the chair, may be opened to the public. The committee chair, with advice from the committee, has complete authority for the conduct of the proposal meeting. See Format of Meetings for additional information.

Approval of the proposal (prospectus) requires a majority affirmative vote of the committee.

Dissertation Proposal/Prospectus Approval Form: The student should bring a completed copy of the approval form to the proposal meeting and secure appropriate signatures following a successful proposal. The form should then be forwarded to the ESR department chair for approval. The student must make at least three copies of this signed form: one is submitted to the graduate degree auditor, one copy goes to the academic advisor (before or at the time the application for degree is filed), and one copy should be retained and submitted with the student’s IRB application.

5. Dissertation

The Dissertation Document: The dissertation should follow the guidelines provided by the Graduate School and generally follows the most current APA format unless otherwise indicated by the dissertation chair. The Student Manual for Preparing Theses and Dissertations (http://www.usm.edu/graduateschool/reader.php) is the official style guide for dissertations approved at The University of Southern Mississippi. Within the Department of Educational Studies and Research, the dissertation is most commonly expressed in the form of a five (5) chapter, book-length publication. The five (5) chapters generally consist of: Introduction, Review of Literature, Methodology, Results, and Discussion. The student should consult with his or her dissertation chair and statistician/methodologist in the development of the dissertation document and should clarify format, length and other expectations. Students may not send the document to individual committee members until the chair, in consultation with the committee’s statistician/methodologist, determines the dissertation is ready for review by the committee. The student must provide the approved draft of the dissertation to each committee member at least 10 working days prior to the dissertation defense meeting. More time may be required in some circumstances.

The Dissertation Oral Defense: Unless directed otherwise by his/her dissertation chair, the student generally arranges for the reservation of the room and supplies any A/V equipment (as needed) for the dissertation defense. The meeting will be open to any member of the graduate faculty and, at the discretion of the chair, may be opened to the public. The committee chair, with advice from the committee, has complete authority for the conduct of the proposal meeting. See Format of Meetings for additional information.

Approval of the dissertation requires a majority affirmative vote of the committee.

Dissertation Approval Form: The student should bring a completed copy of the approval form to the meeting and secure appropriate signatures following a successful defense. Once the candidate has secured signatures on the results form from the committee members and department chair, the candidate submits the form along with the dissertation title page to the Graduate Reader immediately after the defense. Final copies of the dissertation must be deposited with the Graduate Reader. At the point a candidate successfully defends the dissertation he/she earns the title, “Doctor.” The degree will be conferred at the next scheduled commencement ceremony.

Dissertation Grade – Students enrolled in ADE/HE/REF 898 while working on their dissertation research will receive the grade of ‘E’ to indicate work in progress. A grade of ‘P’ is submitted by the chair during the semester of a successful dissertation defense and completion of the dissertation document.

Format of Meetings

The following is a typical format for proposal and dissertation defense meetings. Students should consult with their dissertation chair regarding individual preferences. Meetings must be approved by the committee chair and there must be a simple majority of committee members present for a meeting to occur. All members should be present at the proposal and final defense meetings, either in person or via technology link if necessary (e.g., phone conferencing, webcam). Students will make every attempt to accommodate the various schedules of committee members. On the rare occasion that a committee member cannot attend the meeting, the member may send a proxy.
vote along with his or her written feedback and recommendations. A statement of proxy and written feedback/recommendations should be given to the dissertation chair prior to the scheduled meeting.

1) Opening of the Meeting: The Chair opens the meeting, recognizing guests and committee members. The candidate recognizes the chair, committee members and guests.

2) Executive Session: The committee typically goes into executive session and all non-committee members leave the room (including the candidate and guests). The chair polls members to ascertain if there are major concerns that might prohibit the candidate’s successful proposal or defense. At this point, the chair can decide to cancel the meeting or proceed. An example of why an oral defense may be cancelled would be an accusation of plagiarism.

3) Presentation: Although each member has thoroughly read the dissertation, the student makes a formal 15-30 minute presentation of his or her research. The time and format should be discussed with the chair prior to the meeting. A Power Point presentation is often, but not always, required. The student should be able to articulate a keen understanding of the literature, methodology, results, conclusions and implications of the study.

4) Questions/Comments: The chair opens the floor for questions from the committee typically calling on each committee member individually. Committee members ask questions and/or provide comments related to the candidate’s work. This questioning session continues until ample time has been given to each committee member and/or until there are no more questions/comments. At the discretion of the chair, other faculty members and/or graduate students in attendance may be called upon to ask questions and/or provide comments.

5) Executive Session: The committee goes back into executive session and again all non-committee members leave the room (including the candidate and guests). Discussion of, and decisions about, the results of the defense must be limited to the committee members. At this time, the chair calls for a vote on the outcome of the oral defense. Committee members have these options:

   a. Approved with no revisions
   b. Approved with revisions (committee reconvenes after revisions are made)
   c. Not approved

6) Results: The student/candidate rejoins the committee and is notified of the results. No guests or other non-committee members may be present during this portion of the meeting. Following approval, the results are indicated on the appropriate approval form from the Graduate School and committee signatures are obtained as is the signature of the department chair.

Responsible Conduct of Research and Institutional Review Board (IRB)

The University of Southern Mississippi and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services have established standards and guidelines to protect individuals from risks associated with participating in research studies. The university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) is responsible for ensuring that adequate safeguards are in place to minimize the risk to individuals involved in such studies. The IRB, through an appointed chairperson, reports directly to the Vice President for Research. The IRB acts as a monitor to ensure that the university’s research using people as participants is in compliance with the U.S. DHHS policies and other procedures. All investigations, experiments, surveys, or demonstrations involving human subjects, regardless of funding or the source of the funds, must be reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board before the activity is begun. This includes doctoral dissertations.

All students must complete RCR (Responsible Conduct of Research) training during their first semester of graduate enrollment. No IRB applications will be accepted until this training is successfully completed.

Application cover page and directions for submission of protocols for review by the Institutional Review Board are available on the IRB website. The application must include documentation that the student has successfully completed the Responsible Conduct in Research Module training as required by the university for all graduate students. All IRB applications must be submitted electronically as a single pdf file directly to the dissertation chair after a successful proposal meeting.

The dissertation chair serves as advisor for the purpose of IRB review and will forward the IRB application. Once the dissertation chair, the department chair, and the IRB reviewer have approved the project, the student will be notified by email (sent to the email address included on the application cover page.) The signed and approved IRB approval letter (attached to the approval email) should be included in an appendix of the dissertation.
The IRB reviewer may request modifications of the application. Students should respond promptly to these requests. Students should expect the IRB review process to take at least one month. The process may take longer if the review board requests revisions from the student.

Roles and Responsibilities

Academic Advisor

The role of the academic advisor is to counsel students regarding degree requirements, course selection and other program-specific issues. Advisors may also assist students in selecting their dissertation chair.

Doctoral Student/Candidate

The responsibility for the successful completion of the doctoral degree and in particular, the dissertation, rests with the doctoral student/candidate. Committee members serve only in an advisory capacity with the authority to approve/disapprove the student/candidate’s work. To that end, it is the responsibility of the doctoral student/candidate to solicit input from committee members, follow recommended timetables, meet deadlines, know and comply with the Graduate School guidelines, plan committee meetings in accordance with the committee chair, and keep committee members informed of progress. Also, in working relationships with committee members, the student/candidate should be mindful that members have many other professional responsibilities and serve at their discretion. Students/candidates should allow ample time for committee members to review and respond to submissions and/or questions. The student/candidate is generally directed by the chair to consult with committee members regarding an agreeable time and date for meetings and to secure a location and any A/V equipment needed.

Advisement: Doctoral students/candidates are expected to attend regular advisement sessions and ensure they have successfully completed all coursework and the comprehensive exams before the proposal (prospectus) and/or substantial work toward the dissertation begins. Students must meet registration requirements including those related to residency requirements, continuous enrollment, registering for a minimum of twelve (12) hours of 898, including at least three (3) hours of 898 in each of the semesters they propose and defend the dissertation.

Academic Integrity: The doctoral student/candidate is expected to maintain a high standard of academic integrity. Students are expected to know what constitutes plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty and avoid all occurrences. When a violation occurs the student may be recommended for dismissal from the program and/or expulsion from the university.

Courtesies to Committee Members: In setting dates/times for dissertation committee meetings students should attempt to accommodate the varied schedules of committee members. Additionally, students should supply documents in the preferred format (i.e., paper or electronic) of each committee member allowing at least 10 working days for members to review documents. More time may be required for adequate review.

Committee Selection: Doctoral students should select an appropriate dissertation chair in consultation with their advisor. The dissertation chair must have chair status and be a full-time faculty member within the ESR Department. The doctoral student should formally invite the chair to serve and be prepared to discuss recommendations for the selection of other committee members.

Policies and Procedures: Doctoral students are responsible for knowing and following university and department policies related to the dissertation process. This includes meeting deadlines, downloading and completing appropriate approval forms, acquiring signatures and filing appropriate documents.

Application for Degree/Candidacy: After completing all the requirements for the doctoral degree, other than the dissertation defense, and after the proposal has been approved at least one semester prior to graduation, doctoral students may apply for degree/candidacy. The chair and committee members’ signatures are required on the application/plan of study. A doctoral student becomes a doctoral candidate at this stage.

Human Subjects Review/IRB: If the dissertation involves gathering data from or about human subjects, students must submit an IRB application for Human Subjects Review after the proposal (prospectus) is approved. The protocol is available at [http://www.usm.edu/irb](http://www.usm.edu/irb). Data collection may commence only after receiving approval from the Human Subjects Review Board which may take at least one month to obtain. The approval notification must be included in the appendix of the dissertation. Note: The dissertation chair serves as the advisor on the Human Subjects Review Form.

Commencement: Doctoral graduates are required to attend commencement unless excused by the University President. Completion of the doctoral degree is a significant event and doctoral graduates are recognized.
during commencement in a “hooding” ceremony. Dissertation chairs hood their graduates. In the event the chair is unable to attend, another committee member may be asked to hood.

Dissertation Committee Chair
A dissertation chair must have chair status (R3) as designated through the Graduate Council. The dissertation committee chair is the doctoral candidate’s primary advisor during all phases of the dissertation process. The chair is the leader of the committee and is the committee’s liaison with the student, the program, the department, and the Graduate School. The chair convenes and conducts the proposal (prospectus) and dissertation defense meetings, and assists in completing required paperwork. In conjunction with other committee members, the chair is responsible for providing technical and content advice and assistance. When appropriate, the student may invite his/her academic advisor to serve as dissertation chair.

Committee selection: The dissertation chair advises students in the selection of other committee members. After the student completes the Graduate Committee Request Form (http://www.usm.edu/graduateschool) and secures all committee members’ signatures, the student or dissertation chair will submit the completed form to the department chair for approval. If subsequent changes are made to the committee, the department chair forwards a copy of the revised committee appointment form to the Graduate School, indicating the requested membership changes.

Pre-proposal: The chair and committee members review students’ Pre-proposals and provide critical feedback. Once the student provides the chair with the written feedback from all committee members, the chair meets with the student to discuss recommendations and clarify expectations.

Proposal (prospectus): The chair assists the student with understanding expectations, deadlines, and the overall process. The chair should be available to discuss student’s progress and answer questions, read draft(s) of the proposal thoroughly, and provide critical feedback until the student has prepared a document that is appropriate to present to the committee. A proposal should not be sent to individual committee members until the chair, in consultation with the committee member serving as statistician/methodologist, determines the prospectus is ready for review. The chair convenes and conducts the proposal meeting and completes a Dissertation Proposal/Prospectus Approval Form that has been provided by the student.

Application for Degree/Candidacy: Students apply for degree/candidacy after the proposal is approved. The chair and committee members’ signatures are required on the plan of study filed with this application.

Human Subjects Review/IRB: The chair assists students with understanding the process and provides technical and content advice for the completion of the IRB application for Human Subjects Review that the student submits after the proposal is approved. The dissertation chair serves as the advisor on the Human Subjects Review Form (http://www.usm.edu/irb)

Dissertation Defense: The chair assists the student with understanding expectations, deadlines, and the overall process. The chair should be available to discuss the student’s progress and answer questions, read draft(s) of the dissertation document thoroughly, and provide critical feedback until the student has prepared a document that is appropriate to present to the committee. A dissertation document should not be sent to individual committee members until the chair, in consultation with the committee member serving as statistician/methodologist, determines the document is ready for their review. The chair convenes and conducts the dissertation defense meeting and completes a Results of Oral Defense of Dissertation Form provided by the student. The student submits this form, along with the dissertation title page, to the graduate reader immediately following defense.

Dissertation Grade: Chairs should assign a grade of ‘E’ to indicate work in progress for students enrolled in ADE/HEA/REF 898. Upon successful defense of a completed dissertation, the chair will assign a grade of “P.”

Commencement: The chair attends commencement and has the honor of ‘hooding’ his or her doctoral graduates. This is a major life event for the graduate and every effort should be made by the chair and graduates to attend commencement. Should the chair be unable to attend, he or she should select an appropriate substitute from the dissertation committee and notify the Graduate School of the substitution.

Committee Members
A committee member must have committee status as designated through the Graduate Council. Committee members advise students throughout the process in areas appropriate to their expertise and interests. Members also comment on draft documents developed by the doctoral students/candidates. Members are responsible for evaluating the pre-proposal, proposal (prospectus), and the completed dissertation work. All members should be present at the proposal and final defense meetings, either in person or via technology link (e.g., phone conferencing, webcam). Students will make every attempt to accommodate the various schedules of committee members. On the rare
occasion that a committee member cannot attend a meeting, the member may send a proxy vote along with his or her written feedback and recommendations. A statement of proxy and written feedback/recommendations should be given to the dissertation chair prior to the scheduled meeting.

**Graduate Reader**

The Graduate Reader ensures that dissertations meet university requirements. Students should consult with the graduate reader throughout the dissertation process (http://www.asm.edu/graduateschool).