

## Preparing for the Final Oral Exam

Doctoral students must successfully defend their theses in a final oral examination and must graduate within eight calendar years after enrollment in the PhD program. The final oral examination procedures for the student are on page 35 of the PhD handbook.

### Graduate Student Services & Progress (GSSP) General Procedures

**Before the examination begins** – Please ensure that all assigned committee members are present. The absence of any assigned member results in an invalid examination. If all committee members are not present, you must contact the College Coordinator (CC) immediately before the examination begins, to request any last-minute committee changes. CC contact information can be found at, <https://apps.grad.umn.edu/lists/CC/>. After the defense, students must initiate a change in committee request at, <http://www.grad.umn.edu/students/forms/doctoral/index.html>.

### Examination protocol

*Step One – The Public Seminar:* The final examination begins with a seminar to which the scholarly community is invited and which includes a presentation of the dissertation by the candidate.

*Step Two – The Closed Examination:* A closed meeting between the candidate and the appointed examining committee immediately follows the public seminar. The examination is limited to the candidate's dissertation subject and relevant areas. The entire examination (i.e., public seminar and closed examination) is not to exceed three hours.

*Step Three – The Vote:* At the end of the closed examination the candidate is excused from the room. A written, secret ballot is taken before discussion of the examination begins. Following the committee's discussion, a second and final vote is taken on whether the student passed the examination.

### Outcome of the examination

To be recommended for the award of the doctoral degree, candidates must receive a vote with no more than one member of the total examining committee dissenting.

### Reporting examination results (clear pass or fail)

If the student clearly passed (i.e., the student received no more than one dissenting vote *and* no recommendations were made by the committee for revisions) or failed the examination, and all members signed the final oral examination report form, the report form must be returned to GSSP (160 Williamson Hall) once all signatures have been obtained. For exams with committee members participating by phone or videoconference, one faxed or scanned signature is acceptable.

### **Reporting examination results (revisions recommended by committee)**

If the committee recommends revisions to the dissertation, the student's adviser is responsible for ensuring that the student includes the appropriate modifications and required revisions in the final dissertation. The final oral examination report form should not be signed and submitted to GSSP until all revisions have been made. If the form will be held for more than one week, the committee chairperson must send an email to GSSP at, [gssp@umn.edu](mailto:gssp@umn.edu) stating that the form is being held pending revisions.

### **Special Circumstances**

#### **Retakes and "Pass with reservations"**

According to the rules defined by the graduate faculty, the student either passes or fails the final doctoral examination. Retakes are not permitted, and (unlike the preliminary oral examination) there is no provision for a "pass with reservations." The faculty examining committee has both the authority and the responsibility to fail a student whose dissertation or performance in the oral defense does not meet the standards for award of the doctoral degree.

#### **Recessing the examination**

Occasionally there are instances in which the final examination does not proceed well, but in which the faculty feel that the student has an acceptable dissertation that she or he is capable of adequately defending. While such instances should be rare, it is in both the student's and the faculty's interest to follow clearly defined procedures (see below) for recessing and reconvening the final oral examination.

*Note: Suggestions for minor revisions in the dissertation are common and do not require that the faculty or the student follow the procedures outlined below. Such minor revisions need only be made in the text of the dissertation before the final copy is submitted to GSSP (see "Reporting examination results" above.)*

Circumstances that might prompt a recess of the final oral examination would fall into two broad categories involving 1) primarily non-substantive matters or 2) cases in which the faculty have a serious concern about either the dissertation itself or the student's ability to defend it, but in which they believe that the situation can be remedied if the student is given additional time to revise the dissertation or prepare for the examination.

*1) Primarily non-substantive matters:* Cases in this category include, but are not limited to, those in which the student's nervousness prevents him or her from adequately defending the dissertation. In such circumstances, the examining committee may decide informally to recess for up to one week. The committee and the student should select a date and time for reconvening that is agreeable to all parties. No written notice need be given to the student, although the faculty should give him or her advice and assurance, as they deem important. GSSP need not be notified of the recess until after the fact, when the final examination report form is returned. At that time, as chair of the examining committee, please

attach a brief note indicating simply that the committee had recessed, and provide the date the examination was reconvened and the examination of the student was completed.

2) *More serious concerns*: When the faculty has serious concerns about the dissertation or the student's ability to defend it, but feels the student has the potential to improve the dissertation or his/her examination performance, the faculty should stop the examination, inform the student of their intent to recess, and discuss with the student the deficiencies that prompted the recess. As chair of the examination committee, you should send a letter or email to the student clearly stating these deficiencies, outlining the steps necessary to remedy them, and indicating when the committee expects to reconvene and resume the examination. The letter or email should be sent to the student within a week of the recessed examination. A copy of the letter or email should be sent to GSSP (160 Williamson Hall,) along with the *unsigned* Final Oral Examination Report form. When the student and the committee are ready to reconvene the examination, it should be scheduled in the normal way with GSSP.

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