

Rehabilitation Science PhD Program

Dissertation Oral Defense Guidelines

Program Director: Dr. David Fuller (ddf@php.ufl.edu)
Academic Coordinator: Laura Quintana (lauraq@php.ufl.edu)

All Rehabilitation Science PhD candidates are required to take and pass a dissertation oral defense (hereafter referred to as the “defense”) to fulfill the degree requirement. This document provides general guidelines regarding the structure of the defense. It outlines the expected structure of a defense with the understanding that PhD candidate (“candidate”) and supervisory committee chair may reasonably adapt the recommended guidelines to better suite individual projects.

Note: This document does not address all critical deadlines during the final semester. For additional information on milestones, see the Rehabilitation Science student handbook and Graduate Student Handbook.

- Scheduling the defense:
 - a. The defense must take place at least one week prior to posted final dissertation submission deadline: <http://graduateschool.ufl.edu/about-us/offices/editorial/editorial-deadlines/>
 - It is the candidate’s responsibility to schedule the defense with the committee.
 - The candidate is strongly encouraged to schedule the defense at least 2 weeks prior to the posted deadline final dissertation submission deadline to allow enough time to edit the written dissertation as requested by the supervisory committee.
 - Other best practice recommendations include:
 - Candidate schedules the defense date with their supervisory committee a minimum of 8 weeks ahead of target defense date. This is because faculty schedules fill up quickly.
 - Room for defense is reserved at least six weeks in advance as space also books up quickly. Contact Rehabilitation Science Academic Coordinator if there are questions about room reservations.
 - Dissertation committee members receive a draft of the dissertation at least 2 weeks prior to the defense date
 - b. The candidate and the supervisory committee chair or co-chair (as applicable) must be physically present together at the same location. If necessary, and with approval of the entire committee, other committee members may attend the defense remotely, using modern communication technology.
- Online broadcasting (e.g. Zoom or similar technology):
 - a. When possible, the dissertation defense will be broadcast via appropriate online stream platform. With permission of the candidate and supervisory committee chair, the public portion of the dissertation defense will be recorded.
 - b. The Academic Coordinator will set up the meeting with appropriate security controls (i.e. password required). The candidate will be added as an alternate host of the meeting.
- Advertisement of the defense:

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- a. Candidate notifies Rehabilitation Science Academic Coordinator as soon as the defense is scheduled.
- b. Public advertisements are sent to program and college listservs and posted to PHHP TVs on the ground floor of Health Profession, Nursing, and Pharmacy (HPNP) Building by the Academic Coordinator
- Final examination forms
 - a. Candidate contacts the Academic Coordinator at least one week prior to defense for final examination paperwork. Academic Coordinator will provide:
 - Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Form: To be signed by all members of the supervisory committee. This form verifies that the written portion of the dissertation is complete and ready for final submission. If dissertation changes are requested, the supervisory committee chair or designee may hold the ETD Signature Page until all committee members are satisfied with the dissertation.
 - Final Examination Form: To be signed by all members of the supervisory committee. This form verifies the candidate has successfully completed their dissertation oral defense.
 - Completed forms are returned to the Academic Coordinator at least two business days ahead of the posted final dissertation submission deadline for the graduating semester: <http://graduateschool.ufl.edu/about-us/offices/editorial/editorial-deadlines/>
- Food and drink policy:
 - a. The defense is a formal academic seminar followed by an oral examination. No food or drink are provided at dissertation defense. Candidates are encouraged to focus on preparing their presentation.
- Format and duration of the defense:
 - a. The RSD Steering Committee recommends that candidates and committee members reserve a 3-hr block of time.
 - b. The candidate should check the AV equipment and verify that the presentation works properly before the start of the defense.
 - c. The candidate's presentation and general audience question and answer session is open to the public. The presentation is a formal scientific seminar and should last ~ 45 minutes. This is followed by a ~15 min Q&A session with the general audience. The PhD supervisory committee does not ask questions during this period.
 - d. A "Closed Door" question and answer session with the PhD committee occurs after the seminar and general audience Q&A session. This session generally lasts between 1-2 hours depending on the number and nature of committee questions. It ends when the committee chair determines that no further questions are required to decide the outcome of the exam. At the conclusion of the questioning, the candidate is asked to leave the room while the committee reaches a decision.
- Role of supervisory committee chair:

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- a. The supervisory committee chair acts as the moderator for the public portion of the defense. His or her duties are to a) introduce the candidate and the supervisory committee, b) explain the general defense process, b) moderate the audience question and answer session, and c) see that all attendees act in a civil manner. The chair is familiar with the procedures of the oral defense and has the authority to suspend proceedings should a situation arise that would not be conducive to a fair examination.
 - In the situation of committee co-chairs, these duties may be split between the faculty acting as chairs.
- Role of committee members:
 - a. Review the written dissertation ahead of defense
 - b. Attend the defense
 - c. After the general audience has been excused, participate in the questioning of the candidate
 - d. At the conclusion of questioning, vote as to whether the candidate has successfully defended their PhD dissertation
- Additional role of the external member:
 - a. The external member a) represents the interests of the Graduate School and UF, b) knows Graduate Council policies, and c) serves as an advocate for the student.
 - b. If the academic unit's committee activity conflicts with broader University policies or practices, the external member is responsible for bringing such conflicts to the attention of the appropriate governing body.

General structure:

- 1) Introductions
 - a. The chair will introduce the candidate and provide a brief overview of the scholarly work of the candidate.
 - b. Committee chair will introduce the supervisory committee and their roles.
 - c. The chair will provide an overview of the general structure of the defense.
- 2) Formal presentation
 - a. The candidate will give a full length scientific seminar providing a comprehensive overview of the PhD thesis. (Recommended length: 45 minutes)
Suggested format includes:
 - i. Rationale/Background
 - ii. Hypothesis/Purpose
 - iii. Methods
 - iv. Results
 - v. Interpretation/Discussion
 - vi. Implications for Policy, Practice and/or Research
 - vii. Conclusions
 - viii. Future research plans

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- ix. Acknowledgements
- 3) Audience Q&A
 - a. Supervisory committee chair will moderate public question and answer session (~ 15 minutes).
 - b. Supervisory committee chair will dismiss everyone but the candidate and the committee.
- 4) Closed Door Q&A
 - a. Note: Moderator of the committee question and answer session is usually someone other than the supervisory committee chair.
 - b. Designated committee member moderates the committee question and answer session.
 - c. All committee members have an opportunity to question the student. The recommended order of questioning is to start with the external committee member, and then move to other committee members.
- 5) Deliberation
 - a. Supervisory committee excuses the candidate and deliberate on a) the overall quality and significance of thesis, and b) the defense of his or her findings.
 - b. Each committee member will register a vote of “pass” or “fail”
 - i. Committee chair should cast the last vote to avoid bias (i.e., other committee members should vote first)
- 6) Decision
 - a. Pass: committee signs appropriate forms. If dissertation changes are requested, the supervisory committee chair or his or her designee may hold the ETD Signature Page until all are satisfied with the dissertation. Candidate returns forms to Rehabilitation Science Academic Coordinator
 - Note: Final Exam and ETD forms must be submitted prior to the posted final dissertation submission deadline: <http://graduateschool.ufl.edu/about-us/offices/editorial/editorial-deadlines/>
 - b. Fail: Committee informs candidate and Rehabilitation Science program director. Program director meets with candidate and committee chair to discuss options.