

## Doctoral Prospectus and Dissertation Procedures

### Revised January, 2015

This document is intended to offer guidelines, time-tables, and models of “good progress” for doctoral candidates who have completed their preliminary examinations and are working on the final component of the degree, the dissertation. A dissertation demonstrates the ability to perform original research and to present the results of this investigation in an orderly, accurate, and persuasive manner.

#### **Registering for dissertation hours**

Students completing dissertations should register for ENG 799. A minimum of 15 hours of ENG 799 is required for the degree; the maximum students can take is 24. Normally, TAs and other students on assistantships will register for 6 hours of ENG 799 each semester until the dissertation is completed.

The graduate school stipulates that the doctoral degree must be complete within 7 years. If a student takes a Leave of Absence (which must be approved by the Graduate School, and which covers such situations as military service, bereavement, illness, care giving, maternity, and paternity), that period of leave (up to one academic year) will not be counted toward the seven-year maximum. Please note: extensions to the seven-year policy will only be granted in unusual circumstances and must be approved by the Graduate School.

#### **Dissertation Committee**

The dissertation committee should be composed of 3-4 professors with some degree of expertise in the field of study or a related field. It is important for students to know that they may select a dissertation committee and/or Chair that differs from the committee assembled for the preliminary examination. A minimum of three committee members must be from the English Department of UNCG. If a student wishes to include a faculty member from another department or university on the committee, that person must be a fourth member. Under most circumstances, it is also preferable that the chair of the doctoral committee be a tenured faculty member.

For more information on the doctoral committee, see “English Department Best Practices for Graduate Committees” and “English Department Policy on Doctoral Committees” at this link: <http://www.uncg.edu/eng/graduate/overview/current/policies.html>

#### **Dissertation Prospectus**

The first step in planning the dissertation is to write a prospectus and obtain approval of it by the committee. The final prospectus must be formally approved by the committee within six months of completing the oral portion of the preliminary exam. If this deadline is not met, the Chair may recommend that the committee be dissolved and that he or she be replaced as director of the dissertation.

The prospectus is typically 10-15 double-spaced pages in length, not including bibliography. It typically comprises an introduction in which the candidate describes concisely the focus, the main thesis, and the methodology of the dissertation, and in which she or he explains how her or

his contribution relates to and advances existing scholarship. It should include a chapter-by-chapter outline, possibly followed by a tentative conclusion, and a bibliography.

The Chair should work with the candidate to revise the prospectus, after which the candidate (in consultation with the chair) should arrange a meeting of the entire committee to discuss and formally approve it. (Prior to this meeting, the committee chair should obtain the appropriate forms (see below) from the Graduate Administrative Assistant so that these can be submitted at the conclusion of the meeting or shortly thereafter). At the conclusion of this meeting, the committee should give the candidate clear confirmation that the prospectus has been unanimously approved or, if not, what further revisions are necessary. After the meeting, the Chair of the committee should send an email to the student and the Graduate Administrative Assistant (copying the other committee members) formally confirming the approval of the prospectus, pending any final revisions (as needed). The meeting provides an opportunity for the candidate to think through the issues pertaining to the dissertation, further refine and organize ideas on the subject, and receive feedback on the direction of the project.

Based on input from the committee meeting and in consultation with the Chair, the candidate should revise the prospectus and provide a final copy to the entire committee and the Graduate Administrative Assistant, who will place it in the student's department file. After the dissertation defense, a copy of the prospectus may be made available to future doctoral candidates in a public file.

### **Forms: "Dissertation Topic Approval" and "Application for Admission to Candidacy"**

Upon approval of the prospectus, the graduate student must file two forms; these may be completed and circulated after the committee meeting devoted to the prospectus.

First, the "Dissertation Topic Approval" comprises a title and brief description of the work to be undertaken. The entire committee must sign this form, and the Graduate Administrative Assistant will be forward it to the graduate school with the approved prospectus attached to it.

Second, the "Application for Admission to Candidacy." This form must be signed by the graduate student and the committee Chair and will be submitted at the same time that the student submits the "Dissertation Topic Approval" form.

### **Writing the Dissertation: Planning and Demonstrating Good Progress**

Though the time frame and length will vary, dissertations are typically completed within a span of 1½ to 2 years, during the candidate's third, fourth, and fifth years in the program. They typically consist of 4-5 chapters plus an introduction and bibliography, and they often include a conclusion of some sort. The final dissertation typically comprises 150 to 300 pages.

Weblink to Sample Dissertation in American Literature:

[http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/George\\_uncg\\_0154D\\_11165.pdf](http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/George_uncg_0154D_11165.pdf)

Weblink to Sample Dissertation in British Literature:

[http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/Reigle\\_uncg\\_0154D\\_10397.pdf](http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/Reigle_uncg_0154D_10397.pdf)

Weblink to Sample Dissertation in Rhetoric and Composition:  
[http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/Pennington\\_uncg\\_0154D\\_10465.pdf](http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/Pennington_uncg_0154D_10465.pdf)

### **Developing and evaluating a dissertation timeline**

After the prospectus is approved, the candidate should develop a realistic timeline for completing the entire dissertation. The dissertation timeline should be evaluated and approved by the entire committee at the beginning of the process, though this may be circulated and approved without a formal meeting. Ideally, the candidate will begin preparing the timeline by establishing an anticipated final submission date and working backwards. To determine an accurate final submission date, the candidate should consult with the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) to clarify deadlines during the semester for oral defense of the dissertation and final digital submission to the graduate school. Though the length of time will vary by committee, the candidate should typically allow for 3-4 months of writing and research to complete a working draft of each chapter. The dissertation timeline should plan for each chapter to be read and commented upon within approximately 2-4 weeks of its submission to the Chair and/or committee members.

Ideally the candidate will be in frequent contact with both the Chair and the members of the dissertation committee, seeking advice and guidance and relying upon their expertise. At least one time per semester, the candidate must arrange to meet with the Chair to evaluate his or her writing progress against the original dissertation timeline. If revisions to the timeline are necessary, these should be agreed upon and outlined as well. The candidate should bring the timeline to the meeting and is responsible for making any revisions thereto and redistributing it to the committee after the meeting.

If a candidate fails to schedule and attend a progress evaluation meeting with the Chair for more than two semesters, the Chair may recommend that the committee be dissolved and that he or she be replaced as director of the dissertation.

[Link to Sample Timeline 1](#)  
[Link to Sample Timeline 2](#)

### **Drafting, revising, and distributing chapters**

Candidates should follow the guidance of their Chair and committee, but in general, dissertation chapters should typically:

- Range from 40-60 pages each, including notes
- Make a clear claim and argue in support of it with textual evidence based on a clear methodological or theoretical foundation
- Extend, expand, and augment the central claims of the project rather than repeat them
- Make use of scholarly or standard editions of primary sources whenever possible

- Refer to scholarship in its original form rather than in anthologies or compilations of criticism

After the prospectus is approved, the candidate and the Chair consult to determine the method whereby drafts of individual chapters are distributed to the committee and evaluated. Typically, the Chair will consult at this point with the committee members to determine which of the evaluation models (below) they prefer.

The Chair acts as the primary point of contact with the candidate: meeting with the candidate on a regular basis; reading drafts of proposals and chapters and offering oral and written feedback in a timely manner; assessing the student's performance throughout the process and alerting him or her (as well as other committee members and the DGS, as appropriate) about perceived weaknesses in the work; and serving as a primary source of information about the field of specialty, the job market, and possible career options post-degree.

The roles played by dissertation committee members vary, but they typically adhere to one of the following models and should be determined in consultation with the candidate and the Chair. Note that different members within an individual committee may choose to adopt different approaches. After the Chair has read and approved revisions to each individual chapter:

- Committee members may read and provide comments on the chapters as they are finished and approved by the Chair
- Committee members may read and provide comments on the chapters in sets of two or three at a time, in which case the candidate should plan and be prepared to make larger-scale revisions to the project upon receiving each member's feedback.
- Committee members may read and provide comments only once a draft of the entire dissertation has been completed and reviewed by the director. In this case, the candidate should plan for committee members to review the work for 4-6 weeks, and the candidate should plan and allot time for large scale revisions to the project upon receipt of returned chapters.

If a candidate receives conflicting advice about the dissertation from committee members, he or she should always consult directly and frankly with the chair in order to resolve the conflict.

### **Final submission and the Oral Defense**

Departmental policy requires that candidates must submit a "final" draft of the dissertation—complete with revisions already made in response to the full committee's suggestions and remarks—to their committee one month before the anticipated oral defense.

Unanimous final approval of the dissertation project—that is, verbal or written assent from all committee members that the dissertation meets research expectations—is required by the Graduate School before the candidate can proceed to defense.

Once the dissertation has been unanimously approved by the committee (but potentially while the student is still formatting it for formal submission to the Graduate School), it must be orally defended by the candidate. The defense will be scheduled by the chair of the dissertation committee in consultation with the candidate and the other committee members.

At least two weeks before the defense, a Final Oral Examination Schedule form must be completed by the Chair and sent to the Graduate School. The Chair should obtain the necessary form from the Graduate Administrative Assistant, complete and sign it, and return it to the Assistant. This form must include the following key details: Title of Dissertation, an Abstract, Place and Time of Defense. The Graduate School will publish this information prior to the defense. The defense is open to all members of the University community who may wish to attend as required by state laws on public meetings.

The oral defense lasts between two and three hours and allows the opportunity for each member of the committee to question the candidate about the dissertation. Possible defense topics include (but are not limited to): the nature of the project's methodology; the validity of the evidence offered in support of the thesis; the overall soundness of the argument; the use of theoretical and secondary material; and future directions in which the project may develop. Upon completing the examination, the committee members will excuse the student while they confer. If the committee disagrees, they will discuss evaluations to reach consensus. The committee may decide whether to render individual decisions by open discussion or secret ballot. Unanimous approval is required for passing the dissertation defense. All members of the committee should be present when they convey their decision to the student. The result of the defense should be conveyed by email or memo to the Director of Graduate Studies and the Graduate Administrative Assistant. In addition, the results of the defense are reported in writing to the Dean of The Graduate School through the Results of Oral Defense form (available from the Graduate Administrative Assistant), which is submitted and signed by the committee Chair.

If the candidate plans to graduate in December, the oral defense must occur no later than October (the exact date is set by the Graduate School each year). If the candidate plans to graduate in May, the oral defense must happen no later than March (again, the exact is set by the Graduate School each year). According to English Department policy, if the candidate is to graduate in August, the oral dissertation defense must happen before the end of May. Exceptions to this policy will only be made in rare circumstances, and must be unanimously approved by all members of the student's committee, the DGS, and the Department Head.