

## **DISSERTATION GUIDELINES**

All students in the program will complete a doctoral dissertation. The doctoral dissertation will be initiated as part of the research apprenticeship required of all students. The dissertation chair is the student's primary advisor, a core faculty member in the Ph.D. Clinical Psychology program. Students in the program must successfully defend their dissertation to a five-member dissertation committee that includes their advisor.

Committee members will be chosen by the student in consultation with the primary advisor/dissertation chair.

The dissertation must be empirical in nature and based on sound research methodology.

All guidelines and requirements for dissertation approval by the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley will apply. The requirements can be found at the Graduate School website page that includes the dissertation manual

(<https://www.utrgv.edu/graduate/files/documents/dissertation-manual-updated-jun183.pdf>).

For the purposes of this document the following language will be used:

- *Dissertation proposal: written proposal* and approval for the document/study to be carried out
- *Dissertation defense: acceptance and approval of the dissertation/document* after the investigation is completed

The dissertation involves the development of a specific research study under the supervision of a core faculty member, the student's research mentor. The process includes ***a formal dissertation proposal meeting and a final oral defense of the dissertation***. The guidelines and procedures for the proposal meeting, dissertation committee composition, and the final defense is provided below.

### **Policy for the Doctoral Dissertation.**

1.) **The student will form a Dissertation Committee** with the guidance of the primary advisor who will serve as dissertation chair. All members of the committee must be approved by the student's advisor. The committee must be composed of at least five individuals, three of whom must be full members or associate members of the university faculty. Three of the five committee members must have a Ph.D. degree. All members must have a doctoral level or medical degree consonant with their faculty appointment and professional training. At least two members (primary advisor +1) must be Ph.D. core faculty. At least one member should have their major affiliation in another department of the University or be a person unaffiliated with the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Outside members should be a content expert with a Doctoral degree, and tenured or on tenure track. Students need to notify the Research

Committee if having a UTRGV unaffiliated outside member. In the event of having an outside member, the dissertation chair has to make sure that procedural guidelines are followed, and the outside member is qualified. Once the committee selection is ready, the student will complete the UTRGV-Graduate Office application for dissertation committee's form (<https://www.utrgv.edu/files/documents/graduate/utrgv-application-for-dissertation-comitee.pdf>).

2.) In consultation with the advisor, the student will identify specific aims for the research project and a series of hypotheses.

3.) The **Dissertation Proposal** will include a critical review of relevant research that leads to a theoretical rationale for the project. Specific aims and detailed hypotheses are to be provided and are related to the critical literature review presented. Students need to follow UTRGV formatting guidelines (<https://www.utrgv.edu/graduate/files/documents/dissertation-formatting-guide-september-2021.pdf>) in conjunction with APA guidelines or use another format specified by their committee chair. The proposal document will minimally include an Introduction and Method section followed by References. The statistical tests proposed to evaluate specific hypotheses and an analysis of statistical power are to be included in the Method section. When appropriate, a Preliminary Studies section may be added to the document that can include earlier work including analyses of pilot data. The Dissertation Proposal document cannot be sent to the Dissertation Committee until the advisor provides her/his approval. All members of the dissertation committee must receive a *final* copy of the proposal a minimum of two weeks before the scheduled oral dissertation proposal date. Doctoral students are expected to complete the dissertation proposal process no later than August 15th of their 5th year in the program.

Students who wish to propose a dissertation based on existing data, a systematic review or meta-analysis, must obtain approval from the dissertation committee. For this approval, the student must submit a pre-proposal, and the committee will evaluate the project's appropriateness **before the dissertation proposal is written.** The pre proposal consists of an outline (3-4 pages, APA format), that includes:

- a) study aims and hypotheses
- b) brief overview of study design including data source and whether they already have permission to access/analyze the data
- c) the unique skill(s) the student will gain by using this existing dataset (e.g., complex analytic technique)
- d) their experience with data collection in graduate school, either with the existing dataset the student wants to use or a different one (Students are expected to have

previous experience during graduate school with data collection if they want to use an existing dataset for their dissertation).

Students should be aware that many large datasets require formal approval prior to gaining access to data. Students are strongly encouraged to fully research the process of permission from the data source prior to submitting their pre-proposal outline to their Dissertation Committee.

The committee will review the outline and recommend for or against moving forward with the proposed dissertation project. If approval is granted, the student will then write a formal Dissertation Proposal, as described above.

4.) The student will **orally defend the proposal** in a formal meeting with Dissertation Committee members.

- a. A minimum of ***two-weeks' notice*** must be provided to all committee members.
- b. **Dissertation Proposal Defense duration:** 60-90 minutes. 15-30 for presentation and the rest for questions.
- c. The committee will submit their evaluation and **Dissertation Proposal** to the Director of Clinical Training.

5.) Once approval of the proposal is obtained from committee members, the student will submit an IRB application (if applicable). After receiving IRB approval, the student will collect the data (if applicable), conduct the investigation, and complete data analyses.

6.) For the final dissertation defense, the student will incorporate a Results and Discussion section with content consistent with the study proposal.

7.) With the advisor's approval, a penultimate draft of the dissertation is submitted to the dissertation committee. The student is expected to **complete this report by the spring of their 6th year in the program.**

8.) **Final defense.** The student will **orally defend the dissertation in a formal meeting with the dissertation committee before the end of their last year in the program (typically the 6<sup>th</sup> year before they complete their clinical internship year).**

- (a) It is recommended that the student complete all dissertation requirements prior to leaving for internship.
- (b) A minimum of two-weeks public notice must be provided to all UTRGV faculty members. Students are required to provide a digital copy (paper copies should be made available when and if needed) of their dissertation document to all committee members and to the Department of Psychological Science Program Specialist at least two weeks before the scheduled dissertation defense meeting.

- (c) The final dissertation examination can be wide ranging in nature. In the defense, *the student is expected to demonstrate a scholarly understanding of the specific topics related to the dissertation study and research area, and the significance of their study findings for the field.*
- (d) In the defense, the student will be expected to address methodology, results, study implications, and the limitations of their study. The committee might also pose other questions to assess knowledge reasonable to expect of an advanced doctoral student.
- (e) **The final examination for the Ph.D. degree is oral and is open to all members of the university community.**
- (f) Defense will last 90 minutes, 30-45 minutes for presentation and the rest for questions. The student and public will leave when the committee deliberates the final decision.
- (g) The decision to pass or fail the student rests exclusively with the dissertation committee, and their deliberations are conducted privately. Dissertation committee members can request changes in the presentation or dissertation document and withhold passing the student until such changes are completed.
- (h) If more than one dissertation committee member judges the student's performance to be unsatisfactory, the examination will be considered failed. Students who fail this examination might be terminated from the program. In some cases, a remediation plan might be proposed by the dissertation committee documented and submitted by the dissertation advisor with specific recommendations made to the department faculty. The faculty can accept, modify, or reject a remediation plan and make recommendations for such action to the department chair.
- (i) The dissertation committee will submit the results of the examination, in writing, to the Director of Clinical Training, Department Chair, and Dean.

11.) Once all dissertation committee members have approved a final dissertation document (<https://www.utrgv.edu/graduate/files/documents/certification-of-completion-of-thesis-or-dissertation-form.pdf>), a recommendation for awarding the doctoral degree is made to the Department Chair and the Dean. All other Department and College requirements must have also been met (e.g., internship completion) before the degree is awarded.

12.) Once the draft of the dissertation has been approved following the defense, the student will follow the Graduate College Process for submitting the final copy of his/her dissertation. Check the Dissertation Manual for deadlines and procedures (<https://www.utrgv.edu/graduate/files/documents/dissertation-manual-updated-jun183.pdf>).