

Thesis Defense: Faculty advisor

The thesis defense is the culmination of completing course work, laboratory research and preparing a thesis / dissertation document to be defended before the student's advisory committee. This event is your opportunity to demonstrate your student's growth as well as a chance to showcase your labs achievements. As a PhD you know that if handled properly the thesis defense can actually be an enjoyable experience for you, your student and the committee members. You also know how badly things can go if the student is not ready, the thesis is not ready and the committee is already hostile. Our goal is to prevent this latter scenario from ever happening. To do that we need to be very clear what the time line for planning is, what we require as steps to stay on track, and most important of all, what is the role of the student and of the advisor in these steps.

Below is a brief table of what we have seen commonly being the cause of the problem when things go wrong

<u>Problem</u>	<u>Impact of this problem</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overall Lack of planning and/or clear communication between the student, faculty advisor, and thesis advisory committee about degree completion timeline. Student left unguided or unaided in planning or setting up defense. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Warrants are requested prematurely (An issue for us at least) . Student has a false expectation of completion timeline. Thesis is not written well or even in final format to be circulated to the committee. Not all Thesis committee members are able to attend due to short notice. Confusion over the chosen date ending up with the Director stepping in. Poor impression at the defense, thesis is already poorly presented and then viewed even more critically. Overall the end experience is poor for the student and the Faculty Advisor looks bad.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faculty members fail to fully respond to student requests over availability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of seniority places the student in a no-win situation to negotiate with busy or difficult faculty. Unrealistic additional expectations for the student breed hostility and resentment. Makes committee meetings adversarial. Inappropriate expectations for the student set the student up for failure and can delay time to degree.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thesis / dissertation is not in final 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Committee members are receiving

<p>draft format for committee distribution to allow for adequate (1 month) review time.</p>	<p>incomplete documents to review.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document is of poor quality to make appropriate assessment by the committee. • Committee members are not prepared for the discussion. Time is spent on off topic conversations.
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The Defense:

With regard to the actual defense itself getting everyone together can legitimately be a problem - these guidelines describe how to choose a date and how to deal with those absent on that date. In addition there have been some events where a lack of clarity of just what is needed as revisions has not been clear and then further delays occur. Put another way there have been inconsistent practices regarding what is a *required change* and what is a *recommended change* and who makes the final decision.

Bearing all this in mind we propose to follow the steps listed below from the very day it is decided to prepare the thesis to the end of the defense.

Steps for advisors in preparing for the thesis defense:

Make sure you discuss with your student that a PhD thesis may take as long as 3 month and MS 2 months to write just the first draft if your student works on it full time. Even then we REQUIRE to circulate the final thesis 4 weeks before the defense.

Planning for the exit seminar is normally seen to take place a semester ahead and yet students are repeatedly leaving the organization of the defense and writing to the last minute. You should also talk to your student about all aspects of organizing a defense at the time they begin to write, or even better as soon as you/they decide to begin. In a separate document we have outlined who is responsible for what in the planning of the defense (student or advisor). Follow this document. Essentially at the time the thesis preparation begins **Your Student** should contact your committee and ask for available dates 3 or more months away. Nonetheless please check with the student that replies are coming in. If faculty are not responding **please follow up in support of your student**. Fix the date as soon as you can. Notify the office by email.

Next, as soon as your student has a complete draft of the thesis that meets your approval and is complete as a scientific document (except index, page numbering etc into a single document but otherwise all chapters are at least complete drafts) - that tells us you are close to circulating your student's thesis. We at the office now need to start thinking about requesting a warrant and so we need to know you are at this stage and on track for the defense date. To do this we need you to sign and return the enclosed form signed by

your advisor and a pdf of the complete draft. Only with this form in hand and the pdf can we proceed.

If at this time you are on track to circulate the Final complete thesis (including all pages, spell checked and final figures) one month ahead of the defense then all is well. If you get way behind we need to adjust your defense date. We REQUIRE you to have your defense thesis in the committee's hands for one month ahead of time and it be in fully printed form (double sided is fine if you want to save paper) delivered by the student. We also need a pdf copy emailed to the office for our records.

At this point you have a month to get the students to do things all students should do. They still have obligations before they leave and now is a good time to do them. Meet with them to go over which notes need to be finalized, where samples, reagents and related documents are describing plasmids, antibodies, etc as required for grant funded work. Encourage the student to prepare remaining chapters for submission. Suggest research areas on PubMed to brush up on to defend the thesis.

At any defense corrections need to be made to the thesis. **It is important you as advisor keeps track of verbal comments but it is also clear any committee member that requires a change before they sign makes that absolutely clear. We will now require all examiners to complete a form at the defense listing that which is a required change. Anything else not listed as required will be default be advisory.** Changes that are required should either be undertaken or an explanation provided of why not (and there may be a good reason that only comes up later- that is fine). Either way the final version should be approved by that examiner and this is indicated by a signature on the warrant. Anything else (ie those changes suggested but not required) is by default changed at the discretion of the student with the approval of the advisor.

Thesis committee member issues:

There are a number of other issues that arise periodically and the advisor and thesis committee members would bear the following in mind.

1) Committee Member Unable to Attend. If a committee is asked at short notice then it is entirely understandable that a committee member may be upset and complain. This document and its associated advance timeline is intended to obviate that problem. If proper planning has taken place and the committee member has a heavy travel schedule for extended periods this is not something the entire committee and student have to work around. The solution is simply that the 'traveler' has to arrange to meet separately or submit their comments in written form much as other universities do for external examiners. Given proper planning, the student has a right to try to be done by a certain date for whatever reason (new job starts, avoiding more fees as semesters end etc) **but**

only given proper planning. We would advise that if a thesis committee meeting cannot be carried out on a certain date with all members in the room at one time, then the priority is maximum attendance with the advisor present. All others who cannot attend at that time must arrange a face to face meeting within one week either side of the defense date. In the event a face to face meeting takes place it should be noted defenses are closed meetings and as such attendance should be restricted to committee members only, even when outside the scheduled defense date. If that face to face meeting is not possible within a week either side of the defense then a written evaluation should be submitted through the ERP office before the defense takes place and will be forwarded to the advisor for use in the meeting.

2) Committee Defense goes into Dispute. This refers to two possible levels of dispute. The first is between two or more faculty and the second is between examiner and student. In both cases it is important to recall this is the thesis defense for the Student and the evaluation of their work as meritorious of a degree being awarded. All other considerations are secondary and all personal issues are irrelevant.

If **two faculty** in a meeting get into a long protracted argument on something **other** than the student's thesis, no matter how interesting or important it is to the faculty it is not advancing the defense. Even worse it is possibly unnerving the student. Keep focused. If a long discussion occurs that is nonetheless relevant to the defense then as long as it is civil it is fine. The Chair of the committee should however watch the meeting stays on time.

If a **faculty member and student** get into a dispute in the meeting remember this must remain civil and again the student's interests are paramount. The advisor as Committee Chair must keep control. The examiner in dispute must also remain aware this is not a student in their lab and while they are entitled to an opinion, the opinions of all other examiners are equally important and all signatures carry equal weight. At the end of the day an examiner has every right to refuse to sign but having stated their views and engaged in discussion with the committee, they should avoid going further to campaign for their view, especially if the majority of others clearly do not agree. Certainly the Committee chair's intervention to prevent unreasonable escalation should be respected. There are two recourses in the event of this being unsatisfactory to the examiner in dispute. The first is to require a change to the thesis that acknowledges this view, although accepting it may be stated alongside other views of the student and advisor. An acceptable change would then be acknowledged by the examiners signature. The second recourse is to bring this to the program director who may handle the complaint with the advisor and appropriate committee members or refer it to the Steering Committee or Graduate School.

Closing Statement. In general ERP has many outstanding faculty and over the past twelve years as a thesis committee member and eight as Director I have attended many excellent

defenses. Nonetheless there have been some that are not so well run with correspondingly poorer outcomes I have also had to deal with. This guide is based on what I have seen and is prepared in order to uphold the highest standards in the program. At the end of the day a good thesis and defense is best for the student, for the advisor, the committee members and the ERP. We all win.