

Dissertation Process

This section of the handbook describes all aspects of the dissertation process and includes information on the following topics:

- Phases of Dissertation Development
- Dissertation Committee Selection
- Dissertation Committee Formation
- Proposal Development - Options I and II
- Proposal Defense
- *Plan of Research Form*
- Human Subjects Compliance
- Data Collection and Analysis
- Dissertation Manuscript Preparation – Option I and II
- Dissertation Defense and *Notice of Final Defense Form*
- Final Editing and *Dissertation Title Page*
- Graduation Information

Introduction

A dissertation is required for satisfactory completion of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree (PhD). The student's program of study should support the dissertation research. The Academic Advisor will help the student plan a program of study appropriate to the student's specific research interest.

The dissertation is a written report of an individual student's investigation of a significant research question. Dissertations address a substantive issue through theoretically based research relevant to nursing practice or education and may serve as a preliminary study in developing a program of research.

Currently, there are two choices for the format of the final written product, Options I and II (defined next). Applicants admitted in Fall, 2009 can only choose Option II for the dissertation format. (PhD Committee, October, 2008)

Option I is the traditional five chapter manuscript. Option II is the submission of an introduction chapter, a minimum of three (3) manuscripts based on and related to the student's research submitted to or published in peer reviewed journals, and a summary chapter synthesizing the three (3) manuscripts as well as the overall limitations of the research and the next needed steps. The three manuscripts should follow a logical plan on a selected research topic. Option II is strongly recommended to enhance the scholarship record of the student. Regardless of which option is selected, regular submission of manuscripts is encouraged or required throughout the entire PhD program. Scholarship developed during course work should be refined and submitted as

appropriate. Students should be encouraged to begin “pilot” work early in the PhD program, solicit funding when possible (small grants), and publish findings along the way.

Phases of Dissertation Development

The dissertation process is generally viewed as having six phases: 1) dissertation committee selection and formation; 2) proposal development; 3) proposal defense; 4) data collection and analysis; 5) scholarly written outcome of the investigation; and 6) oral defense and committee approval. Each phase has several steps, which are further defined next.

Dissertation Committee Selection

Once students are nearing dissertation status, faculty should guide the student to select a dissertation chair; this may or may not be the student’s advisor (Approved in Committee, March, 2006). The dissertation committee is composed of the Dissertation Chair and at least three other faculty members, one of whom must be from outside the College of Nursing. Within 6 months of selecting the Chair, the dissertation committee members are selected by the student with the approval of the Dissertation Chair. The dissertation committee’s membership should reflect a balance of research experience, content expertise, and methodological expertise.

Students may desire an external mentor who has been actively involved with their research project to sit on their dissertation committee. Selection of an external mentor should be discussed with the Dissertation Chair. Outside mentors should have recognized expertise or leadership in the content of the research project. Criteria for approving external mentors may be found at:

<http://academicdepartments.musc.edu/nursing/academics/phd/sectionV-mentors.pdf> .

Although the exact composition of the committee may vary depending on the student’s topic and the availability of faculty, the Dissertation Chair must hold Full member status in the MUSC College of Graduate Studies. The Dissertation Chair will work closely with the student from the stage of proposal development through the completion of the dissertation.

Authorship of future publications from the research should be discussed with the Dissertation Chair early in the proposal development process. It is expected that the student will invite committee members to participate in authoring and/or acknowledge their expertise in the writing of any publishable articles. It is expected that the authors in

co-authored articles take full responsibility to work together in terms of the substance of the article.

Dissertation Advisory Committee Formation

Prior to approaching potential Committee members, the student will develop a 2-5 page concept paper that will be given to potential Committee members. The paper will include 1) brief overview of topic, 2) brief summary of literature (ideally in table form), 3) summary of methods, 4) statement of plan to use Option I or II with brief rationale (for students entering program before fall, 2009). If Option II is chosen, list anticipated manuscripts, and 5) proposed time line for completion. The purpose of the concept paper is to fully inform the Advisory Committee of the content and scope of the research proposal.

Once all members have agreed to serve on the student's committee, the student with support of the Chair, should complete the *Recommendation for Appointment for the Advisory Committee* Form and return it to the Director of the PhD Program. The form is resubmitted if committee members change. The form is found under PhD Student Forms under Current Students on the website.

Proposal Development

Once a student has completed course work and passed the Comprehensive Examination, he or she is eligible to write and defend the research proposal. Students shall defend their proposal within one year from the time of achieving Candidacy. The Dissertation Chair is responsible for certifying that all necessary courses and requirements have been completed. The Dissertation Proposal is developed in close collaboration with the Dissertation Chair and Committee members. The proposal may be in one of two formats depending on the option selected by the student for the final product of the program of study. Both options will include the following components: the purpose and aims of the study, a succinct review of the related research and conceptual/theoretical basis of the study, specific hypothesis to be tested (if appropriate) or research questions, description and proposed research design and methods (including sample, setting, instruments or methods, and data collection procedures), data analysis plans, and human subjects protection.

Option I (for students entering the program before fall, 2009)

Chapter I: Introduction/The Problem/Theoretical Framework

Chapter II: Review of Literature

Chapter III: Methods (including plans for presentation of findings in dissertation)

Option II:
PHS 424 application (A – D) electronic version

Proposal Defense

The student and Dissertation Committee determine a date and time for the defense of the proposed research. The proposal defense meeting is confined to the student and Dissertation Committee only. The student will present a 20 to 30 minute overview of the proposed research. The committee members will have the opportunity to ask questions in relation to the oral presentation or the written proposal. All members of the Dissertation Committee must approve the proposal. If there are conditions that require further development, the student will continue to work with the committee to fulfill any requirements before proceeding with the research. The student should bring/send the *Plan of Research* and *Certification of Successful Defense of Dissertation Proposal* Forms to the defense.

Plan of Research Form Completion

Once the proposal defense is completed, the student and the Committee Chair will complete the *Plan of Research* and the *Certification of Successful Defense of Dissertation Proposal* Forms and send them to the Director of the PhD Program. This documents the approved title and content of the research project.

IRB Approval

Following the proposal defense, but prior to any data collection, research involving human subjects (or data derived from human subjects) must be submitted to the MUSC Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. Information about the IRB approval process and the forms and documents, which must be completed and submitted to the IRB, are available from the MUSC IRB website at: <http://research.musc.edu>. To ensure timely follow-up with all issues, students will place the name, phone and email address of the administrative support person for the PhD Program as the “Contact Person” for all IRB communication. It is important to remember that the IRB process includes terminating the proposal at the end of the research process and maintaining necessary updates with IRB.

Data Collection and Analysis

After the proposal has been reviewed and approved by the IRB, the candidate may proceed with data collection. It is advised that the candidate, with consultation of the Dissertation Chair, establish timelines for data collection and analysis.

Unanticipated events or IRB requirements may require changes in the study methods of the original proposal. If such changes are required, the candidate must secure approval of all committee members. Any committee member may request that the committee meet to discuss the changes. The Dissertation Chair is responsible for resolving any conflicting

points of view among committee members regarding the dissertation. Any change in methods must be approved by the MUSC IRB.

All candidates use computerized data management and analysis strategies, which should be planned during the proposal stage. It is strongly recommended that candidates are knowledgeable in the use of the appropriate analysis software at the time they finalize the proposal. This will assist in preparing instruments for coding. The candidate should prepare a codebook and preliminary plans for data analysis at this time also.

The candidate should plan on working closely with the Dissertation Chair and/or other committee members in the interpretation of the data and in determining additional analyses to be conducted. It is strongly encouraged that candidates meet with their full committee after initial analysis is completed to review findings and determine if additional analysis should be conducted. The candidate should allow ample time for interpreting and writing the results of the study.

Dissertation Manuscript Preparation

Writing the manuscript(s) related to the research requires a significant amount of time, regardless of the option for the dissertation selected. Regularly scheduled meetings between the Dissertation Chair and the candidate will facilitate progress in a timely manner.

Option I (for students entering the program before fall, 2009)

If the student selects Dissertation Option I, the product is an integrated, scholarly report. This report includes the essential components of a dissertation (i.e., the introduction to the question, review of the literature, subjects and methodology, results of study, and discussion of the results). However, the organization and emphasis may vary depending on the particular research question, methods selected, and committee preference. The Dissertation Chair should be consulted on issues of developing the appropriate format for the dissertation based on whether the study was quantitative or qualitative.

Typically, the dissertation will include five chapters including revisions of the three chapters that constituted the proposal as well as chapters four and five addressing the results and the discussion and implications of the results. References and appendices are also included. The format of the manuscript must adhere to the guidelines in *A Guide to the Preparation of Theses and Dissertations (MUSC College of Graduate Studies)* and the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*.

Option II

If the student selects Dissertation Option II, the final product will consist of a minimum of three (3) manuscripts published, submitted, or to be submitted for publication to a peer reviewed journal while a matriculated student in the College of Nursing PhD program.

The specific number of articles suitable for a particular dissertation report is based on the agreement of the PhD candidate and the Dissertation Committee. The student must be the first author and original scholar of the work. The articles will require approval by the Dissertation Committee for inclusion in the dissertation compendium. The manuscripts must contribute to a unified work and include a sequence of articles of publishable quality that have been submitted, will be submitted, or are already published in an appropriate peer reviewed journal. One manuscript must be data-based and report the results of the student's dissertation research. The other manuscripts may be other types such as an integrative review of the literature pertinent to the program of study, instrument development, methodological issues, conceptual analysis and/or theory application related to the study, clinical application of the findings to practice (significance to nursing). The format of the manuscripts will be dictated by the guidelines of the peer reviewed journal to which it is submitted. The journals selected need to be approved by the Dissertation Chair, when appropriate.

For manuscripts accepted for publication before completion of the dissertation, students should be aware of the agreement that is signed when a journal (hard copy or electronic) accepts an article for publication. At that time, the student assigns rights to the journal as publisher. The student must obtain written permission from the copyright holder to include the material in the dissertation. Failure to do so would be breaking U.S. copyright laws. All copyright permissions should be secured before finalizing the formatting of the dissertation.

The published article format must include four sections: (1) introduction, (2) publications, including the dissertation findings, (3) discussion and (4) literature cited. (The candidate may include other sections at his or her discretion.)

The Table Of Contents Format

Use the following sample table of contents as a model. It should include page numbers.

Dissertation Title Page with Signatures (no page # inserted but counted as page i)

Copyright.....ii

Dedication and Acknowledgement (if desired)..... iii

Abstract

Table of Contents

List of Tables (if appropriate).....

List of Figures (if appropriate).....

Chapters

 1 Introduction(no page # inserted but counted as page 1)

 2 Paper 1 (paginated separately)

 3 Paper 2 (paginated separately)

 4 Paper 3 (paginated separately)

 5 Summary and Conclusions (Summarizes the 3 papers as a whole).....

Appendices

References

The Introduction will address the knowledge in the field of study, identify gaps in knowledge, and provide a theoretical foundation for the research. The Summary/Conclusions will include a concise summary tying the work and the manuscripts together and discuss the contribution the research makes to science and nursing, as well as the limitation of the research and next steps. If the student so chooses and with the approval of the Dissertation Chair, appendices may be included that contain other relevant materials including an IRB approval letter, forms used for the research process, and data if relevant.

When the Dissertation Chair believes that the dissertation manuscript is ready (minimum of three articles, one of which is the written report of the study), the manuscript will be circulated to the members of the Dissertation Committee. Within two weeks, the Chair will contact the committee members to determine the state of readiness of the manuscript(s) for the final oral defense. If there are recommended revisions, these will be noted by the chair and communicated to the candidate. When in the opinion of the Chair and the candidate the appropriate revisions have been made, the final defense may be scheduled. At that time, the candidate will communicate the date to the administrative support person for the PhD Program so that he/she can communicate this information to the Dean's Office of the College of Graduate Studies and make arrangements for a room, AV equipment, and notices within the College of Nursing and the College of Graduate Studies.

Dissertation Defense and Notice of Final Defense Form

A *Dissertation Defense Notification* Form must be received in the Dean's Office of the College of Graduate Studies three weeks prior to the date of the Defense. The reason for this rule is so that the Defense can be advertised well enough in advance to allow all interested parties to attend. By the rules of the College of Graduate Studies, all Graduate Faculty may attend the Defense and participate in the questioning of the candidate; only the Dissertation Committee will be permitted to vote on the candidate's performance in the Defense.

NOTE: The candidate may arrange to conduct the Defense via telecommunication from a distant site.

The final defense meeting date should be scheduled at a time that all Dissertation Committee members are available. The College of Graduate Studies encourages all dissertation defenses to be publicized well in advance and to be open to all faculty and graduate students.

The candidate may wish to distribute copies of the abstract(s) of the research to the faculty and students in attendance. The candidate will open the defense with a brief (no more than 30 minute) presentation with appropriate slides, after which the Dissertation Chair will open the examination to appropriate questions from the audience and the Committee. The public questioning will last no more than 30 minutes. The candidate is expected to respond to substantive and methodological questions related to the research.

At the end of the questioning, the Dissertation Chair will excuse everyone except the Dissertation Committee members and the candidate. The candidate will be evaluated both upon the quality and significance of the research manuscripts and the oral defense of the findings. The Dissertation Committee will have primary responsibility for evaluating the candidate's research, including the written dissertation, the formal oral presentation, and the candidate's responses to questions. The candidate will be excused and the committee members will be polled for their vote (pass or fail). Approval of the Dissertation Committee, with no more than one dissenting vote, is necessary for the recommendation for awarding the degree. The decision of the Dissertation Committee will be forwarded to the Director of the PhD Program.

Upon successful defense, the student will have committee members sign both the *Certification of Successful Defense of Dissertation* and the *Dissertation Title Page* (printed on rag paper). The Chair will forward the *Certification of Successful Defense of Dissertation* Form to the Director of the PhD Program for signature, and the signed form will be forwarded to the Dean's Office, COGS. The Chair will maintain the *Dissertation Title Page* until all edits are completed to the satisfaction of the committee members.

Note: If major edits of the dissertation are required, the Committee Chair may decide to withhold the forms for signature by the Committee Members until after the major edits are approved.

Faculty are reminded the dissertation is either approved or disapproved, and there are no "conditional" passes (Approved in Committee, March, 2006). In the event of disapproval, the candidate may be permitted to redo the Defense in not less than six months and not more than two years from the time the initial Defense was held. Only one opportunity for another defense is given. Any candidate who is granted this privilege shall retain the status and obligations of a graduate student until the time of the second defense (.i.e., must maintain matriculation through continuous enrollment).

Exceptional student dissertations by CON students can be nominated by the student's Committee for the COG Dissertation Award, which also has a monetary prize. The award will be given at the May convocation of the COGS. Faculty committee chairs should consider submitting exemplary dissertations with a letter of support to Dean, College of Graduate Studies. (Committee minutes, February, 2006)

Final Editing and the Dissertation Title Page

After successful defense, the candidate will edit the dissertation based on recommendations. See the College of Graduate Studies Handbook on requirements for dissertation. Currently, the only absolute rules from this CGS hand book require the Dissertation Title Page (on rag paper) and clear specifications on margins, length of the abstract, and pagination.

Upon completion of all edits to the satisfaction of committee members, the signed Dissertation Title Page should accompany the final copy of dissertation submitted to the College of Graduate Studies.

Graduation

Once the notices of the Dissertation Defense are distributed, a *Degree Order* form is sent from the Office of Enrollment Services. This form needs to be completed and returned as soon as possible. Three copies of the final signed dissertation are turned into the College of Graduate Studies Dean's Office. In addition, the *Graduate Information Form*, the *UMI PhD Dissertation Agreement Form*, the *PhD Program Exit Survey*, and the *Survey of Earned Doctorates* are submitted. (Please check the College of Graduate Studies website for all information regarding formatting, paper, and specific information regarding preparation of the final documents.)

Diplomas are awarded in May, August, and December. Official graduation ceremonies are only held in May. The PhD degree is not awarded and candidates may not attend the convocation or graduation until the final signed copies of the dissertation are turned into the College of Graduate Studies Dean's Office no later than three weeks prior to the last day for the appropriate semester.

Approved July 11, 2005

Modified May, 2008

Modified October, 2008