Preparation & Defense of a Dissertation Proposal

These policies govern the preparation and defense of a dissertation proposal, which is required by both the Graduate College and the Environmental Science Graduate Program for admission to doctoral candidacy. The dissertation proposal is a student-generated prospectus for the conduct of a doctoral research project that will culminate in a dissertation. The ESGP program is an interdisciplinary program and thus the students’ research efforts are expected to address an environmental problem from multiple perspectives, which may include a social and/or economic perspective.

All doctoral students must submit a written proposal and defend the dissertation proposal before their committee. All committee members must participate in the proposal defense. The Research Advisor is responsible for the scheduling and conduct of the dissertation proposal defense. The student should work with the Research Advisor to assemble the proposal and prepare for its defense. The student is responsible for submitting the dissertation proposal to all committee members but must seek the approval of the Research Advisor before doing so.

The dissertation proposal serves as a vehicle to provide confidence that the student has thoughtfully and comprehensively prepared a research agenda that is likely to achieve success. The more detail offered at this stage, the more useful will be the committee’s reactions and suggestions. It is important to note that the committee’s approval does not guarantee research success; however, a good proposal will minimize chances of failure.

Timing

Once approved by the Research Advisor, the student must submit the final defensible draft of the proposal to other committee members no later than two weeks before the defense. The student should consider scheduling the proposal defense immediately following the comprehensive exam, but in no case can the proposal be defended before passing the comprehensive exam. The ESGP Program Coordinator should also be notified if there is a need to reserve a room for the defense; additional advance notice is needed if teleconferencing or videoconferencing is necessary.

Format

Table of Contents: Include a table of contents that reflects the anticipated contents of the entire dissertation. This informs the committee about how the student intends to organize the dissertation report. The contents must also include references to compliance documents, such as the approved Institutional Review Board form that is required if research on human subjects is proposed.

Chapter 1. The Research Question: This chapter answers the question, “What problem will this research address and why should anyone care?” It presents the problem that the dissertation will address, refines the problem into a statement of one or more research questions, and presents an argument of why the solution to this problem is important. This chapter need not be a lengthy one; 3-5 pages will often suffice.

Chapter 2. The Literature Review: This chapter answers the question, “What have others done about this problem?” It presents an organized and coherent review of relevant literature that frames the problem, reports on findings reached so far, and points out holes and deficiencies in the literature. This chapter could be quite long (e.g., 20 pages).

Chapter 3. The Research Methodology: This chapter answers the question, “What do I plan to do about the problem?” It presents and defends the student’s proposed data collection and analytic methodologies as well as hypotheses, conceptual frameworks, models, and so on.

The student must also provide a table that includes the major milestones and associated completion dates for the conduct of the research and the preparation and defense of the dissertation. This allows the committee to provide comments on the timeline and to plan their own schedules.

Chapter 4. Anticipated Results: This chapter, which answers the question, “How do I plan to display and interpret results?” will later become the Results chapter of the dissertation. This chapter allows the committee to determine
how well the student has thought through the results that will emanate from the research and how best to present them.

Defense
The dissertation proposal defense normally lasts about two hours. The student should dress in business attire and should consult with the Research Advisor for additional suggestions (e.g., scheduling of time and place, modest provision of snacks and beverages, etc.). The defense typically begins with a 30-40 minute professional presentation by the student of the dissertation proposal. The presentation is followed with questions from committee members. Suggestions for improvement are offered. It is important to keep in mind that this defense is not an examination but rather an opportunity to gain reaction from the entire committee and to seek formal approval for the planned research.

The defense will conclude with one of two outcomes:

1. The student may proceed with the planned research after incorporating changes suggested by the committee and in accordance with directions given by the Research Advisor. The student must complete, and committee members sign, an Admission to Doctoral Candidacy form and submit it to the Program Coordinator, who will submit it to the Graduate College. Official admission to candidacy occurs upon signature by the Graduate Dean.

2. The student must substantially revise the proposal and defend the revision before the committee. This outcome is the result of the committee’s judgment that the proposal is not sufficient or complete enough to evaluate satisfactorily. While there is no limit to the number of times that a student can re-defend, the committee can decide that the student is not able to develop an acceptable dissertation proposal and thus recommend that the student not be allowed to continue in the program. If this is the conclusion reached by the committee, the Research Advisor (and Committee Chair, if different) must inform the Program Director by email of their conclusion.

Final Dissertation Defense
The defense of the final dissertation will be conducted in similar manner to the proposal defense, following the Best Practices for Theses and Dissertations published by the OSU Graduate College. The ESGP Program Coordinator should be notified at least one week in advance of the scheduled defense so that the public portion of the defense can be announced; additional advance notice is needed if teleconferencing or videoconferencing is necessary.

There are two possible outcomes of a dissertation defense: Pass – Student has satisfactorily completed the final defense and Fail – Student has not satisfactorily completed the final defense. Each member of the Advisory Committee must sign under one of the above statements recommending either a satisfactory or unsatisfactory defense. To be a considered a passing dissertation defense, the Research Advisor must vote in the affirmative and no more than one member of the Advisory Committee may cast a dissenting vote on the Oral Defense Results Form. The form must be signed and returned to the Graduate College immediately following the defense, irrespective of the outcome. The result of the dissertation defense does not indicate approval of the dissertation document, but only the oral defense of the student’s work.

If the oral defense is judged inadequate, a re-examination decision will be made by the Advisory Committee in accordance with Graduate College requirements. Generally, only a single re-examination is permissible. Should the Advisory Committee decide that re-examination is not allowed, the student has failed to successfully defend their dissertation and will be discontinued from the program. In such cases, the student may submit a written appeal to their Advisory Committee within 14 days of the defense. If the decision stands, the student may appeal the decision, in writing, to the ESGP Admissions and Retention Committee with 14 days of the Advisory Committee’s ruling. If the decision is not overturned, the student may contact the Graduate College to appeal the program decision.