Doctoral Dissertation Committee Guidelines

From the Schar School PhD Student/Faculty Handbook

Dissertation Chair

An important key to success in a dissertation is the selection of a dissertation chair who must be a member of the Schar School core faculty. The dissertation chair gives primary guidance to the student during the proposal and dissertation stages of the program.

Typically, students and faculty members discover or develop mutual interests, and the decision of who will be the chair flows naturally from their evolving relationship. This decision is voluntary on both sides; that is, the student is free to select a dissertation chair, and the faculty is free to decide which students’ committees to chair. It is the responsibility of the student to identify a dissertation chair who will accept the responsibility of supervision. The student’s failure to do so may result in termination from the program. A list of eligible faculty who may serve as dissertation chair is included in Appendix A.

The Role of the Chair

Chairs serve as the major advisor and mentor to the doctoral candidates as they research and write their dissertation. Expectations of the chair include the following:

For the Proposal:
- Consult and meet with the student on a regular basis
- Advise on topic selection (e.g., appropriateness, academic value)
- Guide the student in the proposal writing process (e.g., understanding the need for a clearly defined problem statement, precise research questions, viable methodology, focused literature review, and thorough bibliography)
- Counsel student on reliability and validity of data-gathering methods
- Ensure that all research activities are reviewed by the Office of Research Integrity and Assurance (ORIA) prior to implementation of the research activities. Refer to http://oria.gmu.edu/
- Serve as the principal investigator for the research and assume responsibility for the legal and ethical conduct of the work.
- Facilitate committee discussions about creating and improving the proposal
For the Dissertation:
- Meet with student on a regular basis to provide guidance and evaluation during the research and writing stages
- Review dissertation drafts in a timely manner
- Offer recommendations for revisions
- Communicate with committee members
- Discuss any problematic issues in the dissertation with the committee, student, and program director
- Approve the final draft for the dissertation defense, with the concurrence of the committee members
- Attend and supervise the dissertation defense
- Attend activities to recognize the student’s graduation

A change in dissertation chair is unusual and reflects extraordinary circumstances. A discussion of the proposed change must involve the present chair, the proposed chair, and the Doctoral Program Director. Both the Doctoral Program Director and the Schar School Dean must approve a change in chair. (See Appendix B for the Change of Committee Member form.)

Dissertation Committee

The first formal step in pursuing the dissertation is the formation of a dissertation committee. The chair, in consultation with the student, selects the other members from among Mason faculty. At least three members are required for a committee. All must be tenured or tenure-track members of the Mason faculty, and at least two—including the chair—must be from the Schar School faculty. Students and committee chairs are encouraged to select a third member from another unit of the University who is not from Schar School. The chair and those who have agreed to serve must sign the Dissertation Committee form (see Appendix B).

In the Public Policy program, the members of the dissertation committee will, in most cases, have served on the student’s field research committee. Public policy students must also have an additional external scholar as a dissertation reader. (See the External Reader section in Part VII.)

With the approval of the Doctoral Program Director, the committee may include additional members. These additional members may be part of the Mason faculty, or they may have other affiliations. The Doctoral Program Director recommends the dissertation committee to the Dean of the Schar School. The Dean appoints the members and reserves the right to make such substitutions as necessary, after consultation with the dissertation committee chair. (See Appendix B for the Dissertation Committee form.)

The dissertation committee is responsible for supervising and approving all aspects of dissertation preparation and production: additional coursework, research design, model building, data collection, data analysis, dissertation writing, and the oral defense. The committee reads the various drafts of the dissertation, advises the student about directions the dissertation should take, and identifies changes the student may need to make.
The Role of the Committee
The dissertation committee works with the chair to provide advice and consultation to the candidate throughout the process of research and writing. Expectations of the committee members include the following:

For the Proposal
- Meet with the student
- Advise on topic selection (e.g., appropriateness, academic value)
- Offer expertise in the member’s area of study
- Read and review the proposal in a timely manner
- Discuss any recommendations for revisions with the committee chair and student

For the Dissertation
- Meet with the student to provide guidance and evaluation during the research and writing stages
- Review dissertation drafts in a timely manner
- Offer recommendations for revisions
- Discuss any problematic issues in the dissertation with the committee chair and student
- Approve the final draft for the dissertation defense, in consultation with the other committee members

Members of the dissertation committee are required to be present in person at the dissertation defense.