

## **Thesis and Dissertation Committee Roadmap**

The Northern Arizona University Graduate Committee has developed this roadmap to help thesis and dissertation committee chairs, members, and students navigate the thesis and dissertation process. This document is not a policy, rather, it serves to clarify and encourage best practices of committee chairs, members, and students during the thesis and dissertation process. Specific departmental requirements are found in department/program graduate handbooks.

The University relies upon faculty committees to oversee all aspects of a student's dissertation or thesis project. They are responsible for ensuring that the student complies with all the policies and regulations of both the program, the Graduate College, and the University. Most importantly, they are mentors and advisors to the student. Faculty mentorship is publicized through listings and published records of the abstracts and theses/dissertations.

Thesis/dissertation committees have a historical, established position in the academic world and play a vital role in the guidance, development, and direction of graduate student research. The Chair of the committee often has more responsibilities and serves not only as the student's major disciplinary advisor, but also maintains administrative responsibilities due to the way the University recognizes the Chair's responsibilities. On occasion, the roles of the Chair, committee members, and student require clarification.

This document is divided into the following sections:

- I. Requirements for Thesis and Dissertations Policy
- II. Thesis and Dissertation Committee Responsibilities
  - a. Committee Member Responsibilities
  - b. Committee Chair Responsibilities
  - c. Student Responsibilities
- III. Vacancies and Replacements
- IV. Disputes
- V. Termination of the Committee

### **I. Requirements for Thesis and Dissertations Policy**

The NAU and Graduate College policy listing details surrounding selection of a topic, formation of a committee, registering for thesis or dissertation credit, submitting the document for a format check, scheduling a defense, evaluation of the final defense, and submission of final copies may be found in the Academic Catalog: [Requirements for Theses and Dissertations](#)

### **II. Thesis/Dissertation Committee Responsibilities**

#### **A. Committee Member Responsibilities**

- The initial responsibility of the committee is to meet and determine the feasibility of the topic for the thesis/dissertation proposal/prospectus, and to permit the student to proceed only after such determination has been made. The committee shall approve the student's proposal/prospectus and a copy of documentation or email approvals (per departmental requirements) should be recorded and maintained in the department. Approval signifies that the student has permission to proceed with the study as outlined in the proposal/prospectus;
- Committee members shall offer expertise in their area of study and guidance for the

- student through all stages of the research, writing, and delivery of the dissertation;
- The committee is responsible for assuring that the student is familiar with and understands all university policies concerning thesis/dissertation requirements, the handling of dangerous materials, laboratory and fieldwork safety, and maintenance of standards of quality, ethics, and professional performance/behaviors. The committee (Chair) should inform the student regarding proprietary interest and ownership of data or research product as appropriate, and reach an agreement about these issues. Formal written agreements may be desirable or even mandatory when patent-related issues arise. Agreements should be made as early in the process as possible, preferably at the time the proposal/prospectus is accepted;
  - The committee shall determine whether the student's research is subject to the university policy regarding research on human or animal subjects and advise the student accordingly;
  - The committee shall determine the adequacy of the literature review in the prospectus;
  - The committee shall review and approve the methodology and any instrument or questionnaire used in data collection;
- Committee members are responsible for reviewing thesis and dissertation drafts, and providing feedback in a timely manner. Depending on circumstances, there should be no more than a four- week turnaround review time for each of the committee members to review a thesis or dissertation manuscript;
- Committee members will discuss any recommendations for revisions or problematic issues with the committee Chair and the student;
- The committee is to examine the student's work and to make a final determination of the acceptability of the thesis/dissertation, and to assist in the arranging for any oral defense of the thesis/dissertation in accordance with written department and university policies;
- It is the policy of this university to make all theses and dissertations available to the public through the library's Institutional Repository (IR) and search engines as well through the NAU's established academic publishing service (ProQuest). On rare occasions, committee members shall assist the student in determining the need for and recommending the withholding of material for publication (embargo) for a specified period of time, generally no more than one calendar year. The committee shall also assist the student in making copyright and open-access versus traditional publishing decisions;
- Members of the dissertation committee, the student, and the University Graduate Committee representative must be present at the same location for a dissertation defense. However, given the global initiatives and geographically distributed nature of some NAU doctoral programs, a requirement that all participants in a defense be physically present at the same location presents a hardship for some faculty and students. Therefore, participation from a distant location may be approved by the Associate Dean of the Graduate College for a committee member, or, in unavoidable circumstances, two committee members. At a minimum, the committee chair, the student, and one other committee member must attend at the same location. All committee members must attend the entire defense.

## **B. Committee Chair Responsibilities**

Committee chairs serve as the major advisors and mentors to students as they research, develop, and write their thesis or dissertation. Committee chairs are responsible for following all program, department, Graduate College, and university procedures. Some expectations include, but are not limited to:

### **Proposal/prospectus**

- Consult and meet with the student on a regular basis;
- Assist the student with selecting faculty members to serve on the dissertation committee and approve the final dissertation committee;
- (For Co-Chairs) Consult with each other to divide up supervisory responsibilities, and then inform the student of these arrangements;
- Ensure everyone on the committee is familiar with the roles of Chair or Co-Chair, other committee members, and students. The frequency and detail with which members other

- than the Chair(s) engage with the student's work varies from committee to committee. Expectations should be clarified at the outset and all members should maintain regular contact;
- Discuss your working style and habits with the students and develop a plan that contributes to a good working relationship;
  - Work with the student to schedule and plan for committee meetings, taking into account the norms of the department or program;
  - Advise and approve the topic selection (e.g., appropriateness, academic value);
  - Guide the student in the proposal/prospectus writing process and emphasize the need for:
    - a clearly defined problem statement;
    - precise research questions;
    - viable methodology;
    - focused literature review; and
    - thorough bibliography.
  - Inform the student of the style manual or journal style required by the department for formatting the document most appropriate for the discipline;
  - Counsel student on reliability and validity of data-gathering methods;
  - Ensure that all research activities involving human subjects or data regarding human subjects that are directed by an NAU faculty member, staff member or student (including thesis and dissertation work) or involve NAU faculty, staff or students as participants, are submitted to the [Office of Sponsored Projects](#) (OSP) for review and approval. All research activities will be reviewed by the Human Subjects Review Board prior to implementation of the research activities. The Committee Chair will serve as the principal investigator for the research, if applicable, and assumes responsibility for the legal and ethical conduct of the work;
  - Facilitate committee discussions about creating and improving the proposal and/or prospectus;
  - If you become aware of significant problems or weaknesses (e.g., writing, research-related skills, or personal life), refer the student to appropriate resources;
  - Where feasible, assist the student in securing funds, such as fellowships, GSIs, GSRAs, research and travel funds;
  - If a member of the committee is not responding to the student's communication or failing to review the draft sections of the dissertation in a reasonable amount of time, the committee chair coaches the student about how to proceed, or intervenes directly if warranted. If all efforts fail, the student may be encouraged to consider finding a replacement;
  - Take responsibility for dealing with conflicts among committee members. (e.g., personal conflict and intellectual disputes) that create a roadblock for the student;
  - When needed, set firm guidelines regarding number of times work may be revised and timelines to ensure good academic progress.

### **Thesis or Dissertation Process**

- Establish an agreement on an approximate time schedule (including meetings of the committee) for the completion of thesis- or dissertation-related work each semester or term that the student is engaged in such work;
- Provide guidance and evaluation during the research and writing stages and review thesis or dissertation drafts in a timely manner;
- Emphasize data collection and record keeping;
- Discuss ethical issues, including human subject and animal care protections;
- Be aware of conflicts in a research group, and when they arise, take steps to mediate;
- Offer recommendations for revisions;
- Communicate with committee members;
- Discuss any problematic issues in the thesis or dissertation with the committee, student, and program director/academic coordinator;
- With approval of the committee members, approve the final draft for the thesis or dissertation defense;

### **Thesis or Dissertation Details**

- Make sure the student is aware of [deadlines](#) for defense, submission, and [graduation application](#) (a necessary step in posting the degree to the transcript);
- Inform the student of university regulations regarding the need to maintain [continuous enrollment](#) while working on the thesis/dissertation and the time limit for the degree;
- Ensure the student sends an email copy of the document to the Graduate College Electronic Thesis and Dissertation (ETD) [Coordinator](#) for a format review;
- Inform the student of the Graduate College ETD [website](#) and should encourage attendance at a thesis or dissertation workshop as early as possible in the student's thesis/dissertation process.

### **Thesis or Dissertation Defense**

- Complete and submit the Dissertation Defense Scheduling form available on the ETD [website](#);
- Before the defense begins, the committee must review all the members' written evaluations and identify the topics they will raise and their sequence;
  - If any of these activities has not been done in advance, excuse the student and others from the room to do so.
- Attend and supervise the dissertation defense in person;
- At the defense, make sure it's clear which committee member(s) will sign off on the required revisions;
- After the defense, submit the completed [Oral Defense Form](#) (Thesis/Dissertation Defense) – Part 1 (Pass/Fail Form) to the ETD Coordinator via email.
- Once revisions or corrections are complete, submit the completed Oral Defense Form – Part 2 to the ETD Coordinator via email.
- If revisions and/or corrections are required, make sure the Oral Defense Form – Part 2 is submitted to the ETD Coordinator as soon as possible after the dissertation has been completed and approved;
- Attend commencement to hood the graduates (doctoral students only).

### **Facilitating Student Professional Development and Career Success**

- Prepare students to consider the full range of career possibilities appropriate to their field;
- Ask students to engage in activities and build skill-sets for needs in their professional fields;
- Encourage students to attend professional meetings, and when you attend the same meeting, actively help students to network with other professionals and students;
- Speak honestly to students about their strengths and weaknesses;
- If appropriate to your field, contact other professionals to help students when they are seeking positions, but be deliberate and careful about treating them fairly in this regard;
- If the student's dissertation or thesis is exceptional, consider nominating the student for a WAGS or CGS outstanding dissertation or thesis award.

### **C. Student Responsibilities**

- Completion of a thesis or dissertation is a unique learning experience that requires research, analysis, synthesis, communication, and writing skills at the highest intellectual and professional level;
- Students are to work closely with their committees all throughout the proposal, prospectus, research, development, and writing process;
- Students are responsible for scheduling meetings with committee members and staying in regular, close contact with their committees;
- Students are responsible for knowing and understanding the Graduate College policies and procedures outlined in the NAU [Academic Catalog](#), and the Graduate College [deadlines](#), policies, [forms](#), information, and other resources available on the [Graduate College](#) website.
- The student is responsible for adhering to all Graduate College deadlines for format review, defense scheduling, application for graduation, and submission of the final copy of the thesis/dissertation.

- A reasonable amount of time (no more than four weeks) should be allowed for each of the committee members to review the manuscript.
- Students should make consistent progress toward completion of the dissertation and meet with their dissertation committee regularly after the prospectus meeting.
- Doctoral students are typically expected to complete a doctoral degree within three to six years. In rare circumstances, students may take longer. However, there is a 10-year time limit to complete a doctoral degree following a bachelor's degree and an 8-year time limit following a master's degree.
- Master's students are typically expected to complete a master's degree in two years. In rare circumstances, students may take longer. However, there is a 6-year time limit to complete a master's degree.
- Students should strive to become experts in the topic area of their dissertations and theses and to become develop as professionals in their disciplines.

### **III. Committee Member Vacancies and Replacements**

- If any committee member anticipates an extended (but temporary) absence during the time the student is working on the thesis/dissertation, they should contact the committee Chair and the student to arrange for means of communicating during this leave, or designate an appropriate temporary/permanent substitute;
- A Chair who anticipates an extended temporary absence should contact other committee members and the student to make arrangements, which may include assigning a co-chair;
- Changes to a dissertation committee require approval by the Graduate College Dean for doctoral students using the [Dissertation Committee Recommendation](#) form;
  - The determination to recommend a change in committee membership must be discussed and approved by the Committee Chair;
    - Faculty committee members who are replaced must be informed by the committee Chair;
  - The determination to recommend and a change in the Committee Chair must be discussed and approved by the Department or Program Chair;
    - A change in dissertation committee chair also requires a letter of justification from the Department or Program Chair at the time the Dissertation Committee Recommendation form is submitted;
- If the chair is unexpectedly absent or absent due to planned sabbatical/retirement at the time the student completes their thesis or dissertation, the Department or Program Chair may appoint a Chair or act as Chair, in consultation with the absent chair and other committee members.

### **IV. Disputes**

- In the event that a dispute or disagreement arises between a student and a member of the committee or between members of the committee, the committee Chair shall call a meeting for the purpose of resolving the problem;
- If a proposed solution is unacceptable to the student or one of the committee members, or if the dispute arises between the student and the committee Chair, the Department or Program Chair shall review the situation with the student and the committee and recommend a solution;
- If a proposed solution is unacceptable to the student, committee members, committee Chair, or Department or Program Chair, the Association Dean of the Graduate College shall review the situation and recommend a solution. This will be the final level of appeal.

### **V. Termination of the Committee**

- The committee has completed its obligations when:
  - The final manuscript has been approved and submitted for publishing by the Graduate College;
  - Each committee member has signed the Oral Defense Form (Thesis/Dissertation Defense) - Part 1 (Pass/Fail Form);
  - The designated members have signed the Oral Defense Form - Part 2; and

- The thesis/dissertation grades have been recorded on the transcript.
- In the event that a student does not maintain continuous enrollment or fails to make adequate academic progress after official acceptance of the proposal/prospectus, the committee Chair has the option of dissolving the committee.
  - In these cases, a new committee must be secured and approved by the Graduate College if the student is allowed to continue in the program.
- If a student must suspend work on the thesis/dissertation for reasons acceptable to the committee Chair, the student should submit a [Leave of Absence](#) form with the Graduate College. If the leave is approved, the committee shall continue its existence until the student returns.