



NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

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 serves to clarify and encourage best practices of committee chairs, members, and students during the thesis and dissertation process.

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

Thesis/dissertation committees have an established place in the academic world and play a vital role in the guidance and direction of graduate student research. One member of the committee, the chair, has a more formal administrative relationship with the student because of 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 (to be inserted)
- 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

II. Thesis/Dissertation Committee Responsibilities

A. Committee Member Responsibilities

1. 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 kept in the student's file in the department. Approval signifies that the student has permission to proceed with the study as outlined in the proposal/prospectus.
2. Committee members shall offer expertise in their area of study.
3. The committee is responsible for assuring that the student is familiar with and has received copies of appropriate university policies concerning the handling of dangerous materials, laboratory and fieldwork safety, and maintenance of standards of quality, ethics, and professional performance. The committee (chair) should inform the student regarding proprietary interests and

ownership of data or research product as appropriate, and reach 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.

- a. 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.
- b. The committee shall determine the adequacy of the literature review in the prospectus.
- d. The committee shall review and approve the methodology and any instrument or questionnaire used in data collection.

4. 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 the manuscript for a thesis or dissertation.

8. Committee members discuss any recommendations for revisions or problematic issues with the committee chair and the student

9. The responsibility of the committee as a whole is to examine the student's work and to make a final determination of the acceptability of the thesis/dissertation, and to arrange for any oral defense of the thesis in accordance with written department and university policies.

10. It is the policy of this university to make all theses and dissertations available to the public through the library's data bases and search engines and through established academic abstracting services. On rare occasions, committee members shall assist the student in determining the need for and recommending the withholding of material for publication (placing an embargo) for a specified period of time, generally one calendar year. The committee shall also assist the student in making copyright and open-access versus traditional publishing decisions.

11. Members of the thesis or dissertation committee are expected to be present in person at the defense with exceptions granted by the Graduate College as indicated in the policy above.

B. Committee Chair Responsibilities

Committee chairs serve as the major advisors and mentors to students as they research and write their theses or dissertations. Committee chairs are responsible for following all program, department, college, and university procedures. Some expectations of the chair are:

1. 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
- (For Co-Chairs) Consult with each other to divide up supervisory responsibilities, and then inform the student.
- Make sure 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.

- Coach the student about your working style and what the student can do to contribute 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 on topic selection (e.g., appropriateness, academic value)
- Guide the student in the proposal/prospectus writing process (e.g., understanding 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.
- 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 Programs (OSP) for review and approval. Refer to the website <http://www.nau.edu/research/ORSP/index.html> for information. 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/prospectus
- If you become aware of significant problems or weaknesses (e.g., in the student's 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 the problem is severe. 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/timelines regarding number of times work may be revised.

2. Thesis or Dissertation Process

- The student and the committee chair, insofar as it is possible, should arrive at an agreement on an approximate time schedule, including meetings of the committee, for the accomplishment of thesis/dissertation-related work for each semester or term that the student is engaged in such work and to provide guidance and evaluation during the research and writing stages
- Review thesis or dissertation drafts in a timely manner
- Emphasize data collection and record keeping.
- Go over 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 the concurrence of the committee members, approve the final draft for the thesis or dissertation defense
- Make sure the student is aware of deadlines for defense, submission, and graduation application (which is 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 workshop as early as possible in the student's thesis/dissertation process.
- Complete and submit the Dissertation Defense Scheduling form available on the Graduate College 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 Final Oral Examination (Thesis/Dissertation Defense)—Part 1 (Pass/Fail Form), and, if no revisions or corrections are needed, Verification of Final Thesis/Dissertation Document—Part 2 (Verification Form).
- Attend graduation convocation to hood the graduates (doctoral only)
- If revisions and/or corrections *are* required, make sure the Verification of Final Thesis/Dissertation Document—Part 2 (Verification Form) is submitted to the Graduate College as soon as possible after the dissertation has been completed and approved.
- When needed, set firm guidelines/timelines regarding number of times work may be revised.

3. Facilitating Student Professional Development and Career Success

- Ask students to do tasks they will need to do after they get into the field.
- 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 (e.g., not everyone can succeed as a faculty member).
- If appropriate to your field, call people to help students seek positions and be deliberate and careful about treating them fairly in this regard.
- Prepare students to consider the full range of career possibilities appropriate to their field.
- If the student's dissertation is exceptional, consider nominating the student for the 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, communication, and writing skills at a professional level.
- Students are to work closely with their committees all throughout the proposal/prospectus, research, and writing process.

- Students are responsible for scheduling meetings with committee members and staying in close contact with their committees.
- Students are to work closely with their committees throughout the proposal/prospectus, research, and writing process. Students are to be familiar with the doctoral policies and procedures outlined in the catalog, and the timelines, policies, forms, information and other resources available on the Graduate College website.
- It shall be the responsibility of the student to observe graduate deadlines for format review, defense scheduling, application for graduation, and submission of the final copy of the thesis/dissertation. A reasonable amount of time (not 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 at least once every six months after the prospectus meeting. Students are expected to complete their doctoral degrees 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.
- Students should strive to become experts in the topic area of their dissertations and to become develop as professionals in their disciplines.

III. Vacancies and Replacements

1. If any committee member anticipates an extended but temporary absence during the time the student is working on the thesis/dissertation, he or she should contact the committee chair and the student to arrange for means of communicating during this leave, or designate an appropriate temporary/permanent substitute. Committee chair who anticipate an extended temporary absence should contact other committee members and the student to make arrangements, which may include a co-chair.
2. The determination to make a change in committee chair or membership must be reported to the department chair. Changes to a dissertation committee also require approval by the Graduate College dean for doctoral students using the Recommendation/Change of Dissertation Committee form. A change in dissertation committee chair also requires a letter of justification from the department chair at the time the Recommendation/Change of Dissertation Committee form is submitted. Faculty members who are replaced must be so informed by the committee chair.
3. If the chair is unexpectedly absent or absent due to planned sabbatical/retirement at the time the student completes the thesis/dissertation, the department chair may appoint a committee chair or act for the committee chair, in consultation with the absent chair or other committee members.

IV. Disputes

1. 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 of the committee and the student for the purpose of resolving the problem.
2. If a dispute arises between the student and the committee chair, or if the proposed solution is unacceptable to the student or one of the committee members, the department chair shall review

the situation with the student and the committee and recommend a solution. the association dean of the college shall review the situation and recommend a solution.

3. If the dispute cannot be resolved through this processor if the committee chair is the department chair, the student or any committee member may request that the graduate committee of the student's department/program review the problem and recommend a solution.

4. If the problem cannot be resolved at the department level, the dispute should be appealed to the college or school dean. This will be the final level of appeal.

V. Termination of the Committee

1. The committee shall have discharged its obligations when the final manuscript has been approved by the Graduate College, each member has signed the Final Oral Examination (Thesis/Dissertation Defense)—Part 1 (Pass/Fail Form), the designated members have signed the Verification of Final Thesis/Dissertation Document—Part 2 (Verification Form), and the thesis/dissertation grade has been recorded on the transcript.

2. In the event that a student does not register for thesis/dissertation or fails to adequate progress toward the dissertation after official acceptance of the proposal/prospectus by a committee, the committee chair has the option of dissolving the committee, in which case a new committee must be secured and approved by the Graduate College.

3. If a student must suspend work on the thesis/dissertation for educational reasons acceptable to the committee chair, the student should submit a leave of absence form. These leaves may be approved for up to one year. If the leave is approved, the committee shall continue its existence until the student returns.

