

**Office of Academic Services
Doctoral Programs**

**Policy and Procedural Guidelines
Doctoral Dissertation Oral Examination**

For detailed information about the oral examination, refer to the Stanford Bulletin and Graduate School of Education (GSE) Doctoral Degree Handbook applicable to the student's year of admission.

Registration and Candidacy:

Students must be registered (i.e., enrolled) in the quarter for which the oral exam is taken, including summer, and their doctoral candidacy must be valid.

Forms and Scheduling:

Oral exams cannot be scheduled until the dissertation is essentially complete. The *University Oral Exam Form* should be submitted to the Assistant Director of Degree Programs, Kate McKinney, two to four weeks before the oral exam date.

For students with a Ph.D. minor, representation on the oral exam committee by the minor department might be required, in which case, one examiner on the committee may need to hold a courtesy, joint, or full appointment in the minor department. Regardless of whether representation is required, students with a departmental Ph.D. minor must obtain a signature from the minor department on the *Oral Exam Schedule* form.

The oral exam should not exceed three hours in total length.

A committee member may participate via telephone if s/he is unable to attend the oral exam in person. That committee member should cast his/her vote to the chair during the closed committee discussion period. The chair should record the vote on a ballot.

Students must coordinate the oral exam date and time with their committee, and reserve their room in advance. Rooms can be reserved at the following website: <https://25live.collegenet.com/stanford/>. The GSE IT group located in CERAS can assist with any technology needs (e.g., audio/visual).

Committee Composition:

The oral examining committee is composed of a minimum of five faculty members: four examiners and the University chair (the chair should ideally be from outside the GSE, but must be fully outside the student's area). The committee must include the dissertation advisor and at least one other member of the dissertation reading committee. The oral exam and reading committees are separate and distinct bodies; however, the three readers are normally also examiners for the defense. A reading committee member may not serve as oral exam chair for that student's oral exam. Students may only have one non-AC member on the orals committee. The only exception to this rule is if a student has more than the required five for an orals committee. A non-AC member must hold a PhD and contributes an area of expertise that is relevant to the orals and that is not readily available from the Stanford faculty. A petition must be submitted and approved well in advance of the oral exam for a non-AC member of the oral exam committee

Dissertation Drafts and Abstract:

A complete, but not final, draft of the dissertation is "defended" during the oral examination. Drafts should be submitted to all four committee examiners at least one month before the oral exam date.

The committee chair is not expected to read the entire dissertation draft, but can do so if s/he likes. A one to two page abstract should be provided via email to the chair at least two weeks before the oral exam date.

The Oral Exam:

Academic Services staff will deliver relevant paperwork and ballots for the chair shortly before the oral exam begins.

If the candidate and committee approve, visitors may attend but do not participate in the proceedings. Visitors always sit around the periphery of the room and are excused at some point for a period of private questioning by the committee.

The candidate should ask a faculty examiner to take notes on the main issues raised, so that suggestions for revisions can be made at the end of the examination. Members of the oral exam or reading committee may request a copy of the revisions.

Students may bring to the Oral Examination their dissertation signature page. Stanford requires that students obtain original ink signatures from all reading committee members on this document. High-quality, long-lived, acid-free (neutral pH) bond paper must be used; please check the packaging or contact the manufacturer if you are unsure about this. The student's typed name should be included on the header of the signature page, in the upper right hand corner (right justified). A sample signature page with further instructions can be found in the electronic dissertation submission guidelines. The faculty on the dissertation reading committee may elect to sign the page after the exam has been passed. They may also wish to wait until revisions are completed, in which case an appointment to get the physical signature should be set. The advisor, in addition to signing the page, will also need to approve via Axess when the dissertation has been finalized and approved, so a signature on the physical page is not the only required action before the final version is submitted.

The candidate opens with some brief remarks and an overview of the dissertation (e.g., a discussion of highlights, findings or issues that pertain to the work). If appropriate, visuals and/or handouts can be used, but are not required. This opening phase can take from 15 to 20 minutes. Occasionally an examiner asks for clarification during the opening phase, but interruptions are usually minimized.

After the opening presentation, the questioning begins. The committee members ask her/his own questions, each taking a turn until the chair takes a turn. Then a second round of questioning may begin. This phase of the oral defense can last from one to one and a half hours.

A period of private questioning (i.e., without visitors present) should occur at some point. A few minutes before two hours elapse, the candidate is excused from the room, after which each committee member provides a brief evaluation of the oral defense.

After the closed committee discussion, a vote by secret ballot commences. Only members of the official examination committee are eligible to vote. Five members of the committee constitute a quorum. To be eligible to vote, an examiner must have been present throughout a substantial part of the examination and during the final discussion. It is the chair's responsibility to determine who is eligible to vote. Passing an oral examination requires four favorable votes out of five, four favorable votes out of six, five favorable votes out of seven, or six favorable votes out of eight. A committee member may participate via telephone if s/he is unable to attend the oral exam in person. The chair should complete a ballot for the absent committee member based upon her/his verbal vote over the phone.

After voting, there is a discussion of the notes taken during the defense, and the committee agrees upon the required revisions the candidate must make. Later, the student and dissertation advisor will meet to discuss any required revisions.

At the conclusion of the examination, the chair tallies the votes of the members and records the results of the examination on the University Oral Examination Schedule. This form is returned to the Assistant Director of Degree Programs immediately after the examination, when possible, but no later than five days after the defense.

Any violation of University policy such as committee membership or an insufficient number of voting members should be reported to the Associate Dean of Student Affairs and the Assistant Director of Degree Programs for review.

Committee Chair Responsibilities:

Serve as an impartial party to the proceedings.

Ensure that challenging but fair questions are asked. The chair may participate in the questioning.

Observe the University and School of Education guidelines and advise examiners when needed.

Confirm that the dissertation advisor will provide adequate feedback to the candidate after the examination.

Initiate the voting process by secret ballot, and vote on the candidate's performance.

Report the examination results and any changes in committee composition on the University Oral Examination Schedule and return this signed form to the Assistant Director of Degree Programs, Kate McKinney (Barnum 136), immediately after the exam, when possible, but no later than five days after the exam.

In the event of a student's failure, submit a written evaluation of the candidate's performance to the candidate, with a copy to the Associate Dean for Student Affairs (Shelley Goldman) and the Assistant Director of Degree Programs (Kate McKinney), within five days of the exam.

Report any violation of University policy (e.g., committee membership or not enough voting members) to the Associate Dean for Student Affairs (Shelley Goldman) and Assistant Director of Degree Programs (Kate McKinney).

Exam Failure:

If the oral examination committee votes to fail a candidate, the committee should remain convened to formulate a recommendation. The committee may recommend the length of time that should elapse and conditions to be met before the candidate retakes the examination.

The committee also has the option of recommending that the candidate not be permitted to repeat the oral examination, but only if this action has been preceded by a written warning from the department for failing to make satisfactory degree progress. In effect, this is a recommendation that the department should terminate the candidate's degree program.

If the committee votes to fail the candidate, the chair is responsible for transmitting a written evaluation of the student's performance to the Associate Dean for Student Affairs and to the student, within five days of the examination. Copies of the University Oral Examination Schedule and the chair's evaluation should also be sent to the Associate Dean for Student Affairs (Shelley Goldman) and Assistant Director of Degree Programs (Kate McKinney) within five days after the exam. Within thirty days of the examination and after review of the committee's evaluation and recommendation, the Associate Dean for Student Affairs (Shelley Goldman) will send a letter to the candidate describing the final action of the School.

For dismissal proceedings, see the Stanford Bulletin's section entitled Guidelines for Dismissal of Graduate Students for Academic Reasons discussed in the Graduate Degrees chapter.