

Stanford

Published on *Graduate Academic Policies and Procedures* (<https://gap.stanford.edu>)

[Home](#) > 4.7.1 Doctoral Degrees, University Oral Examinations & Committees: Policy

4.7.1 Doctoral Degrees, University Oral Examinations & Committees: Policy

Last updated on:

Summary

Every Ph.D. student must pass a university oral examination, which can be one of three types, as determined by the department. Every university oral examination is chaired by an out-of-department chairperson. This policy outlines university requirements for committee membership and responsibilities, scheduling and procedures for the examination, and reporting the results.

COVID-19 POLICY UPDATE: Approval for a partially or fully remote oral dissertation has been delegated by Vice Provost Stacey F. Bent to DGSs or department chairs through Summer 2021 (see [GAP 4.7 Doctoral Degrees, University Oral Examinations & Committees](#) [1]).

Guidance on implementing a fully remote defense:

- Separate Zoom sessions can be set up for the public and closed sessions.
- Setting up the session using the webinar function may give the student and out-of-department chair more control over the event.
- The student can host the meeting; the out-of-department chair should be added as a co-host; the student services officer might also be added as co-host to troubleshoot any technical difficulties.
- If using the Zoom webinar function, voting can be done using the private Chat function in Zoom - ie. by sending only to the chair.
- Following the defense, the completed [University Oral Examination form](#) [2] can be sent electronically to the student services officer.
- If electronic signatures are not possible, email verification of the results from the out-of-department committee chair will serve as signature.
- Recording via zoom: the student may choose to record the public part of the oral defense; recording of the closed session should be done only with a specific accommodation from the Office of Accessible Education.

Rationale

Why a University Oral Examination?

The Ph.D. degree is formally awarded by the faculty of the university as a whole, not by individual departments. Although responsibility for admitting, educating, and recommending Ph.D. candidates is in effect exercised by departments, the University exercises control over the Ph.D. degree through general regulations; through the University oral and other examinations; and through the ultimate power of the Academic Council to disapprove the awarding of any individual degree.

The purpose of the university oral examination is to test the candidate's command of the field of study and to confirm fitness for scholarly pursuits. The student, the department, and the University all derive benefits from this requirement that would not be easily obtained by other means. The oral examination retains value first as a teaching experience and intellectual encounter for the student; second as a milestone, a means of internal indication, and a point of contact with the larger university for the department; and third as a small but significant unifying force and means of promoting communication between the different, often highly specialized, departments of the university.

Why a University Oral Examination Out-of-Department Chair?

The out-of-department chair serves as an impartial representative of the academic standards of the university by maintaining the quality and integrity of the university oral examination.

The out-of-department chair is both a quality controller and an umpire. As a quality controller, the chair's role is to actively participate in the assessment of the quality of the student and judge the intellectual merits of the candidate. The chair is also an umpire whose role is to act as a time-keeper and monitor of university rules and procedures. In order to maintain impartiality, the orals chair may not simultaneously serve on the student's dissertation reading committee.

For the individual student, the outside chair may serve as both an observer and, to some extent, a buffer in the rare case when candidates' examinations are clouded by intellectual and even political factionalism in their own departments.

In addition, oral examinations make the character and quality of school and department programs visible to faculty members from other areas. The appointment of an outside chair provides an opportunity for a measure of outside scrutiny of the department's academic programs.

The convention of the out-of-department chair continues to foster serendipitous contact among members of the faculty and helps strengthen the intellectual ties that make it possible to describe the university as a community of scholars. (Adapted from "The Study of Graduate Education at Stanford," 1972, pp. 76-77, 81-82; and discussion of the Academic Senate, April 29, 1993.)

Policy

Passing a university oral examination is a requirement of the Ph.D., J.S.D. and Ed.D. degrees. The purpose of the examination is to test the candidate's command of the field of study and to confirm fitness for scholarly pursuits. Departments determine which of the following three types of oral examinations is to be required in their doctoral programs:

- a test of knowledge of the student's field; this type of examination is intended to assess the student's overall mastery of a specific field of knowledge
- a review of the dissertation proposal covering content relevant to the area of study, rationale for the proposed

investigation, and strategy to be used in the research; this type of examination is intended to assist the student in refining a dissertation topic and to ensure mastery of theoretical and methodological issues as well as the materials needed to conduct the research effectively

- a defense of the dissertation presented either upon completion of a substantial portion of the dissertation or upon completion of a pre-final draft (in either case, a draft of the work completed should be available for the examining committee well in advance of the examination); this type of examination is intended to verify that the research represents the candidate's own contribution to knowledge, and to test his or her understanding of the research. General questions pertaining to the field as a whole, but beyond the scope of the dissertation itself, may be included.

Authority:

- Committee on Graduate Studies (policy)
- [Office of the Registrar](#) [3] via Stanford Services & Support (implementation)
- Departmental Office (implementation)
- [Office of the Vice Provost for Graduate Education](#) [4] (exceptions)

Applicability:

All Ph.D., J.S.D., and Ed.D. degree candidates and programs.

Jump To:

1. [Scheduling the Oral Examination](#)
2. [Committee Membership](#)
3. [Out-of-Department Chair](#)
4. [Conducting and Voting on the Examination](#)
5. [Reporting of Results](#)

1. Scheduling the Oral Examination

Department policy determines when, after admission to candidacy, the oral examination is taken. Timing of the examination depends on department policy, on the nature of the examination, and on the estimated readiness of the student. The examination may be scheduled at any time during the year, unless otherwise specified by department policy.

Students must be registered in the term in which the university oral examination is taken. The period between the last day of final exams of one term and the day prior to the first day of the following term is considered an extension of the earlier term. Candidacy must also be valid. If the oral examination is a defense of the dissertation, the [Doctoral Dissertation Reading Committee form](#) [5] must be submitted to and recorded by the department prior to the scheduling of the examination.

The [University Oral Examination form](#) [2] is used to schedule the examination officially, including:

- date, time, and location of the examination
- type of examination and title of dissertation or subject of examination
- composition of the committee, approved by the department chair

If a member cannot attend the scheduled examination, the examination is rescheduled.

With the agreement of the principal dissertation advisor and student, a member of the University oral examination

committee may participate by telephone or video conferencing. The principal dissertation advisor, the student, and the out-of-department chair must be present and may not participate virtually. If the conferencing technology fails and the examiner can not fully participate, the committee may fail to reach its quorum. In this case, the examination must be rescheduled. *(Please note that in response to the uncertain COVID-19 situation, decisions about exceptions to the requirement that the student, principal dissertation advisor, and/or out-of-department chair be physically present have been temporarily delegated to faculty Directors of Graduate Studies from March 9-April 15, 2020. See full explanation [here](#) [6].)*

[Back to top](#)

2. Committee Membership

The University Oral Examination Committee consists of at least five Stanford faculty members: four examiners and the committee chair from another department. The chair of a Stanford oral examination is appointed for this examination only, to represent the interests of the University for a fair and rigorous process as described above. In order to maintain impartiality, the orals chair may not simultaneously serve on the student's dissertation reading committee.

All committee members are normally on the Stanford University Academic Council, and the chair must be a member. Emeritus faculty are also eligible to serve as examiners or chair of the committee. Emeritus Stanford faculty, though no longer current members of the Academic Council, count as Academic Council members when serving on dissertation oral committees (clarified by the Committee on Graduate Studies in 2011; see SenD#6535).

Representation from the Ph.D. minor department on the committee is at the discretion of the major and minor departments.

If the oral examination is a defense of the dissertation, the Dissertation Reading Committee usually constitutes the three of the four examiners on the oral examination committee (see GAP 4.8, [Doctoral Degrees: Dissertations and Dissertation Reading Committees](#) [7]).

A [Petition for Non-Academic Council Doctoral Committee Members](#) [8] for appointment of an examining committee member who is neither a current or emeritus member of the Academic Council may be approved by the chair of the department or by the faculty director of graduate studies, according to local policy, if that committee member contributes an area of expertise that is not readily available from the faculty and holds a Ph.D. or equivalent foreign degree.

Exceptions for individuals whose terminal degree is not the Ph.D. or equivalent foreign degree may be granted by the Office of the Vice Provost for Graduate Education, upon the request of the student's department chair or faculty director of graduate studies. The prospective committee member's curriculum vitae and a brief description of their contributions to the student's research should be submitted [via email](#) [4] to the Office of the Vice Provost for Graduate Education.

The majority of the examiners must be current or emeritus Academic Council members; more specifically, one of four or five examiners or two of six or seven examiners who are not current or emeritus members of the Academic Council may be appointed to the oral examination committee by means of [this petition](#) [8] or approval by the Office of the Vice Provost for Graduate Education, as required for members who do not have a PhD degree.

The responsibilities of the examiners are to:

- ask challenging questions,

- follow the University and department guidelines for oral examinations, and
- vote on the candidate's performance.

[Back to top](#)

3. Out-of-Department Chair

The chair of a Stanford oral examination is appointed for this examination only, to represent the interests of the university for a fair and rigorous process as described above.

The chair must be a member of the Stanford Academic Council and may be a Professor Emeritus. If emeritus, the chair counts as an Academic Council member. The chair of the examining committee may not have a full or joint appointment in the advisor's or student's department, but may have a courtesy appointment in the department. The chair can be from the same department as any other member(s) of the examination committee and can be from the student's minor department provided that the student's advisor does not have a full or joint appointment in the minor department.

For Interdisciplinary Degree Programs (IDPs), the chair of the examining committee may not have a full or joint appointment in the primary advisor's major department and must have independence from the student and advisor. To maintain the independence that is the intent of the policy requiring an outside chair, the faculty director of the IDP is not allowed to chair an examining committee for students in that IDP.

The department of Electrical Engineering has been granted an exception to this policy, whereby "out-of-department" may include a faculty member from another division of the department. The School of Education has been granted an exception to this policy, whereby "out-of-department" may include a faculty member from another program area of the school.

Responsibility for appointing the out-of-department oral examination chair rests with the candidate's major department. Many departments invite advisors to participate in the process of selecting and contacting potential chairs. The department should not require the student to solicit the out-of-department chair, although the student may participate in selecting and contacting potential chairs. (See July 2012 [memo from Richard Roberts](#) [9], then chair of the Committee on Graduate Studies.)

The responsibilities of the chair of an oral examination are to:

- serve as an impartial representative of the academic standards of the University;
- ensure that the examination is conducted within University and department/school guidelines and keep examiners aware of both sets of rules;
- ensure that the candidate is asked challenging but fair questions (the chair may participate in the questioning);
- confirm that one or more members of the examining committee will provide the candidate adequate evaluation after the examination;
- vote on the candidate's performance;
- report the examination results and any changes in committee composition on the [University Oral Examination Form](#) [2] and return this form to the department graduate studies administrator within five days of the examination; and
- in the event of a candidate's failure, submit a written evaluation of the student's performance to the candidate, the chair of the major department, and the Registrar's Office within five days of the examination.

[Back to top](#)

4. Conducting and Voting on the Examination

A portion of the oral examination may take the form of a public seminar, but a period of private questioning by the official examining committee must be included. The examination should be conducted according to the major department's stated practice, although it should not exceed three hours in length.

At the conclusion of the examination the candidate should be asked to leave so that the committee can confer in private. At the conclusion of the examination, a vote is taken and the chair tallies the votes of the members.

Voting is by secret ballot. Only members of the official examination committee are eligible to vote. Five members of the committee present and voting 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. The candidate passes the examination if the examining committee casts at least four favorable votes out of five or six, five favorable votes out of seven, or six favorable votes out of eight.

If a member of the oral examination committee is participating by telephone or video conferencing, the examiner must convey his or her vote to the chair in secret.

[Back to top](#)

5. Reporting of Results

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 form](#) [2]. Within five days of the examination, this form must be returned to the department graduate studies administrator who records the results.

Any violation of university policy or procedures should be reported by the chair to the school dean's office for review.

If a university oral examination committee votes to fail a student, the committee should remain convened to formulate a recommendation for the department. The committee may recommend the length of time that should intervene before the student retakes the examination and conditions to be met before it may be retaken.

If the committee votes to fail a student, the committee chair sends within five days a written evaluation of the candidate's performance to the major department and the student. Copies of the [University Oral Examination form](#) [2] and this evaluation should also be sent to the school dean. Within 30 days and after review of the examining committee's evaluation and recommendation, the chair of the student's major department must send the student a written statement indicating the final action of the department.

The committee also has the option of recommending that the student not be permitted to repeat the oral examination, but only if this action has been preceded by a written warning to the student from the department that the student has not been making satisfactory progress. In effect, this is a recommendation that the department should terminate the candidate. If the candidate is to be terminated, the guidelines for dismissal of graduate students must be followed (see GAP 5.6, [Dismissal for Academic and Professional Reasons](#) [10]).

[Back to top](#)

Related Content:

Related Policies

- GAP 4.5, [Doctoral Degrees: Requirements](#) [11]

- GAP 4.8, [Doctoral Degrees: Dissertations and Dissertation Reading Committees](#) [7]
- GAP 5.6, [Dismissal for Academic and Professional Reasons](#) [10]

Related Bulletin Sections

- [University Oral Examination](#) [12]

Related Information and Forms

- [University Oral Examination form](#) [2] [pdf]
- [Doctoral Dissertation Reading Committee form](#) [5] [pdf]
- [Petition for Non-Academic Council Doctoral Committee Members](#) [13] [pdf]
- [Memo, Identification of University Oral Examination Chairs](#) [14] (Richard Roberts, 2012) [pdf]

Source URL: <https://gap.stanford.edu/handbooks/gap-handbook/chapter-4/subchapter-7/page-4-7-1>

Links

- [1] <https://gap.stanford.edu/handbooks/gap-handbook/chapter-4/subchapter-7/page-4-7-1>
- [2] <https://stanford.app.box.com/v/doc-orals>
- [3] https://stanford.service-now.com/services?id=services_portal_home
- [4] <https://vpge.stanford.edu/about-vpge/contact-us>
- [5] <https://stanford.app.box.com/docdiss-reading-committee-form>
- [6] <https://stanford.box.com/s/0n2qffy5qbpvfunh7ny7tf5bqz70nffy>
- [7] <https://gap.stanford.edu/handbooks/gap-handbook/chapter-4/subchapter-8/page-4-8-1>
- [8] <https://stanford.app.box.com/v/doc-ctte-non-acad-council>
- [9] <https://stanford.box.com/shared/static/v60kouj5g1skea6x3uwp0d6omjke5jyl.pdf>
- [10] <https://gap.stanford.edu/handbooks/gap-handbook/chapter-5/subchapter-6/page-5-6-1>
- [11] <https://gap.stanford.edu/handbooks/gap-handbook/chapter-4/subchapter-5/page-4-5-1>
- [12] <http://exploreddegrees.stanford.edu/graduatedegrees/#doctoraltext>
- [13] <https://stanford.app.box.com/doc-ctte-non-acad-council>
- [14] https://gap.stanford.edu/docs/Roberts_July2012.pdf