

Chairing UW Epi Dissertation Committees



THE PURPOSE OF A DISSERTATION CHAIR*

To guide & support a doctoral student in their journey through the dissertation process. This includes:

- Ensuring the student completes the necessary degree requirements & steps in the dissertation process
- Ensuring the rigor of the dissertation research
- Providing guidance in the design & conduct of the dissertation project

THE PURPOSE OF A DISSERTATION CHAIR*

This **should also** include:

- Supporting the student in finding & pursuing career development opportunities (e.g., conferences, networking)
- Supporting the student's professional skills development (e.g., manuscript writing, grant writing)
- Advocating for the student & championing their research
- Meeting with the student at regular (reliable) intervals
- Providing timely feedback on proposals, manuscripts, abstracts, applications, etc.
- Helping the student navigate interpersonal matters with committee members

REQUIRED STEPS IN THE DISSERTATION PROCESS

- > Epi Department Preliminary Exam
- > Form / establish dissertation committee
- > Short proposal
- > Long proposal
- > Written general exam
- > Oral general exam
- > Form reading committee
- > Dissertation defense
- > Submit completed dissertation

****Steps to be completed in this order, but the timing of these steps can vary***

EPI DEPARTMENT PRELIM EXAM

- > Offered once per year in June (next exam ***in-person*** on 6/20/2023)
- > Typically taken at the end of the 1st year for PhD students (also open to MS / MPH students interested in applying to the PhD program)
- > Tests knowledge gained in 1st year epi courses
- > Written by Ali Rowhani-Rahbar & Amanda Phipps; graded by Ali, Amanda, & Steve Hawes
- > Passing score required to proceed with dissertation process
- > 2 chances to pass the exam

PRE-CANDIDACY PHASE



PRE-CANDIDACY PHASE – Forming a committee



Forming a committee:

- Requirements around committee composition found [here](#).
- Committee Chair is often identified first, then other committee members.
- Must have **“Graduate Faculty” status with “endorsement to Chair”** before you can Chair a committee (request approval from Steve Schwartz, then ask Laurel Belton to put your request up for a faculty vote).
- Dissertation topic idea is typically developed with the identified Chair. This development often happens (at least partially) before formalizing other members of the committee.

PRE-CANDIDACY PHASE – Forming a committee



Forming a committee:

- Identifying committee members is generally the responsibility of the student; however, as Chair, it is helpful when you can provide suggestions. Ensure the student has the expertise necessary on their committee (recognizing that you may not have all the necessary expertise yourself!)
- Topic ideas may be developed into a draft short proposal or aims page, which can be circulated to potential committee members.
- Student must inform the Epi Department when they have identified a Chair (and when there are any changes to their committee membership) using this [form](#).

PRE-CANDIDACY PHASE – Preparing / submitting the short proposal



Short Proposal:

- Format / requirements are listed [here](#). *(Make sure your student uses these!)*
- 3 pages to include: specific aims, background / significance, methods, limitations & timeline
- Should also make clear the student's role in the project & how the student will meet the Department's primary data collection requirement.
- Should be reviewed & approved by all members of the dissertation committee.
- Student then submits short proposal to the UW Epi Graduate Program Director for Departmental review.

PRE-CANDIDACY PHASE – Preparing / submitting the short proposal



For the Short Proposal, it is helpful for the Chair to:

- Provide the student with guidance in how to structure specific aims.
- Help the student in finding data resources to support their aims.
- Ensure that necessary details are included in the proposal.
- Serve as the primary point of contact for the student in reviewing iterative versions of the document.
- Review the feedback received from other committee members (and the Department) to guide the student in responding.
- Ensure the student submits a Human Subjects Form.

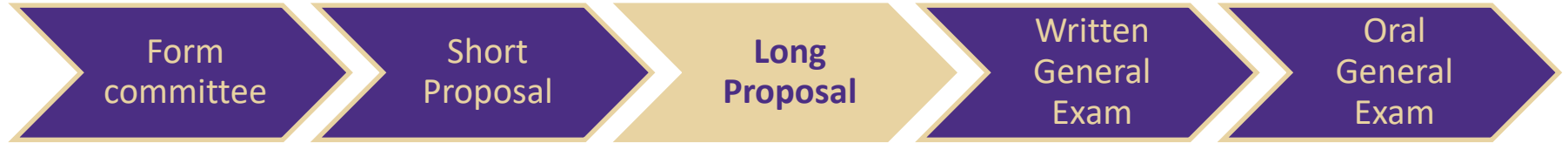
PRE-CANDIDACY PHASE – Preparing the long proposal



Long Proposal:

- Format / requirements are listed [here](#). (*Make sure your student uses these!*)
- 13 pages in the style of an NIH R01 (i.e., 1-page specific aims, 12-page research strategy including significance, innovation, approach)
- Protection of Human Subjects document to be added (as applicable).
- An opportunity to provide the student with support in grant-writing & to ensure they are thinking through the design (& limitations) of their proposed ideas.
- Nothing to submit to the Department, but must be approved by the full committee.

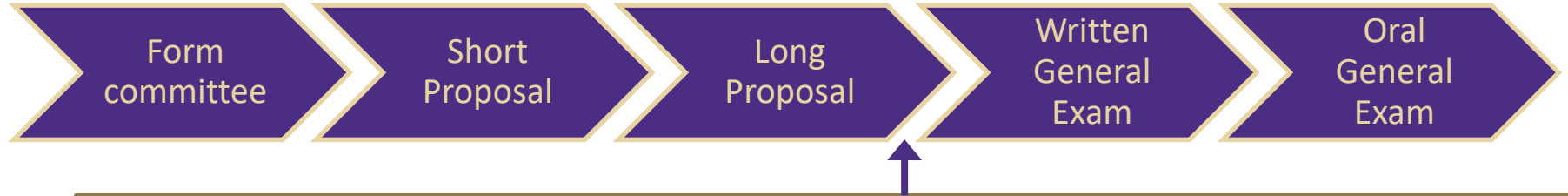
PRE-CANDIDACY PHASE – Preparing the long proposal



For the Long Proposal, it is helpful for the Chair to:

- Provide the student with guidance in grant structure.
- Ensure that necessary details are included in the proposal.
- Serve as the primary point of contact for the student in reviewing iterative versions of the document.
- Review the feedback received from other committee members to guide the student in responding.
- Ensure the student is obtaining the necessary human subjects / IRB approvals.

PRE-CANDIDACY PHASE – The General Exam



In order to proceed to the Written General Exam, a student **MUST**:

- Have completed ≥ 60 credits (including those in process).
- Have had their short proposal approved by the Department.
- Have completed their long proposal to the satisfaction of their committee.
- Have unanimous agreement within the committee that the student is sufficiently prepared to proceed. (**Chair should solicit consensus from committee.**)
- Have requested a departmental degree audit (epi@uw.edu), and performed one themselves (via MyGrad).

PRE-CANDIDACY PHASE – The Written General Exam



Written General Exam:

- Includes 1-2 questions from each committee member (typically excluding the GSR) pertaining specifically to the student's dissertation topic.
- Chair will solicit questions from committee members, often with some agreement regarding content / topic areas. Chair will then review / compile questions to form the exam.
- Questions may pertain to: limitations of the proposed design (& their implications), analytic methods, content area knowledge (e.g., literature review), implications of the proposed research, etc.
- Students typically granted 2-3 weeks to return answers.

PRE-CANDIDACY PHASE – The Written General Exam



For the Written General Exam, it is helpful for the Chair to:

- Provide suggestions to committee members with regard to question areas.
- Ensure that all included questions are fair and relevant to the student's learning.
- Provide guidance in terms of suggested page counts for individual questions.
- Be available to answer questions for clarification from the student throughout the exam period.
- Plan ahead with the student to ensure the written general exam is scheduled for a time that works for them.

PRE-CANDIDACY PHASE – The General Exam



In order to proceed to the Oral General Exam, a student **MUST**:

- Complete the written portion of the general exam **to the satisfaction of all committee members**.
 - All committee members should be granted sufficient time to critically review the written exam & identify areas that require further work.*
 - Students must address areas identified by the committee as necessary to proceed.
- Submit an approval form to Epi SAS & make an official exam request in MyGrad.

*(*The committee may determine that some areas for further work can be pursued **after** the oral general exam rather than as a pre-requisite.)*

PRE-CANDIDACY PHASE – The Oral General Exam



Oral General Exam (~2 hours):

- May be scheduled before the final written general exam is approved, but cannot take place until after the final written general exam is approved.
- May be administered in-person or virtually. (Attendance rules are shown [here](#).)
- Student is expected to prepare a presentation of responses provided to the written general exam questions & any dissertation updates. Committee members are expected to ask questions to clarify / building on the student's presentation.
- After presentation / questions, student is excused for the committee to discuss their decision & any recommendations.
- Student gets 2 attempts to pass the oral general exam.

PRE-CANDIDACY PHASE – The Oral General Exam



For the Oral General Exam, it is helpful for the Chair to:

- Solicit feedback on the written general exam from committee members in advance of the oral exam, to provide the student with areas they should be prepared to address in their presentation.
- Facilitate the oral general exam meeting, ensuring all committee members have an opportunity to ask questions & being mindful of time constraints.
- Gathering input from committee members in the component of the exam without the student present & then summarizing feedback / suggestions for the student.
- Remind the student to schedule their oral exam in MyGrad.
- Circulate the oral exam warrant for signatures.

DISSERTATION PHASE



DISSERTATION PHASE – The Dissertation

Conduct & Write Dissertation

Process is intended to give students experience in:

- > Formulating & testing a hypothesis
- > Developing a research design / research plan
- > Collecting data
- > Analyzing data
- > Interpreting findings
- > Preparing a written report of their investigation

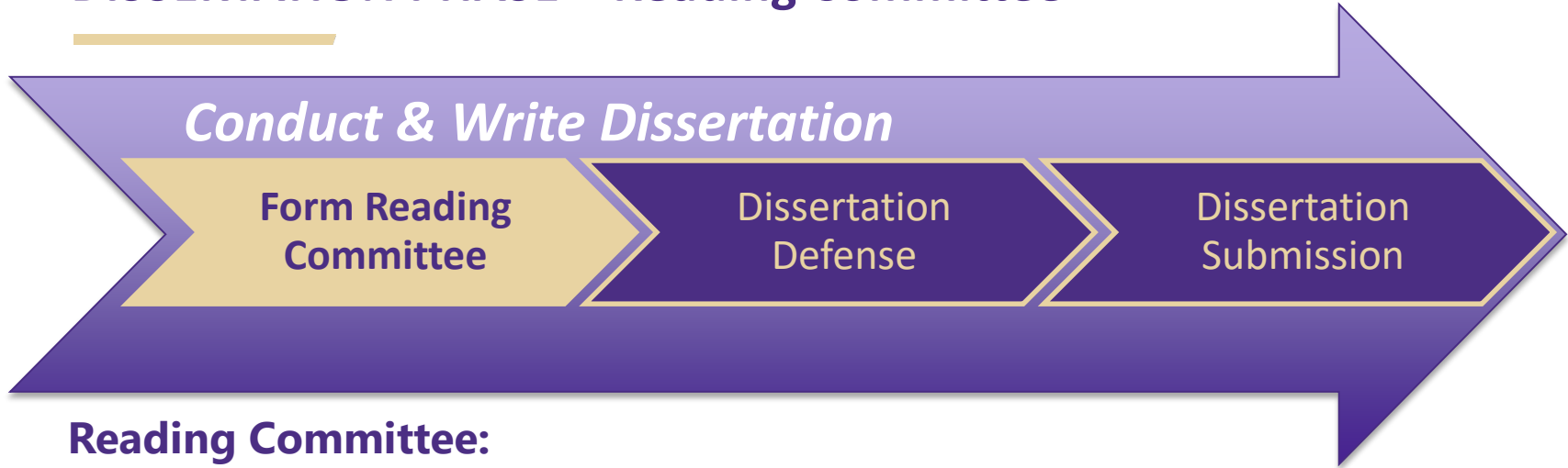
DISSERTATION PHASE – The Dissertation

Conduct & Write Dissertation

Throughout the dissertation process, it is helpful for the Chair to:

- Meet with the student regularly (& reliably) to check in on progress, troubleshoot challenges, & ensure the student is getting the support they need.
- Review preliminary data / data tables.
- Encourage the student to submit preliminary work to conferences.
- Check in with the student regarding their funding, and provide support in locating funding as needed.

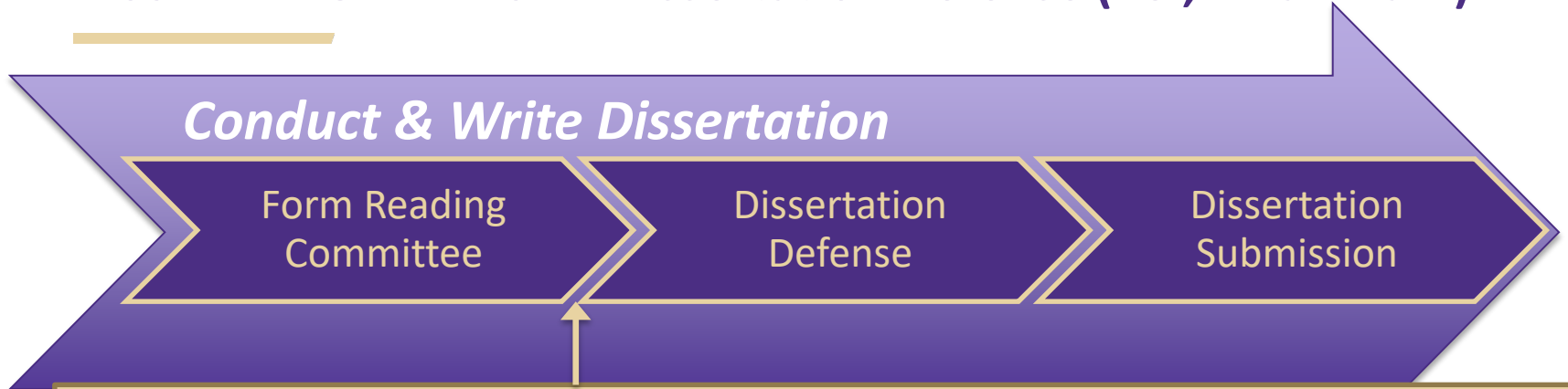
DISSERTATION PHASE – Reading Committee



Reading Committee:

- Should include 3 committee members (**include Chair**, do not include the GSR), formalized with the Department via this [form](#).
- Reviews drafts of the dissertation & provides feedback – typically with some iteration back & forth.
- Determines when the student is ready for their defense.

DISSERTATION PHASE – Dissertation Defense (i.e., Final Exam)



In order to proceed to the Dissertation Defense / Final Exam, a student MUST:

- Obtain approval to proceed from Reading Committee (submit signed form via Canvas) & make official Final Exam Request in MyGrad.
- Provide a full draft of their dissertation to all committee members.

** The defense may be scheduled before the Reading Committee approval form is submitted, but cannot take place without the Reading Committee's approval.*

DISSERTATION PHASE – Dissertation Defense (i.e., Final Exam)



Format:

- May be held in person or virtually. (Attendance requirements shown [here](#).)
- Student presents a seminar of their dissertation research (~40-50 minutes)
- Questions for the student are taken from the public audience.
- Audience is dismissed so that committee can ask the student questions privately.
- Student is dismissed (but told to stay near)

DISSERTATION PHASE – Dissertation Defense (i.e., Final Exam)



Format, continued:

- Committee discusses the student's work &: a) decides whether or not to recommend granting the PhD, and b) gathers recommendations for additional non-contingent edits / minor modifications to the dissertation
- Committee notifies the student of their decision
- Committee sign & complete the Final Exam Signature Form

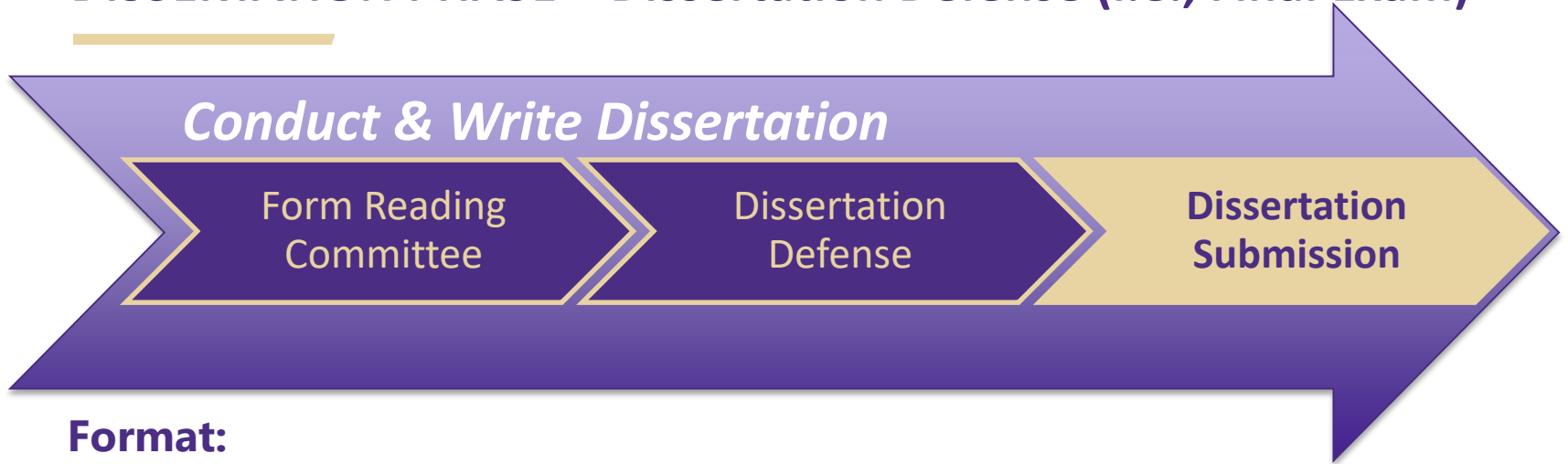
DISSERTATION PHASE – Dissertation Defense (i.e., Final Exam)



For the dissertation defense, it is helpful for the Chair to:

- Introduce the student & explain the format at the beginning of the meeting.
- Facilitate the session by keeping things to time, triaging questions, excusing the audience & student at the appropriate times, & gathering input from committee members.
- Ensure committee members sign the Final Exam Form.

DISSERTATION PHASE – Dissertation Defense (i.e., Final Exam)



Format:

- May be formatted as a single, combined study or as multiple collated manuscripts.
- Specific formatting requirements for first 3 pages only (title page, copyright page, abstract).
- General formatting guidance is provided here.
- Must be submitted in the same quarter as the Final Exam.

DISSERTATION PHASE – Dissertation Defense (i.e., Final Exam)



For dissertation submission, it is helpful for the Chair to:

- Review the feedback received from other committee members to guide the student in responding.
- Encourage the student to format the dissertation in the form of publishable papers - & to submit these papers for publication either before or as soon as possible after submitting the dissertation.
- Review the dissertation to check for formatting & completion.

PRE-CANDIDACY PHASE – Dissertation Committee Meetings



The Committee MUST convene as a group (pre-candidacy):

- To administer the **oral general exam**

Ideally, the committee would also convene as a group (pre-candidacy):

- To finalize the **short proposal** & discuss the student's timeline
- To finalize the **long proposal** (with the student) & discuss questions for the student's written general exam (without the student present)
- At times that would be beneficial for the student – recognizing that the Chair should also be meeting with the student on a regular basis

DISSERTATION PHASE – Dissertation Committee Meetings



The Committee MUST convene as a group:

- To administer the **dissertation defense / final exam**

Ideally, the committee would also convene as a group:

- At times that would be beneficial for the student – recognizing that the Chair should also be meeting with the student on a regular basis

Expectations of Dissertation Committee Members (NOT Chair or GSR)

- > Provide timely feedback to the student on the short & long proposals.
- > Offer expertise & guidance relevant to the design, conduct, & interpretation of the dissertation project.
- > Provide timely feedback to the student on iterative drafts of the dissertation (particularly for those on the Reading Committee).
- > Meet with the student individually occasionally (if needed) to support the student in the dissertation process and in their career development.
- > Participate in committee meetings.
- > Provide a question(s) for the written general exam & engage in questioning for the oral general exam & final exam.

Expectations of a GSR on a Dissertation Committee

- > Be aware of the dissertation process / procedure in the student's department.
- > Participate in committee meetings.
- > Attend the student's oral general exam and final exam.
- > Ensure the student is treated fairly and that the process being used follows guidelines & expectations.
- > Be available to meet with the student to address concerns with the process.
- > **NOTE:** A GSR is not expected to provide substantive feedback or guidance with regard to the conduct of the dissertation project (but can do so if they choose).

OTHER VALUABLE INFORMATION

- > [Degree checklists](#) (vary slightly by year of entry into PhD program)
- > [UW guide on graduate student mentoring](#)
- > [Epi Students Canvas page](#)

COMMENTS & SUGGESTIONS

- > Mentoring is a critical piece of our mandate & mission as an academic institution. ***And it can be hugely rewarding for both parties involved!***
- > It is important that all faculty engage in mentoring. BUT, don't feel compelled to mentor every student that approaches you. ***The mentor-mentee partnership needs to be a good fit.***
 - If you don't believe you are the right fit for the student's needs, help connect them with other faculty who might be better suited.
 - Remember that you don't have to be a content-area expert to be a good mentor!
- > Set expectations with your mentees up-front to let them know what you are able to provide, what kind of turnaround they should expect on things, & what you need from them. ***Keep the lines of communication open.***

QUESTIONS???
