

# THE DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

(Pulled from the 2023 handbook)

## Committee Composition

Upon completion of the QE, the student, in consultation with the PhD Program Director selects a Dissertation Chair. This person must be a Full Member of the School of Social Work Graduate Faculty (a faculty member at the rank of Associate Professor or Professor) and should be knowledgeable about the topic and/or methods the student intends to pursue. It is the student's responsibility to talk with the faculty member to describe their research interests and make the request that the faculty member serve in the role of Chair or committee person. Students should aim to select a faculty member who can be of help with moving their dissertation research along. It is wise to select a faculty member who has an interest in, and familiarity with either the subject matter, the methodology, or some other central aspect of the proposed dissertation, as well as one with whom the student can talk about scholarly issues. A list of faculty interests is available on the PhD Program website.

The Chair and the student together choose the rest of the Committee members. These should be chosen so as to complement the expertise of the Chair, adding needed areas of knowledge to round out the Committee. Final approval of the Committee rests with the PhD Program Director, who appoints the Committee in consultation with the student's Chair.

The PhD dissertation committee must consist of a minimum of four members chaired by a Full Member of the Graduate Faculty (at the rank of Associate Professor or Professor) from the School of Social Work. The remaining members may be Full or Associate members of the Graduate Faculty (which includes Assistant Professors), and one of the committee members must be from outside the School of Social Work. The outside member is expected to be a recognized authority on the subject or methods relevant to the dissertation. If the outside committee member is not a member of the Rutgers University Graduate Faculty, the PhD Program Director must be provided with the title and affiliation of the person to be appointed and a curriculum vita. Outside committee members who are not on faculty at Rutgers must have a doctoral degree and a university or other research affiliation. It is only after the PhD Director's approval that the individual can join the committee. In some cases, a fifth member is allowed. Once committees are formed, substitutions must be approved by the PhD Program Director. Substitutions may occur only if a member is unable to serve or if a student's dissertation topic changes, requiring a new dissertation director and/or modification in the committee. Any other committee changes require approval of the Dean of the School of Graduate Studies - New Brunswick.

Committee members who have left the University for another academic appointment may continue to serve on a Dissertation Committee, but they may not serve as Chair of the Committee. Committee members who have moved to Emeritus status may serve on a Committee for a year after retirement, and their Committee membership may be extended for additional one year terms at the discretion of the PhD Program Director. Emeritus faculty may not serve as Committee Chairs.

The PhD Program Director approves the Committee Chair and members by signing the student's Dissertation Committee Form (see Appendix).

## **Role of Committee Members**

The Chair guides the student through the process of the Proposal and its defense. They oversee how the student carries out the dissertation research and writing process. Committee members should be involved and consulted throughout the process. Once the Proposal is accepted by the Committee, the Committee must be kept informed of the student's progress and must agree to follow the student's work and assist in its development. The Committee members must read, critique, and convey any reservations concerning the student's work in a timely fashion, and follow the guidelines specified in "Time to Review" (see Appendix).

Any changes requested in the proposed research by the student or by members of the Committee must be approved by all. Should Committee members differ, the Chair must decide and settle the difference.

## **Provisions for Faculty Who Leave the University**

Faculty who leave the University for another academic position may retain Membership in their graduate program(s) for a period of up to 4 years after the official termination of their appointment at the University. During this period, such faculty are appointed as Associate or Affiliate Members of the PhD faculty in Social Work, and may serve on PhD dissertation committees, but not chair dissertation committees. This policy is aligned with the policy articulated in the School of Graduate Studies bylaws.

## **Dissertation research credits**

A student must take a minimum of 24 dissertation research credits (including the Research Internship and Dissertation Seminars) to complete requirements for the degree. Research credits apply to the Research Internship (3 or 6 credits), the Dissertation Seminar (6 credits), and all work on the dissertation itself.

Students must be continuously registered, whether for additional courses or research credits (910:701, 702), even if the required 24 credits of research have been completed. Students who have completed 24 credits but have not finished the dissertation must register for at least one credit per semester.

## **THE DISSERTATION PROPOSAL**

The student must work with the Chair to develop a dissertation proposal. This serves as a detailed contract for the work the student will undertake in order to complete a dissertation and the remaining research credits.

The Dissertation Proposal is a comprehensive plan for implementing the dissertation project and is also a contract between the student and their committee. The proposal details what they will do, how they will do it, and why it is worth doing. Committee members should each bring useful, different, and complementary expertise and contributions to student's dissertation project. The formal defense

of a student's Proposal takes place after the Chair judges that the document is ready to send to the Committee members. Once the Committee members have seen and read it and it meets their standards as well, a defense date is arranged. Often, in a Defense, members and the student come up with changes that tighten, clarify, or otherwise improve the Proposal design. The Chair is responsible for ensuring that the final Proposal reflects the new ideas. The Committee may wish to meet again after having read the revised version. In either case, **the student must ensure that the Chair, all members of the Committee, and the PhD Program office (Program Coordinator) have copies of the final form of the Proposal.**

Prior to scheduling a proposal defense, please consult the **Dissertation Proposal Checklist** (Appendix).

All full-time students are expected to defend their Dissertation Proposal by the summer term of their 3rd year. If the proposal is not defended by that time, the student and dissertation chair must submit a Request for Extension for approval by the Program Director. The request must include a rationale for the extension, and a timetable for completion in the 4th year of the program for full time students. If a full-time student has not defended a proposal by the end of the 4th year, a meeting must be scheduled with the PhD Program Director, Dissertation Chair, and student to discuss the reasons for the delay, and to determine a completion date. The student may face termination from the PhD program for failure to complete their dissertation research and writing in a timely manner.

Part-time students are expected to defend their Dissertation Proposal within 18 months of completing the Qualifying Examination. If the proposal is not defended by that time, the student and Dissertation Chair must submit a Request for Extension for approval by the PhD Program Director. The request must include a rationale for the extension and a timetable for completion in the following year of the program for part-time students. If a part-time student has not defended their proposal by the end of that year, a meeting must be scheduled with the PhD Program Director, Dissertation Chair, and student to discuss the reasons for the delay, and to determine a plan for completion, including a deadline date. The student may face termination from the PhD program for failure to complete their dissertation research and writing in a timely manner.

## **Types of Dissertations and Sources of Data**

Students' dissertation projects may involve quantitative or qualitative methodologies, as well as historical analysis and/or mixed methods approaches.

Depending upon the particular research question/focus and practical concerns, students may choose to:

- pursue an original research project for which a student collects their own data;
- develop a research study utilizing data from a faculty project; or
- formulate a research question that can be pursued using secondary analysis of existing data sets in order to address new or different questions.

## Proposal Outline

The topic chosen can encompass any area related to social work policy or practice, or social work research or theories of interest in the fields of social work and social welfare. It is important to be clear about the social problem or social justice issue that is being addressed. The PhD program aims to allow wide latitude to candidates to conduct research in their area of interest. While all aspects of the proposal content outlined below are usually covered, the order in which they are addressed may vary somewhat. In all cases, the topical and format decisions are made collaboratively by the student, the Dissertation Chair, and the Dissertation Committee.

The primary purpose of the Dissertation Proposal is to identify an important research question and to very clearly explain how the student is going to answer it. The committee must evaluate whether the question/s that you pose are relevant to the field of social welfare and whether the answer/s are feasibly resolved with your proposed methods. Thus, the most important element of the proposal, the one to which the most attention should be paid and the most space allocated, is the methodology. The following is a sample outline which identifies the necessary elements of a dissertation proposal. These elements must be incorporated into all dissertation proposals, but the structure of any individual proposal does not need to adhere to this outline.

The Chair of the dissertation committee and each individual student will work together to identify the appropriate structure of the proposal. Dissertation Chairs may provide more detailed approaches to the Proposal, but key elements of a proposal typically are:

### Elements of a proposal:

1. Motivation and relevance
  - a. What is the problem or issue?
  - b. Questions and aims
  - c. Why is this important?
2. Theoretical background – conceptual framework
  - a. Define/evaluate relevant concepts, theories, models
  - b. Competing theories
  - c. Relevant constructs: how might they describe or explain relationships/pathways/mechanisms pertaining to research questions/hypotheses
3. Prior literature
  - a. What do we know?
  - b. What do we need to know – gaps?
  - c. How does this study contribute?
4. Methods
  - a. Design/Approach
  - b. Sampling
  - c. Data
  - d. Measures
  - e. Analytic strategy
5. Considerations and limitations
6. Implications
  - a. Research, Policy, Practice
7. Timeline

## **Typical Proposal Structure (content)**

### ***Motivation: Statement of the research problem or issue:***

A general statement of the problem, issue, concern; why it is important? Include a brief reference to the empirical work central to the issue, its size or scale (e.g., this problem affects 100,000 people at present and is expected to double by the end of the century) and discuss key theories that are tied to it. Explicitly state the broad research question/s.

### ***Rationale for problem/issue choice:***

The relevance and contribution of your particular study to social work and social welfare knowledge building, theory development, and/or social justice should be clearly articulated. If your research problem is part of a larger research project, describe your specific contribution to the research and how the dissertation research will be completed independently.

### ***Significance:***

Describe the significance of your proposed research in terms of the ways it will contribute to the knowledge base and enhance social work practice, policy, social justice, and/or social work education. Why is it important?

### ***Specific aims and conceptualization of problem/issue components:***

The conceptual framework you are using can be described as it relates to the specific aims of the study. Here you will state the various specific aims or sub-questions used to answer the broad question/s raised earlier. Define the conceptual context within which these questions are being studied. Definitions of your key constructs and concepts should be presented. Many will explicate a true conceptual framework hypothesizing how the key constructs/concepts are interrelated.

### ***Analytic review of past work in the area:***

Review major and directly relevant past works in the area under investigation. This demonstrates awareness of the major research and scholarly efforts in your area of study and how the present proposal is building on previous knowledge. The student should review studies critically that provide a foundation for the proposed investigation, discuss these studies in sufficient detail to make their relevance entirely clear, assess their validity, and explicitly identify the ways in which they contribute to the proposed research. Indicate how the proposal is designed to move beyond earlier work. Particular attention must be given to a critical analysis of previous methodology and exposition of the advantages and limitations inherent in various alternatives. Dissertation Chairs have differing expectations about this section and some will expect a full literature review while others will expect that the major works will be addressed and that a more complete literature review will be done for the dissertation itself. The proposal should include methodological and theoretical literature, as well as substantive empirical studies. At times, the “practice wisdom” literature also may be of use. Clearly synthesize and integrate the literature, articulating what it says and how you are using it.

### ***Design and methodology:***

All proposals must provide a detailed plan specifying how the research will be carried out. The discussion

of methods must address 1) the general type of design to be used (e.g., experimental, quasi-experimental, qualitative, or mixed methods) 2) sources of data, 3) the plan for data collection, if appropriate and 4) the plan for data analysis. For studies using quantitative methods, in order to clearly examine the specified hypotheses, the student should demonstrate the appropriateness of the chosen dataset and how the data collected fit into and relate to the hypotheses.

The following topics should be covered and the rationale given for the use of a particular approach, technique, or method.

- 1) Description of the general type of design to be used.
- 2) Identification and description of the target population and sampling methods to be used.
- 3) Specification of the instruments and techniques for measuring each of the concepts/variables (Copies of instruments should be appended).
- 4) Information relevant to the validity and reliability of each of the measures to be used, or in qualitative methods, strategies to enhance credibility.
- 5) Presentation of a design or strategy for data collection.
- 6) Presentation of procedures for collecting and recording data. Feasibility of obtaining data (entry, facilities, recruitment, sample, time, costs, etc.)
- 7) Explanation of intended data analysis procedures.
- 8) Limitations of the study as related to overall design and methodology.
- 9) Provisions for pretesting or piloting the instruments and other methodological components on a small scale.

***Limitations of the study:***

The student should state the limitations of the study in relation to overall design and methodology issues (e.g., instruments; reliability and validity; sampling; design; analysis).

***Proposed timetable:***

Specify the timeline for data collection, analysis, and writing.

If this format is followed, anyone reading the proposal should be able to understand exactly what the study is about and the plan for conducting the research. The exact format does not have to be followed; however, anyone reading the proposal should be able to determine the intended approach to any of the issues indicated above.

## **Writing the proposal**

Students are supervised by the Dissertation Chair as they write the dissertation proposal. The Dissertation Chair and PhD student ask for guidance from the Dissertation Committee members to varying degrees in the development, conceptualization, and/or review of the dissertation proposal as it is being drafted. They are kept informed of proposal developments and student progress by the PhD student and the Chair.

Once the proposal draft is complete and approved by the Chair, the final draft can be sent to the Committee for review. Committee members will need time to read and critique the work and should be provided with two-four weeks to review the full draft. There may be many or few revisions. If Committee members agree that the work is now in acceptable form, the student will schedule the defense. If committee members disagree, the Chair is responsible to discuss/settle the issue.

## **Modifications for a Three-paper Dissertation Proposal**

The Dissertation Proposal for the three-paper option will follow the same format as the traditional (book format) dissertation. The Proposal should include an in-depth statement of the problem/issue, literature review, and review of relevant theory. The methods section will be aligned with the purposes of the 3 papers.

It is expected that the problem/issue statement, and theoretical and literature reviews covered in the Dissertation Proposal will serve as the foundation for the contextual Introduction to the three-paper format and will also be covered to various degrees in the 3 papers. If the content or depth required by the book-style format is not covered in the 3 papers, it is expected that the content will be represented in the Introduction.

## **The Proposal Defense**

The proposal defense is not public. Only the student, Chair, and committee members should attend. The format for the defense is as follows: The student presents an overview of the proposal (about 20 minutes), followed by questions and discussion from the committee. Following the discussion, the Chair requests that the student leave the room and the committee votes to 1) accept, 2) accept with revisions, or 3) reject the proposal.

A student may pass the defense with a unanimous vote; or a vote of 3 positive, one negative.

If the committee votes to accept with revisions, the committee will discuss the expected revisions with the student. The Chair is responsible for ensuring that the revisions are incorporated into the proposal.

## **Changes to an Approved Dissertation Proposal**

Once the proposal has been formally accepted, modifications are still possible. These changes should be discussed with the dissertation Chair, and the Chair should keep committee colleagues informed. If there is a substantive change in the focus of the research, the dissertation Chair must determine whether a new proposal should be formally submitted and whether the committee should meet again. Substantive changes also should be appended to the file copy of the proposal on file in the PhD Program.

## **Human Subject Research Review**

All projects involving human subjects must be reviewed by the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to the collection of data. All students must be current with their CITI (ethics) training and must obtain University approval before research with human subjects may commence. Students should obtain information and forms from the Rutgers eIRB website:

[https://eirb.rutgers.edu/eIRB/sd/Rooms/DisplayPages/LayoutInitial?Container=com.webridge.entity.Entity\[OID\[AC482809EC03C442A46F2C8EEC4D75D3\]\]](https://eirb.rutgers.edu/eIRB/sd/Rooms/DisplayPages/LayoutInitial?Container=com.webridge.entity.Entity[OID[AC482809EC03C442A46F2C8EEC4D75D3]])

The title page and formatting for the Dissertation is defined by the School of Graduate Studies. We recommend following their formatting for the Proposal (see below for sample title page).