

# Dissertation

## Quality of the Dissertation

The dissertation is a scholarly work that represents an investigation of a problem of significance. The dissertation meaningfully contributes to the field of psychology. It is the culmination of a program of advanced study leading to a doctoral degree and, as such, is expected to demonstrate a high degree of scholarly competence. It must show that the candidate is capable of (a) **sophisticated independent research and analysis** and (b) **scholarly reporting in the field of psychology**. It must be the product of original scholarly research and of such quality as to represent a meaningful contribution to knowledge in the field. The dissertation must follow acceptable research methodology appropriate for a chosen topic. The committee chairperson and committee members are to take an active role in the supervision of dissertation research.

## Dissertation Committee

The Dissertation Committee shall consist of at least four members. The chair must be a member of the SHSU Graduate Faculty. The doctoral program faculty must approve any chair who is not a member of the Department of Psychology. Students may arrange for a member at another academic institution to co-chair their dissertation with the approval of Program faculty, and provided that a Department of Psychology faculty member co-chairs the dissertation. In any dissertation committee, at least two members must be from the faculty of the Department of Psychology. At least one member of the committee must be from outside the Department of Psychology. This can be someone from another department on campus, or from another institution. If the member is from another institution, the committee member must be approved by the dean's office.

When the student has clearly identified a dissertation research question, the student, in consultation with the chair, selects the prospective committee members. Once the committee is formed, complete the Appointment of Dissertation Committee form and send it to the Dean's Office.

Any changes to the composition of the dissertation committee must be made with the approval of the dissertation chair. A student may change the chair of the committee for justifiable reasons,

with approval from the DCT. To change the committee membership, the student must petition the DCT in writing. In the event that the DCT is the member of the committee to be changed, the student should direct the request to the Chair of the Department of Psychology.

### **Dissertation Courses and Continuous Enrollment**

*Students must have a chair and permission from their dissertation chair to begin enrolling in dissertation courses.* Students enrolled in Dissertation I (PSYC 8096), Dissertation II (PSYC 8097), and Dissertation III (PSYC 8098) only once. They then enroll in Dissertation IV (PSYC 8099) until their dissertation is complete. Once enrolled in Dissertation I (PSYC 8096), University policy requires continuous enrollment in Dissertation (I, II, III, or IV) until the dissertation is complete. Continuous enrollment includes summer sessions if the student is taking any other credit hours during the summer. A student may enroll in Dissertation IV multiple times, but will receive a grade of IP each semester until the dissertation is successfully defended. A student must defend the completed dissertation before the College of Humanities and Social Sciences posted deadline (several weeks before end of semester) to avoid having to register for Dissertation IV the following semester.

In some instances, a student who is about to complete internship and begin a postdoctoral or employment position misses the posted summer dissertation defense deadline. In these instances, the registrar's office will backdate the student's transcript to indicate that student met all requirements as of September 1, but only if the registrar has received a signed copy of the student's dissertation route sheet before the beginning of the first day of the Fall semester. Please understand that the route sheet does not go to the registrar's office until the library has received and approved the final dissertation document. If the student does get the route sheet to the registrar's office before the first day to the Fall semester, the student will not be required to register for Dissertation IV for the Fall semester.

Dissertation courses are variable credit courses, meaning that a student can enroll for 1, 2, or 3 hours each semester. Students must enroll for 3 hours of Dissertation I, 3 hours of Dissertation II, 3 hours of Dissertation III, and 3 hours of Dissertation 4. If students enroll in Dissertation IV for more than one semester, they can then enroll in Dissertation IV for 1, 2, or 3 hours.

## **Dissertation Course Grades**

As with thesis courses, dissertation courses (PSYC 8096-8099) are graded as Credit (CR) or No Credit (NC). Please see the thesis course grade for more information about the serious consequences associated with NC grades.

Each semester, the faculty member chairing the student's dissertation will develop a syllabus outlining the student's expected progress during the semester. A faculty member will assign a grade of No Credit (NC) when he/she believes that the student has made no or insufficient progress on the tasks outlined on the syllabus. Students are encouraged to meet with their chairs at the beginning of each semester to ensure that the student understands the type and amount of progress expected during the semester.

## **Dissertation Procedure**

Please see the Master's Thesis Procedure section in this Handbook. The procedures for the dissertation are identical to those for the master's thesis.

## **Dissertation Deadlines**

The Program requires you to successfully defend your dissertation proposal before September 15 if you plan to apply for internship (see below).

You must defend your dissertation by the date posted by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences to avoid having to enroll in dissertation in upcoming semesters. If you defend after that date (which is several weeks before the end of the semester), but before the end of the semester, you will still have to enroll in dissertation the following semester. The University's deadlines are published several semesters in advance at <http://www.shsu.edu/dept/graduate-studies/thesis-dissertation-timelines.html>. The College's deadlines, which are sometimes slightly earlier, can be found at <http://www.shsu.edu/academics/humanities-and-social-sciences/graduate/index.html>.

## **Dissertation Deadlines and Being Certified to Apply for Internship**

Please take especial note: The Clinical Program *will not certify you as being eligible to apply for internships* unless you stage a successful defense of your dissertation proposal by **September 15**

of the fall semester that precedes your intended internship.

Let's consider this requirement. You will need to defend your dissertation proposal at the start of your last academic year on campus in order to go on internship the following year. (The deadline occurs early in the year because your internship applications will need to be in place only one month later, and there is much to do to make that happen. Indeed, as we discuss the ramifications of this deadline, please note that you *can* defend your dissertation proposal earlier than this, that is, in the preceding spring or summer. September becomes complex if everyone waits until the last minute, so we encourage you to finish your proposal earlier and to defend it as soon as possible.) Thus, you will need to receive feedback from your full committee to stage your defense before the Fall semester begins. Keep in mind, too, faculty often are completely unavailable for weeks during the summer, including the two weeks just before the Fall semester starts.

**Thus, we strongly recommend that you should plan your efforts so that your Chair is satisfied with a proposal that is ready to submit to the other members of your committee by July 15.**

In practice, this means that you must work closely with your Chair to ensure that you can meet these deadlines. Chairs differ in the number of drafts they expect from students and the time it takes them to return drafts. They also differ in their availability over the summer. Faculty members work on 9 month contracts and may take long vacations in the summer. Although many faculty members teach and do research in the summer, **you should not assume that your Chair will be available during the entire summer. It is extremely important that you work closely with your Chair in planning your dissertation to ensure that you can meet the September 15 deadline.** We strongly encourage you to **clarify by Spring Break** exactly whether and when your Chair will be available to assist you during the summer months.

### **A Dissertation Timeline**

Every dissertation presents its own challenges, but here is an illustrative sample timeline:

Fall semester (3<sup>rd</sup> year)

- Discuss possible dissertation topics with potential chairs
- Select a Chair

Beginning of Spring semester (3<sup>rd</sup> year)

- Register for PSYC 8096, Dissertation I
- Choose a topic
- Refine your plans

Middle of Spring semester

- Select other committee members
- Clarify summer availability of all committee members
- Specify procedure and detail plans
- Create proposal outline
- Write first draft of complete proposal

End of Spring semester

- Revise and resubmit drafts of proposal to Chair

Early summer

- Register for PSYC 8097, Dissertation II
- Submit refined proposal to other committee members by July 15
- Revise and resubmit drafts of proposal

Late summer

- Stage proposal defense as early as possible (and no later than Sept. 15 if applying for internship in the Fall)

Fall semester (4<sup>th</sup> year)

- Register for PSYC 8098, Dissertation III

- Obtain approval of institutional review boards
- Begin data collection

#### Spring semester (4<sup>th</sup> year)

- Register for PSYC 8099, Dissertation IV
- Complete data collection
- Write first draft of dissertation
- Revise and resubmit drafts to Chair
- Revise and resubmit drafts to other committee members
- Submit a draft to the library for formatting
- Stage dissertation defense

### **Choosing a Research Question**

The specific hypotheses and procedures involved in any research enterprise usually emerge from some combination of careful reading of the existing literature, local opportunity, and thoughtful innovation. One usually develops a particular question over a period of time, so we encourage you to think of the selection of a topic as a *process* that can actually take several forms.

There are at least three broad trajectories by which students settle on a thesis or dissertation topic. At one extreme, students join a faculty member's ongoing research program for a semester or two, learn the ropes, and then take ownership of a project that is a logical next step in the research program. Such investigations are not started from scratch; indeed, they may straightforwardly emerge from the studies that precede them.

At the other extreme, the student generates a personal interest and specific research question entirely on his or her own, and then shops it around to the faculty to find a thesis or dissertation chair. Between those extremes is a broad approach that is probably the most common of the three types: The student has a particular interest and an emerging question, and works closely with faculty advisors in a synergistic process of give-and-take to shape the specific study. Thus, a thesis may address a topic that is entirely new to the Department or it may be an extension of local work that has preceded it. Don't hesitate to visit with the faculty regarding their (and your)

interests.

Overall, then, you probably won't be thinking up your research plan all by yourself. You still have to hone your interests, however, and to aid that process, we have several specific suggestions.

1. Keep a small research notebook handy, and whenever you encounter a phenomenon or finding of interest to you, make a note of it.
2. Read the most recent studies that bear on your two or three favorite phenomena. There is no substitute for this type of preparation. You should aim to become an expert in the very specific domains of interest to you. When you know enough, what you can (or should) do is often obvious; the latest investigations will offer you state-of-the-art methods, and their discussion sections will often *suggest* subsequent studies to readers.
3. As your specific idea emerges, consult the faculty. Start with those with expertise in your area, broadly defined. Manageable theses and dissertations must be practical, so expect a collaborative process of helpful criticism that will refine your idea and provide reassuring guidance.
4. Finally, remember that science is *incremental*, and think small. Study a question that interests you, but do not expect to make a discovery that sets psychology on its ear. That hardly ever happens; science is a cumulative exercise in which small steps produce meaningful advances over time.

Thus, when you choose your question, you'll likely not be blazing a new trail into a dangerous wilderness. Instead, you'll likely be following closely in the footsteps of others, using their proven tools. Once you learn where their paths lead and how to use their tools, what to do may be straightforwardly apparent rather than frustratingly unclear. Don't hesitate to answer small questions decisively; that's always more valuable than addressing huge issues ambiguously.

### **Time Limitation on the Dissertation**

Unless compelling circumstances warrant an extension, all students must complete the program within six years of their first registration in the doctoral Program. For students who enter the

Program without a master's degree in psychology, the six-year deadline starts after they have completed requirements for the master's degrees. There are no time limitations on the period for completion of the dissertation other than those imposed for the successful completion of all requirements by the student in the doctoral Program. However, during the actual period of data collection and analysis, close liaison and consultation shall be maintained by the student with each member of the committee in order that they may be kept informed of the student's progress in a timely manner. Ideally, students will complete the dissertation before departing for internship.

### **Dissertation Forms**

There are a number of forms that students need to complete during the dissertation process. These include forms for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Graduate School. Each of these forms requires a number of signatures.

The Thesis and Dissertation Process Checklist (next page) identifies the different forms and explains when each form needs to be completed and signed. These forms do sometimes change, and students are encouraged to check with the program administrative staff (i.e., Sonya Miller), the Dean's Office, and the Graduate School to make sure that they have the most up-to-date versions of these forms.

The Psychology Department webpage provides a link to copies of the CHSS forms (<http://www.shsu.edu/~clinpsy/Forms.html>).



## Dissertation Process Checklist (Forms and Approvals)

1. Complete [Appointment of Dissertation Committee Form](#). Obtain signatures from Graduate Advisor (DCT), Department Chair and the Dean's Office, prior to proposing your dissertation. The Dean's Office will keep the completed/signed form.

If a committee member will be someone outside of Sam Houston State University, please make sure to complete the [Non SHSU Employee on Thesis/Dissertation Committee Request](#) form, obtain signatures, attach non-SHSU committee member's CV, and submit for approval to the Dean of Graduate Studies. Graduate Studies will forward the approved form to the Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program (form will remain in student file).

2. Defend Proposal. On the day of proposal, have the [Proposal/Prospectus Defense Form](#) prepared for signatures. Secure signatures from Dissertation Chair(s) and Committee, Graduate Advisor (DCT), Department Chair, and send to the Dean's Office along with Prospectus (prospectus is a more in depth version of abstract). The Dean's Office will forward the form to the Registrar's Office.
3. Submit [IRB](#) application (human subject approval). You must have IRB approval before collection data.
4. Check the [Graduate Studies website](#) for specific timeline dates.
5. Submit draft to [Library](#) for approval of basic style and format (6 weeks prior to graduation).
6. Defend dissertation. On the day of dissertation defense, have the following forms prepared for signatures: [Dissertation Defense Form](#), [Approval Page](#) (on bonded paper) and [Route Sheet](#). Secure signatures from Dissertation Chair(s) and Committee, Graduate Advisor (DCT) and Department Chair. Bring signed forms along with a copy of your abstract to the Dean's Office for signature. The Dean's Office will send the Dissertation Defense Form to the

Registrar's Office and will contact you to pick up the Approval Page and Route Sheet.

7. Submit approved draft to Thesis Clerk in the Library (with changes, if any, from defense). Make changes as requested by the Library.
8. Once final approval has been received by the Library, [copies](#) should be made (preferably by Sam Houston Press & Copy Center). Take final copy (on bonded paper), approval sheet (on bonded paper), extra abstract (on bonded paper) and Route Sheet to the Library for signature.
9. Take Route Sheet to Graduate Studies Office.
10. Graduate Studies will hand-deliver Route Sheet to the Registrar's Office.

\*Note: Please make sure Program Secretary receives a copy of each signed form.

# **Policy for Committee Members Not Employed by SHSU Serving on SHSU Thesis and Dissertation Committees**

## **1. PURPOSE**

1.01 The purpose of this policy is to provide a procedure whereby highly qualified individuals not employed by SHSU may serve on SHSU thesis and dissertation committees. This will enable our students and faculty to interact with prominent individuals in the appropriate topic area.

## **2. GENERAL**

2.01 Only one external reader may be permitted to serve on each thesis or dissertation committee. This person must be specifically requested by the student writing the thesis or dissertation and approved, in advance, by the appropriate academic dean and department and committee chairs.

2.02 If specifically requested by the student writing the thesis or dissertation, and if approved by the department and committee chairs, the external reader may be included as a fourth signatory.

2.03 If an approved external reader is located at a distance from the SHSU campus, which would make his/her presence at thesis/dissertation committee meetings or a defense impracticable, such meetings or defense may be accomplished by a conference call.

2.04 An approved external reader will be bound by all pertinent rules, regulations and procedures pertaining to the preparation and approval of theses and dissertations at SHSU.

## **3. QUALIFICATIONS**

3.01 It is expected that an external reader should:

- a. generally be a member of the graduate faculty of his/her institution;
- b. teach courses at the level of the degree the student writing the thesis or dissertation is pursuing; or
- c. possess pertinent credentials and/or expertise in the topic area sufficient to satisfy the respective academic dean and department/committee chairs. In such special circumstances, that person must be included as a fourth member of the committee.