

Thesis/Dissertation Committee Policy and Guidelines

Division of Graduate Studies

California State University, Fresno

It is the purpose of this document to set forth policies for the functioning of thesis and dissertation committees appointed at California State University, Fresno, in order to maintain high standards of quality in the conduct of graduate student research and writing and to provide guidelines for the orderly transfer of members' responsibilities if this should become necessary.

Insofar as it is judged the academic obligation and expectation of all graduate faculty to serve on graduate thesis and dissertation committees, this work in turn is recognized by the Division of Graduate Studies and the university in support of tenure and promotion, and individual faculty mentorship is publicized through listings and published records of the abstracts and theses/dissertations at a national level.

Where joint doctoral or master's degree programs are offered, policies and procedures of participating campuses may also apply. Additionally, joint requirements for approval of committee assignment and completion of the final document may add to or supersede this policy. The following policy and guidelines have been established for faculty members at California State University, Fresno who direct theses and dissertations.

Thesis/Dissertation Committees

Thesis/dissertation committees have an established place in the academic world and play a vital role in the guidance and direction of graduate student research. One member of the committee, the chairperson, has a more formal administrative relationship with the student because of the way the university recognizes the chairperson's responsibilities. On occasion, the roles of the chairperson and the committee members require clarification.

1.0 Thesis/Dissertation Committee Structure

1.1 Number of Members

- 1.11 Each master's thesis and doctoral dissertation committee shall be composed of a minimum of three members.
- 1.12. Under extenuating circumstances (e.g., member's death or sudden leave), to be noted by the graduate program coordinator* in a letter to the graduate dean, an individual student in the final stages of the thesis/dissertation may request to have fewer than three members on the committee.
- 1.13 A fourth and/or fifth member may be added to the committee when deemed appropriate/necessary to provide required expertise.

* The terms *Program coordinator* and *Program director* are interchangeable in this document.

1.2 Committee Membership

- 1.21 Two of the three required committee members, including the chair, shall be members of the *Master's Graduate Faculty Group* of the student's degree program. Only members of this group are allowed to chair a thesis. In order for a member to chair a thesis, he/she must have previously served as a second or third member of a thesis committee (per APM 226-2, III. *Criteria for Membership in a Master's Graduate Faculty Group*, par. 3).

The Graduate Group in the program, with the approval of the department, may invite their Faculty Early Retirement Program (FERP) faculty members to participate on thesis/dissertation committees as second or third readers, with the stipulation that they demonstrate a personal commitment to function in this capacity and that they have been appointed as members of the consultative body. Graduate faculty members whose status has been terminated due to retirement or who are in FERP status may complete outstanding examining committee, thesis committee, and advising assignments as chair if they wish to do so, but they may not accept new assignments to chair such committees (see APM 226-3, III. *Criteria for Membership in a Master's Graduate Faculty Group*, par. 8). *Note:* In order for the thesis/dissertation committee to function as required, the program must appoint FERP faculty serving on these committees as adjunct faculty during each of the academic terms in which they have inactive status.

- 1.22 An individual who possesses requisite expertise, but who is not a member of the department faculty in the student's program, may serve as a third reader on a thesis or dissertation committee with the approval of the department chair. This may include part-time and adjunct faculty, retired program faculty, faculty from other programs or universities, and community professionals. In such cases, a curriculum vita of the individual concerned must accompany the submitted Master's Thesis (299) Committee Assignment form.
- 1.23 Each graduate program committee may establish additional procedures for the appointment of thesis committee members. It is recommended that these procedures be published and be made available to incoming graduate students and new faculty members.
- 1.24 The committee chair shall be a faculty member of the graduate faculty from the student's program. A faculty member from another department may assume the role of committee chair only if eligible for and appropriately appointed as program graduate faculty (see APM 226) in the student's degree program.
- 1.25 For the doctorate degree, the committee chair must be a member of the *Doctoral Graduate Faculty Group* and possess requisite knowledge and experience in discipline-based research theory and methodologies at the doctoral level, knowledge of the requirements for doctoral dissertations in the discipline, and a demonstrated ability to successfully direct others in research activities. The first time an individual is being considered as a chair of a doctoral dissertation committee, supporting documentation must accompany the recommendation through all levels of review (per

APM 227-2, III. *Criteria for Membership in a Doctoral Graduate Faculty Group*, par. 6c).

- 1.26 Each graduate program's graduate group should establish a reasonable maximum for the number of theses an individual faculty member may supervise.
- 1.27 The department chair should ensure that work of the thesis or dissertation committee chair is calculated as part of the faculty's required regular workload.

Interdisciplinary Studies (formerly Special Major): As representatives of the departments related to the student's fields of interest, the interdisciplinary studies student's program committee, approved by the graduate dean, will also serve as the thesis committee for the student.

2.0 Thesis Committee Responsibilities

2.1 The Committee as a Whole

- 2.11 The initial responsibility of the committee is to meet and determine the feasibility of the topic and the thesis/dissertation plan or proposal, and to permit the student to proceed only after such determination has been made. The committee shall sign off on the student's plan or proposal and a copy should be kept in the student's file in the department. The signing of this document signifies that the student has permission to proceed with the study as outlined in the plan.
- 2.12 The committee is responsible for assuring that the student is familiar with and has received copies of appropriate university policies concerning the handling of dangerous materials, laboratory and fieldwork safety, and maintenance of standards of quality, ethics, and professional performance. The committee (chair) should inform the student regarding proprietary interests and ownership of data or research product as appropriate, and reach agreement about these issues. Formal written agreements may be desirable or even mandatory when patent-related issues may arise. This needs to be done as early in the process as possible, preferably at the time the proposal is accepted.
- 2.13 The committee shall determine whether the student's research is subject to the university policy on research on human or animal subjects and advise the student accordingly.
- 2.14 The committee shall determine the adequacy of the bibliography.
- 2.15 The committee shall review and approve the methodology and any instrument or questionnaire used in data collection.
- 2.16 Committee members are responsible for reviewing thesis and dissertation drafts, and providing feedback in a timely manner. Depending on circumstances, there should be no more than a four-week turnaround review time for each of the committee members to review the manuscript for a thesis or dissertation.

- 2.17 The responsibility of the committee as a whole is to examine the student's work and to meet and make a final determination of the acceptability of the thesis/dissertation, and to arrange for any oral defense of the thesis in accordance with written department policies.
- 2.18 It is the policy of this university to make all theses available to the public through the library and through established academic abstracting services. On rare occasions, committee members shall assist the graduate dean in determining the need for and recommending the withholding of material for publication for a specified period of time, not to exceed one calendar year.
- 2.19 It shall be the responsibility of the student to observe graduate deadlines for the submission of final and publication copies of the thesis/dissertation. A reasonable amount of time (not more than four weeks) should be allowed for each of the committee members to review the manuscript.

2.2 The Chairperson

- 2.21 The student and the committee chairperson, insofar as it is possible, should arrive at an agreement on an approximate time schedule, including meetings of the committee, for the accomplishment of thesis/dissertation-related work for each semester or term that the student is engaged in such work.
- 2.22 The chair shall have primary responsibility for the supervision of the student's work, setting deadlines, and guiding the student's progress.
- 2.23 The chair shall assume the role of "principal investigator" when the student's research involves human or animal subjects, and shall ensure that university policies in this area are carefully observed (The Policy and Procedures for Research and Human Subjects at California State University, Fresno, available from the Office of the Vice President for Administration; Policy and Procedures for Handling all Warm-Blooded Animals Used for Teaching, Experimentation, or Research at California State University, Fresno, *Academic Policy Manual*).
- 2.24 The chair shall inform the student of university regulations regarding the need to maintain continuous enrollment while working on the thesis/dissertation, and the zero-unit policy requiring enrollment in Graduate Studies (GS) Continuation through Continuing and Global Education (Extension) or in GS 299 (Regular University Enrollment).
- 2.25 The chair shall inform the student of the university's *Guidelines for Thesis Preparation* and shall encourage attendance at a thesis workshop as early as possible in the student's thesis process. The *Guidelines for Thesis Preparation* are available at the Kennel Bookstore and from the Thesis Office website.
- 2.26 In consultation with the other members of the committee, the chair shall determine the final grade on the thesis/dissertation and see that it is properly reported on the Graduate Degree Clearance form.

- 2.27 The chair is responsible for evaluating the student's progress before assigning an "SP" grade for thesis/dissertation units. (The "SP" grade is automatically assigned unless a student is not making significant progress, in which case an "I" grade may be assigned.)
- 2.28 The chair shall inform the student of the style manual or journal style required by the department for formatting the reference list or bibliography.

3.0 Vacancies and Replacements

- 3.1 If any committee member anticipates an extended but temporary absence during the time the student is working on the thesis/dissertation, he or she should arrange for means of communicating during this leave, or designate an appropriate temporary/permanent substitute.
- 3.2 The determination to make a change in committee chair or membership must be reported on a Change in Master's Thesis (299) Committee and/or Topic form, submitted to the Graduate Division, and must be approved by the graduate program coordinator and department chair. A change in the committee chair requires a letter of justification from the department chair at the time the Change in Master's Thesis (299) Committee form is submitted, as stated on the form. Faculty members who are replaced must be so informed by the department chair.
- 3.3 If the chairperson is unexpectedly absent or absent due to planned sabbatical/retirement at the time the student completes the thesis/dissertation, the department chair may act for the thesis chair, in consultation with the absent chair or other committee members.

4.0 Disputes

- 4.1 In the event that a dispute or disagreement arises between a student and a member of the committee or between members of the committee, the committee chairperson shall call a meeting of the committee and the student for the purpose of resolving the problem.
- 4.2 If the dispute cannot be resolved through this process, or if the proposed solution is unacceptable to the student or one of the committee members, the disagreeing party or the department chairperson may request that the graduate committee of the student's department/program review the problem and recommend a solution.
- 4.3 If the problem cannot be resolved at the department level, the dispute should be appealed to the college or school dean. This will be the final level of appeal.

5.0 Termination of the Committee

- 5.1 The committee shall have discharged its obligations when the final manuscript has been approved by the Graduate Dean, each member has signed the approval page for the

publication copy of the thesis/dissertation, and the thesis/dissertation grade is recorded on the clearance sheet.

- 5.2** In the event a student does not register for thesis/dissertation or fails to maintain an active status within one semester or term after official acceptance by a thesis committee, the committee chairperson has the option of dissolving the committee, in which case a new committee must be secured and approved before registration can be authorized.
- 5.3** If a student must suspend work on the thesis/dissertation for educational reasons acceptable to the committee chairperson, the student should obtain a planned educational leave of absence. These leaves may be approved for two to four semesters. If the leave is approved, the committee shall continue its existence until the student returns.

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