

# GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR THE EPIDEMIOLOGY PHD DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

## I. Establishing the Dissertation Committee

- 1) Once a student has passed the comprehensive examination, he/she will select a dissertation advisory committee of not fewer than four members.
  - 2) The committee will be chosen in consultation with the student's research mentor.
  - 3) The committee must include two members of the Epidemiology faculty other than the mentor and at least one faculty member from Biostatistics.
  - 4) The DGS will serve as an *ex officio* member of the committee if he/she is not an official member of the committee.
  - 5) The committee must be appointed by the Graduate School no less than 2 weeks before the time of the qualifying examination.
- The dissertation committee is intended to bring specialized expertise and resources to a student's resource and career development process. The committee guides the development of the student's research and career development, with the dissertation advisor primarily responsible for overall guidance of the student's research and training.
  - Suggestions on choosing committee members:
    - Consider a mix of established and junior faculty members, as each are likely to provide different input, and while established faculty have a great deal of experience, they often have greater time commitments, whereas junior members can be more responsive.
    - Talk with Spencer about the specific individuals you are considering, to make sure they are qualified by the Graduate School to serve on your committee.
    - Talk with Dr. Hartmann or Dr. Epplein about your committee selection. Your committee membership ideas can also be discussed during your interdepartmental review (IDR).
  - The dissertation committee is responsible for administering the qualifying examination and the final dissertation examination.

## II. Preparing the Dissertation Proposal

- 1) The dissertation proposal is a comprehensive proposal detailing the motivation, approach, and feasibility of the student's proposed doctoral dissertation research.
- 2) The dissertation will comprise, at the minimum:
  1. Critical review of the literature
  2. Motivation for the study, and how it fulfills certain gaps in the field
  3. Statement of specific aims, and hypotheses for each

4. Proposed approach and analytic plan, including:
  - a) Table 1 equivalent descriptors with overview of population (for each aim if population differs)
  - b) Detailed operational definitions of key exposure and outcome variables in text and potentially figures/tables, including the construction of variables and any decisions that need to be made (spline, quantiles, categorical from continuous)
  - c) Detailed operational definitions of other variables proposed and their construction (can be in table format)
  - d) Rationale for candidate confounders for each aim
  - e) Rationale for consideration of effect modification
  - f) Detailed analysis plan that includes statistical methods to be used for each aim, and an explanation as to the assumptions and/or caveats associated with such methods
  - g) Clear defense of superiority of the modeling approach over common alternatives
  - h) Power calculations for each aim
5. Description of papers to be written from the research
6. Potential limitations of the study

### **III. Working with Your Committee**

- 1) The first, full draft of the dissertation proposal should be presented to the dissertation committee at least 2 months prior to the planned date of the qualifying exam.
  - The final, completed draft of the proposal should be given to the committee 3 weeks before the date of the exam.
- 2) The student is in charge of this process:
  - You are responsible for organizing committee meetings and making sure that things progress. At this point in your career, you should be in charge of moving things along, not your committee.
  - Provide your materials/rewrites/proposal to your committee members with plenty of time to review (we are talking weeks ahead for formal meetings). Do not expect to give material to your committee the night before and get something in the next day or two. Demonstrate that you value the committee members input and time by being courteous.
  - Make sure you give your committee members quality work – this means having someone edit it, check for grammar and spelling errors. There is nothing worse than when a student wants quality feedback, but hasn't bothered to provide quality material. Furthermore, if a committee member suggests changes, don't give it back to them for review without those changes. If you disagree – discuss it, but just don't ignore it.
  - If you can, provide a schedule for your committee so they know what to anticipate and potentially make time for. An example:
    - Aug 1- will provide 1<sup>st</sup> draft to committee members
    - Aug 28- request that committee feedback be given by this date
    - Sept 21- makes changes return to committee (repeat cycle as needed until committee is satisfied with your proposal)

- Oct 10- final proposal will be given to committee members
- Oct 31 – Committee meeting/proposal defense
- Prior to scheduling the qualifying exam, you should have agreement from all committee members that your proposal is ready, by their standards and taking into account their concerns, to be defended.

#### **IV. Qualifying Exam (*aka* oral proposal defense)**

- 1) The qualifying examination is an oral defense of the dissertation proposal.
- 2) The Graduate School must be notified of the time and place of the qualifying examination at least 2 weeks in advance.
- 3) To qualify for candidacy, a student must complete all of the required first and second year courses, must be in good academic standing (GPA  $\geq 3.0$ ), must pass the comprehensive examination and must pass an oral qualifying examination.
- 4) The examining committee is the student's dissertation committee.
- 5) The examining committee assesses the written proposal and oral defense by rating the success of the student in the following components:
  1. Familiarity with research literature
  2. Ability to organize scientific data
  3. Critical thinking skills
  4. Mastery of principles and methodology proposed
  5. Oral presentation of proposal
  6. Ability to interpret and answer questions appropriately
- 6) There are three possible outcomes of the examination: Pass; Conditional Pass; or Fail.
  1. A Fail requires a complete Qualifying Exam take-over (if a second Fail occurs, the student is dismissed from the program).
  2. A Conditional Pass requires a set of conditions to be set out by the committee, with a due date by which such conditions must be fulfilled. Upon satisfactory completion by the due date, the Conditional Pass will then become a Pass; otherwise it will become a Fail.