



## The Dissertation Process: Survivor Manual

The doctoral dissertation is a piece of original, independent research in an area of educational significance. It reflects the candidate's knowledge and understanding of the related literature and of the research methodology appropriate to the investigation. The dissertation in the form of an organized and competently written study should represent a contribution to the knowledge base in the candidate's field or area of specialization. A block of 9-12 units of coursework is devoted to the development of a dissertation proposal and to the research and writing of a dissertation, specifically, 709 (*Dissertation Proposal Seminar*), 729, (*Dissertation Proposal Development*), 790 (*Dissertation Proposal Writing*), and 791 (*Dissertation Research and Writing*).

The following narrative describes five phases in the dissertation experience, namely:

- Phase I, which outlines the requirements for enrolling in the *Dissertation Proposal Seminar (709)* course;
- Phase II, which describes the expectations of the *Dissertation Proposal Seminar (709)* course, the requirements for enrolling in the *Dissertation Proposal Writing (790)* course, and the process of establishing a dissertation committee;
- Phase III, which delineates the expectations of the *Dissertation Proposal Writing (790)* course, including the proposal defense protocol, the approval of the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, the successful defense of the dissertation proposal, and the candidate's advancement to candidacy;
- Phase IV, which summarizes the expectations of the *Dissertation Research and Writing (791)* course, including the successful defense of the complete dissertation; and Phase V, which outlines the final procedures involved in the dissertation process.

### Phase I Preparing to Enroll in 709 (*Dissertation Proposal Seminar*)

#### ***Requirements for Enrollment in the Dissertation Proposal Seminar (709) Course***

In order to enroll in the Dissertation Proposal Seminar (709) course, candidates must meet the following requirements:

- Completion of a minimum of 30 units with a minimum GPA of 3.0 with no Incomplete (I) or In-Progress (IP) grades

- Completion of three introductory General Education courses:
  - Applied Educational Statistics (706)
  - Research Methods in Education (708)
  - General Education Foundations course (*See Doctoral Handbook*)
- Approval of the Associate Dean (obtained by submitting the [Dissertation Courses Registration Form](#))

***Pause to Reflect...***

Even if you have fulfilled the above checklist, are you *really* ready to register for 709? Ask yourself:

~ Have you conceptualized the major aspects of your future dissertation study, namely, the research problem, the background and need for your study, the purpose of your study, its significance, etc?

~ Have you read a substantial portion of the literature that validates the need for your study?

~ Have you taken a course in the methodology that you intend to employ in your research?

If not, this is your opportunity to enroll in one or more courses that will empower you to further conceptualize your proposed study (such as, a literature review course, the Scholarly Writing course, a methods course) that will prepare you for the 709 course, in which you are required to outline/write the first three chapters of your dissertation.

**Phase II**  
**Completion of**  
***Dissertation Proposal Seminar (709)***

***Dissertation Proposal Seminar (709) Course***

This course prepares the candidate to produce a prospectus of the dissertation proposal, consisting of a formulated Chapter One, a thematic outline of annotated references for Chapter Two, and a draft of Chapter Three. A grade of "Pass" in this course indicates the candidate's readiness to work with a dissertation chairperson and committee in 790, *Dissertation Proposal Writing*. In the event that a doctoral candidate does not achieve a grade of "Pass" in the 709 course, s/he may enroll in Dissertation Proposal Development (729), and repeat the 709 course and its focus on development of Chapters One through Three (prospectus).

### ***Requirements for Enrollment in the Dissertation Proposal Writing (790) Course***

In order to enroll in the *Dissertation Proposal Writing (790)* course, candidates must have developed a prospectus of the dissertation proposal in the 709 course, and must have fulfilled the following requirements:

- Completion of a minimum of 45 units with a minimum GPA of 3.0 with no Incomplete (I) or In-Progress (IP) grades
- Completion of the *Dissertation Proposal Seminar (709)* course
- Approved application to appoint a dissertation committee
- Approval of the Associate Dean (obtained by submitting the [Dissertation Courses Registration Form](#))

### ***Establishment of a Dissertation Committee***

Prior to enrolling in 790, a request is made to the Associate Dean to establish a dissertation committee. The primary functions of the dissertation committee are to provide feedback at the pre-proposal meeting, review and approve the dissertation proposal, and review and approve the dissertation. The *Application for Appointment of a Doctoral Dissertation Committee* packet is available for download from the School of Education's website: [http://www.usfca.edu/soe/students/handbooks\\_forms/](http://www.usfca.edu/soe/students/handbooks_forms/).

Ordinarily, a doctoral dissertation committee includes a chairperson from the candidate's department, one member from the School of Education's fulltime faculty (usually from the department, but the candidate should check the specific requirements of her/his department), and one member from the SOE or USF at large, all of whom are qualified in either or both the substantive area of the candidate's research topic and the design and procedures of the candidate's research method.

If the faculty members in the candidate's department agree, the candidate may have a chairperson outside the department. To utilize this option, the candidate must write a request to the Doctoral Program Policy Committee (DPPC). This request must be endorsed by the candidate's department and have the signature of the department chairperson for DPPC consideration.

Also, at the candidate's option, the committee may include a fourth reader who is a qualified member of the faculty of another school or college at USF, or of the professional community outside USF who is distinguished in the area of the candidate's dissertation topic, possesses a doctoral degree, and is approved by the chairperson, the other two members of the candidate's committee, and the Associate Dean.

In any case, the candidate, in consultation with her/his faculty advisor, secures the agreement of the chairperson and, then, in consultation with the chairperson, also secures the agreement of the second and third readers and, optionally, of the fourth reader. The chairperson then approves the candidate's selection of committee members and recommends this selection to the Associate Dean, who appoints the dissertation

committee. When the Associate Dean has approved the committee, the candidate and the committee members will receive a copy of the signed form.

If it becomes necessary or desirable to change the membership of the dissertation committee, candidates should obtain a [\*Change in Membership of Doctoral Dissertation Committee\*](#) form that the chairperson of the new committee should submit to the Associate Dean for approval after the candidate has obtained the appropriate signatures.

### ***Protocol for Securing Dissertation Committee Members***

When inviting a faculty member to join a dissertation committee, the candidate is expected to schedule a face-to-face appointment with a prospective dissertation chairperson or committee member to describe her/his research topic. Prior to this meeting, the candidate is advised to submit a synopsis of her/his proposed study for review by the faculty member. At this meeting, the candidate may request the signature of the faculty member on the *Application for Appointment of a Doctoral Dissertation Committee*. In the event that a faculty member may not be able to accept a candidate's invitation to serve on her/his committee (due to a variety of reasons, such as an upcoming sabbatical, a heavy workload, etc.), the candidate would simply approach an alternate member of the faculty. It is not acceptable to request that a faculty member join a dissertation committee during a casual encounter.

### ***Pause to Reflect...***

~ Are you now ready to work independently with a chairperson in the 790 course? Once you enter Phase III, you will work independently without the support of classmates and a regular teaching weekend schedule of class check-ins and assignments. At this stage, it is advisable to have formed a network of peers that meets on a regular basis and provides a structure for support during the dissertation writing phases.

~ Were you productive in 709 to the extent that you have, at a minimum, a thorough outline of Chapters I, II, and III and, perhaps, complete text for one or more of these chapters?

~ If you are not quite ready to enroll in 790, you have the option of enrolling in 729 (*Proposal Development*), which would place you in another 709 course and give you the opportunity to recycle through 709, as well as the support of the instructor and classmates to assist you to expand and refine your outline/writing of Chapters I, II, and III.

## Phase III Preparation for Your Proposal Defense

### ***Pause to Reflect...***

*With your chairperson, decide whether you will enroll in 790 for 3 units? 2 units? or 1 unit? See below for explanation...*

*Remember to submit the [Dissertation Courses Registration Form](#) prior to registration to obtain authorization to register.*

### ***Dissertation Proposal Writing (790) Course***

During the 790 course, *Dissertation Proposal Writing*, the candidate works individually with her/his dissertation chairperson, writes and successfully defends the dissertation proposal (indicated by the signatures of the committee members), consisting of complete written versions of Chapters One, Two, and Three of the dissertation. The dissertation chairperson (and committee members, if arranged) is responsible for reviewing drafts of the proposal and providing feedback in a timely manner. A reasonable amount of time (minimum of two weeks and not more than four weeks) should be allowed to review each draft of the manuscript.

Once a candidate enrolls in 790, s/he must continue to enroll in 790 each semester until s/he has successfully defended and submitted the corrected dissertation proposal to the Associate Dean. The candidate, in consultation with her/his dissertation chairperson, may spread the 3 units over two semesters (1 unit and 2 units, or 2 units and 1 unit). All repetitions of this course beyond the required 3 units may be for 1 unit. If a candidate is enrolled in 790 for more than three semesters, s/he, as well as the candidate's chairperson, will receive a letter from the Associate Dean requesting a specified timeline of completion. Please Note: Enrollment in 3 or more units per semester is required to qualify for Financial Aid.

If the chairperson or any committee member anticipates an extended but temporary absence during the time the candidate is working on the dissertation, s/he should communicate with the candidate in advance regarding his or her availability or unavailability during this absence.

### ***Pre-Proposal Meeting***

The doctoral candidate and her/his dissertation committee should meet appropriately in advance of the dissertation proposal defense in order to provide the candidate the opportunity to articulate her/his conceptualization of the proposed study and to afford the committee the occasion to assist the candidate in this endeavor. At this meeting, not to

exceed one hour in duration, the candidate will provide committee members, in written format, with the purpose statement, research questions, and instrumentation (that is, survey instrument, interview questions, etc.) related to the proposed study. The committee will determine the feasibility of the candidate's dissertation topic, the educational significance, appropriateness of the research methodology, and potential contribution to the field. This one-hour meeting can eliminate, potentially, many hours of unnecessary effort for all involved, particularly in the case of a candidate who has not adequately conceptualized her/his proposed study; on the other hand, it can provide support and assurance to the candidate who has. Please Note: Some departments in the School of Education require a *Pre-Proposal Meeting* prior to the proposal defense; for other departments, this may be an optional step that is determined by the chairperson and the candidate. (Candidates should check the requirements of their department.)

### ***The Dissertation Proposal***

The dissertation proposal should describe the problem to be investigated, the methodology/design to be used, instrumentation, the proposed plan for data collection and analysis, a theoretical rationale, a review of the literature, procedures for the protection of human subjects when appropriate, and the probable contribution the dissertation would make to the field. In no instance should the candidate begin dissertation research until the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) has approved the Application for the Protection of Human Subjects, and the Associate Dean has officially approved the dissertation proposal.

All work submitted for review at this stage should reflect not only scholarship, but also, concern for the technical details of format and style. The proposal should begin with a title page (See *Doctoral Handbook*). The body of the text should be divided into appropriate sections, with one standard form for footnotes, references, quotations, and tables/figures. With the approval of the dissertation chairperson, one of two style guides is acceptable: the most recent edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA)* or the most recent edition of the *Style Guide of the American Anthropological Association (AAA)*. Dissertation proposals that have not meticulously followed the style manual will be returned for correction.

### ***Dissertation Proposal Defense***

The dissertation proposal defense provides a formal opportunity for the dissertation committee to question the candidate about the work s/he has completed and to vote on the quality of that work. Technically, the event is also an oral examination, which means that the committee may choose to question the candidate about issues relevant to, but not directly part of, the dissertation. For example, the committee may question the candidate about the use of a particular statistic or about a body of literature that is pertinent to the dissertation, but not cited therein. Generally, dissertation defenses should not exceed two hours in duration.

A proposal must demonstrate mastery of an area of specialization and a proposed investigation of a problem in an analytic, creative, and scholarly way. When this has been accomplished to the satisfaction of the committee chairperson, a defense may be scheduled. The candidate is expected to coordinate a defense date and time, first, with her/his chairperson and, then, with the committee members. When a consensus has been reached, then contacts the Doctoral Program Assistant to reserve a conference room in the School of Education for the defense. The proposal defense must be on the schedule, kept by the Doctoral Program Assistant, at least three weeks before the defense. The defense must take place by the second week in May (Spring Semester) or December (Fall Semester). Finally, the candidate must supply a copy of the proposal to each member of the committee at least three weeks prior to the date of the defense.

The proposal (as well as the final dissertation) defense is a formal, academic presentation and critique of the doctoral candidate's work. It is not a celebration, nor is it an informal discussion. If desired by the candidate and approved by the chairperson and committee members, the defense may be attended by other members of the School and University community and, where reasonable in the eyes of the committee, by others from outside the University. However, visitors may not participate in the defense.

Audiotaping of the proposal (and final dissertation) defense is encouraged, but requires permission from the chairperson and each member of the committee prior to the date of the defense. All members of the committee must be present for the defense. If a member cannot be present, the defense must be rescheduled.

Prior to the date of the defense, the chairperson and the candidate should review the protocol for the defense and agree upon the method to record feedback from committee members. Also, the candidate should bring the *Proposal Results* form to the defense in anticipation of receiving the approval and subsequent signatures of her/his committee members. The chairperson reserves her/his signing of this form to the candidate's submission of a completed, corrected, approved proposal.

### ***General Proposal Defense Protocol***

The chairperson of the dissertation committee makes a statement at the beginning of the defense spelling out the protocol for the defense. Then, the candidate provides a brief (10-15 minute) presentation related to her/his proposal, as worked out in consultation with her/his chairperson. This presentation may include an overview of the research problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the methodology, and the significance of the proposed study.

Committee members then conduct their questioning/discussion and, when completed, the chairperson concludes this part of the defense and invites the candidate (and visitors) to leave the conference room for a brief executive session of the committee. The committee deliberates upon the quality of the proposal and takes one of four possible actions on the proposal:

- Approve with no substantive revisions (i.e., only style, grammar, etc.)
- Approve, but require minor substantive revisions
- Delay approval, requiring major substantive revisions
- Reject

The doctoral candidate is the only person who returns to the room after the committee's deliberations. Feedback from the committee is to the doctoral candidate only. Committee members' signatures on the Proposal Results form represent approval of the candidate's proposal. After the defense meeting, the candidate should write a memo outlining the expected revisions. When the chairperson endorses the memo, it is circulated among committee members and then filed in the Dean's Office as an addendum to the proposal. (This protocol is repeated for the final dissertation defense.) Once revisions have been made to the satisfaction of the chairperson, s/he signs the candidate's *Proposal Results* form.

In the event that substantive revisions are required, the chairperson will confer with the candidate regarding the required revisions and establish a timeline for completion. The committee signs the proposal after the revisions have been completed to the committee's satisfaction.

In the instance when a candidate has written a dissertation proposal that predictably will not secure the approval by the committee, the committee may suggest a "work session" to provide the candidate with guidance for its successful execution. A candidate may have one such work session. The candidate may attempt a proposal defense at a later date. In the event that the proposal is still found to be unsatisfactory, the candidate may not continue in the School of Education. A conference should be scheduled with the Associate Dean.

### ***Advancement to Candidacy***

Following a successful proposal defense, the candidate must apply for advancement to candidacy, which includes the completion of a minimum of 51 units (with no incomplete grades) and the passing of any qualifying examinations required by her/his program. The following items should be submitted to the Doctoral Program Assistant in order to be considered for advancement to candidacy:

- The [\*Advancement to Candidacy\*](#) form, signed by the candidate's chairperson
- The [\*Proposal Results\*](#) form, signed by the dissertation committee
- A completed, corrected, approved proposal
- A copy of the IRBPHS approval email that may be forwarded via email to the Doctoral Program Assistant

Following submission of all the required materials, the candidate will receive written notice and the Advancement to Candidacy Packet from the Dean's Office. S/he will be



permitted to register for 791, *Dissertation Research and Writing*. Advancement to candidacy is necessary prior to enrolling in 791.

## **Phase IV Completion of the Dissertation and the Final Defense**

### ***Pause to Reflect...***

*With your chairperson, decide whether you will enroll in 791 for 3 units? 2 units? or 1 unit? See below for explanation...*

*Remember to submit the [Dissertation Courses Registration Form](#) prior to registration to obtain authorization to register.*

### ***Dissertation Research and Writing (791) Course***

During the 791 course, *Dissertation Research and Writing*, the candidate either initiates or continues the collection and analysis of the data related to her/his study, writes Chapters Four and Five of the dissertation, and makes minor modifications to Chapters One through Three as needed (e.g., inclusion of new, related literature; refinements of the data collection/analysis processes; and, substitution of present/future tense, associated with the proposal, with past tense related to completion of the study). Once a candidate enrolls in 791, s/he must continue to enroll in 791 each semester until s/he has successfully defended and submitted the corrected dissertation to the Associate Dean. The candidate, in consultation with her/his dissertation chairperson, may spread the 3 units over three semesters. All repetitions of this course beyond the required 3 units may be for 1 unit. If a candidate is enrolled in 791 for more than three semesters, s/he, as well as the candidate's chairperson, will receive a letter from the Associate Dean requesting a specified timeline of completion.

When the dissertation has been accomplished to the satisfaction of the committee chairperson, demonstrating a scholarly completion of the study, a final defense may be scheduled. Similar to the dissertation proposal procedure in establishing a proposal defense date, the candidate is expected to coordinate a defense date and time, first, with her/his chairperson and, then, with the committee members. When a consensus has been reached, s/he then contacts the Doctoral Program Assistant to reserve a conference room in the School of Education for the defense. The final defense must be on the schedule that is maintained by the Doctoral Program Assistant by the first week of April (for defenses in the Spring semester) or the first week in November (for the Fall semester) in order for the School of Education to confirm the graduating candidate with the Graduation Center and for the candidate to be included in the commencement brochure. The defense must take place by the second week in May (Spring Semester) or December (Fall Semester). Finally,

the candidate must supply a copy of the dissertation to each member of the committee at least four weeks prior to the date of the oral defense.

### ***General Dissertation Defense Protocol***

The chairperson of the dissertation committee makes a statement at the beginning of the defense spelling out the protocol for the defense. Then, the candidate provides a brief (10-15 minute) presentation related to her/his dissertation, as worked out in consultation with her/his chairperson. This presentation may include a review of the results of the candidate's study and their implications for the educational community.

Committee members then conduct their questioning/discussion and, when completed, the chairperson concludes this part of the defense and invites the candidate (and visitors) to leave the conference room for a brief executive session of the committee. The committee deliberates upon the quality of the dissertation and takes one of four possible actions on the dissertation:

- Approve with no substantive revisions (i.e., only style, grammar, etc.)
- Approve, but require minor substantive revisions
- Delay approval, requiring major substantive revisions
- Reject

The candidate is the only person who returns to the room after the committee's deliberations. Feedback from the committee is directed to the candidate only. Committee members' signatures on the dissertation signature page represent approval of the dissertation. After the defense meeting, the candidate should write a memo outlining the expected revisions. When the chairperson endorses the memo, it is circulated among committee members and then filed in the Dean's Office as an addendum to the dissertation. Once revisions have been made to the satisfaction of the chairperson, s/he signs the candidate's signature page.

In the event that substantive revisions are required, the chairperson will confer with the candidate regarding the required revisions and establish a timeline for completion. The committee signs the dissertation signature page after the revisions have been completed to the committee's satisfaction.

### ***Pause to Reflect...***

To be eligible for graduation, the candidate must:

~Petition to graduate by February 1 for Spring graduation; by September 1 for December graduation.

~Schedule final defense with the Doctoral Program Assistant by the first week of April (for defenses in the Spring semester) or the first week in November (for the Fall semester).

~The defense must take place by the second week in May (Spring Semester) or the second week in December (Fall Semester).

~If a candidate and/or committee decide that the defense needs to be rescheduled for the following semester, the candidate should notify the Doctoral Program Assistant. If the candidate has already petitioned to graduate, they should also contact the Graduation Center to alert them of the change in their graduation semester.

## **Phase V**

### **Completion of Doctoral Dissertation Requirements**

#### ***Final Procedures***

Once the doctoral candidate has scheduled her/his final defense, a Final Procedures Packet will be sent to the candidate via email. The Packet contains information regarding submission of the final, approved dissertation, as well as forms to be submitted for degree completion and degree posting. Completion deadlines are also outlined in the Final Procedures Packet.

The School of Education and Gleeson Library have collaborated to create a system to submit dissertations in electronic format. When the candidate's committee has approved the dissertation and all members have signed the dissertation signature page, the candidate should upload a PDF version of it to the UMI website for approval. Once the electronic dissertation is approved, a hard copy version is submitted, together with the required forms (found in the Final Procedures Packet), to the Doctoral Program Assistant. Doctoral candidates should refer to the Final Procedures Packet for further information.

Please Note: The dissertation title that is submitted on the *Results* form is the title that will be entered in the graduation program unless the Dean's Office is notified otherwise.

#### ***Degree Posting***

Upon completion of the 60 units required for the degree and the receipt of the final corrected dissertation, the University Registrar's Office will evaluate the candidate's academic record for degree completion.

Degrees are posted when *all* requirements have been fulfilled. The date of the defense of a dissertation has no bearing on the degree posting. **Candidates must submit all required documents with all of the proper signatures by August 1<sup>st</sup> (for a Spring/May degree posting) or January 30<sup>th</sup> (for a Fall/December degree posting).**

The Doctoral Program Assistant must be allowed at least one week to process the dissertation. **Failure to complete these procedures by the above dates requires that candidates register for 1 more unit of 791 in the following semester. Failure to complete**

**the Final Procedures in the following semester will require candidates to register for 3 more units of 791 and re-defend the dissertation at the chairperson's discretion in the subsequent semester. Candidates must be registered in the semester that the degree is posted.**

***Concerns About Protocol or Standards Regarding the Proposal/Dissertation Process***

Any exceptions to the above protocols or standards must be submitted in writing and approved by the Doctoral Program Policy Committee and the Associate Dean in advance of implementation.

***Pause to Reflect...***

After you upload your dissertation to the UMI website, it may take up to one week to receive approval; in the case of necessary changes, it may take longer. Approval of your digital version is required before you may submit the hard copy and accompanying paperwork. As such, you should upload your digital version to UMI no later than one week prior to the final deadline.

Candidates may only participate in one commencement ceremony (graduation). Candidates who participate in commencement but do not complete the Final Procedures by the deadline (and must re-enroll in 791 the following semester) may not participate in another commencement ceremony.

**FORMS**

The Doctoral Handbook and all of the forms mentioned herein are available for download from the School of Education's website:

[http://www.usfca.edu/soe/students/handbooks\\_forms/](http://www.usfca.edu/soe/students/handbooks_forms/)

**QUESTIONS / FEEDBACK**

The Doctoral Program Policy Committee has produced this document to help guide doctoral candidates through each step of the dissertation process. If you have questions about the information presented here, or if you have suggestions for improvement to this document, please email Connor Cook, the Doctoral Program Assistant at [cgcook@usfca.edu](mailto:cgcook@usfca.edu).

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