

## **Protocols and Guidance Concerning the Dissertation Process in the Language, Literacy & Culture Doctoral Program**

*This document is intended for LLC doctoral students who have completed their coursework and comprehensive exam and for the chairs of dissertation committees in the LLC Doctoral Program. Both chair and student must familiarize themselves with these protocols and guidance.*

Upon completion of their coursework, LLC students prepare for their Comprehensive Exam. By this point in their student progression, students should have a succinct dissertation research topic. With this topic in mind, a student should reach out to a UMBC faculty member with expertise in this topic to serve as their first reader for the comps and their likely dissertation committee chair. Students often find value in speaking with their LLC Program Advisor about this process in advance. (For further details about the Comprehensive Exam, please see the LLC website at <http://llc.umbc.edu>.)

### **1. Preparing for the Proposal Defense**

Immediately after passing the Comprehensive Exam, students can register for the required proposal defense preparation course, LLC 890. This course prepares students for their written and oral proposal defense meeting with the dissertation committee, often undertaken towards the end of the same semester.

### **2. Assembling a Dissertation Committee**

Before their proposal defense, students consult with their dissertation advisor about the composition of the dissertation committee. The dissertation chair helps the candidate select the members, and must approve the suitability of the other members chosen by the candidate. Following the protocols in this document, students then invite those qualified to serve as members of their dissertation committee. It is entirely up to the discretion and availability of individuals to agree to serve as members of any dissertation committee. See section 5 for details about the Committee's structure and responsibilities.

- ➔ At least one committee member must be from outside of the LLC Program, while at least one LLC core faculty member should be on the committee.
- ➔ A minimum of 5 members are required and at least three members, including the chair, must be Regular members of the [UMGSB Graduate Faculty](#).
- ➔ All members need to hold a terminal degree (such as a PhD, EdD, or MFA).

Although the Graduate School requires the filing of its *Nomination of Members for the Final Doctoral Dissertation Examination Committee* form after the successful completion of the dissertation proposal defense and at least six months prior to the dissertation defense, the LLC program requires the formation and approval of the entire committee membership before the proposal defense.

The candidate should complete the *Proposed Dissertation Defense Committee* form (found on the LLC website, <http://llc.umbc.edu>) and submit it to the current LLC director. The UMGSB Graduate Faculty status of each proposed member should be indicated. Attach the CV of anyone who is not a UMBC Graduate Faculty member. Once the director approves the committee, a Proposal Defense date can be scheduled.

## **Working with your Dissertation Chair and Committee**

After their successful proposal defense, students should be in direct communication with their dissertation chair(s) to discuss how to coordinate their research and writing going forward.

Dissertation chair(s) have agreed to help a student turn their chosen research into a polished, defensible manuscript; to establish realistic goals and timetables; and to help navigate Graduate School and Program rules and the committee's expectations.

Students who keep their chair(s) regularly apprised of their progress (or questions or sticking points) are more likely to graduate sooner because of the experience and expertise the chair can proffer on their behalf.

### **Committee Chair**

The Committee Chair, or dissertation advisor, must be a Regular UMBC Graduate Faculty member (Graduate School faculty status is on the Grad School website). Mentoring ideally begins as soon as the student chooses a research topic. The student's LLC program advisor often plays a role in helping to identify a possible dissertation mentor who serves as the chair of the dissertation committee. It is common in LLC for students to work with co-mentors, with the lead person serving as committee chair and the other one as co-chair (A co-chair does not have to have Grad School regular faculty status). The faculty member has no obligation to agree to serve, but, once they agree to the student's request, they must follow the protocols in this document.

The chair's responsibilities include:

- a. Serving as first reader for the Comprehensive Exam
- b. Identifying (or approving) all other potential committee members
- c. Mentoring on research topics and methodology, including IRB (if necessary)
- d. Signing all necessary Graduate School forms (outlined at end of this document)
- e. Shepherding the committee's deliberations in the Proposal Defense and Dissertation Defense meetings
- f. Certifying, through the research process and with official signatures, the highest doctoral-level rigor and excellence of every aspect of the dissertation without exception.
- g. Guiding the candidate and dissertation process according to their own areas of expertise and drawing on the expectations of their own disciplines and fields of expertise.

The co-chair has the same general responsibilities as the chair, but the Graduate School credits the co-chair as having a less significant role. LLC recognizes co-chairs as equal partners and expects that students will register for 899 credits with both advisors.

## **3. Successfully Defending the Dissertation Proposal**

At UMBC, the Graduate School leaves requirements for proposal defenses to individual programs or departments. The LLC Doctoral Program requires a dissertation proposal defense, following these protocols.

## **Dissertation Prospectus/Proposal**

Upon reaching candidacy, a candidate will prepare a dissertation prospectus/proposal. The format of this document, determined by the dissertation chair, draws upon the norms and practices of the chair's disciplinary background, and those areas in which the student's scholarship is situated. The chair and doctoral candidate may want to consult the LLC Program's regular faculty. The document will include an overview of the proposed research project and discussion of the research significance and approach. Depending on the kind of proposal, it may include drafts of an introduction, literature review and methodology chapter, summaries of expected chapters, an initial argument with evidence, an annotated table of contents, appendices, or other elements. There is no single format or length for a typical prospectus or proposal; these proposals range in length from 20 to 100 pages.

- ➔ An IRB approval *may* be required for any pilot study in a proposal. In many cases, an IRB approval is *not* needed, but it is the candidate's responsibility to discuss IRB requirements with the research advisor and communicate with UMBC's Institutional Review Board [IRB] to determine if the proposed research requires IRB approval.

The proposal defense meeting follows many of the same procedures as the dissertation defense meeting. Please read the procedures for the dissertation defense in Section 6, below. Proposal defenses differ in that there is no requirement for Readers to approve the prospectus/proposal before the defense is scheduled. After the dissertation chair affirms that it is ready to be defended by the candidate, the prospectus/proposal will be sent to committee members usually two weeks in advance of the proposal defense, but specific plans are made with the dissertation advisor.

## **Attendance at the Proposal Defense**

Students are responsible for working with the chair(s) and the committee members to schedule a mutually acceptable date for the proposal defense and reserve a room for the defense if it will be held in person. (Virtual defenses are permitted. The Program Coordinator can help set up a Zoom or Webex meeting. A virtual meeting must be hosted by the committee chair, not the student.) The entire dissertation committee should be present at the proposal defense. If a member of the committee who works at UMBC cannot attend in person or virtually, the proposal defense should be rescheduled. If a non-UMBC committee member cannot attend due to an unforeseen emergency or illness, then that member must communicate with the dissertation committee chair before the defense begins. The chair has discretion to postpone or continue the proposal defense meeting in this instance. But we strongly encourage everyone to be present for the discussion! Please note that the requirements for the dissertation defense are different; please see section 6.

Upon the successful completion of the candidate's proposal defense, the committee chair(s) should sign LLC's *Proposal Defense Form*, found on its website <http://llc.umbc.edu>, and file it with the LLC main office.

If the dissertation goes in a different direction after the proposal defense, and there is a need to alter committee membership, a new Proposed Dissertation Defense Committee form should be submitted to the LLC director. (See Section 2.)

## **4. Achieving Candidacy**

Immediately after passing the Proposal Defense, students enter candidacy by filing the Graduate School form called *Application for Admission to Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy* with the Graduate School, found on their website at <https://gradschool.umbc.edu/graduation/forms/>. At UMBC, there is an annual university-wide ceremony celebrating this candidacy status each November.

## **5. Formalizing a Dissertation Committee**

## **Nomination Form**

At least six months prior to dissertation defense, the doctoral candidate must file the *Nomination of Members for the Final Doctoral Dissertation Examination Committee* form with the Graduate School. This form designates committee membership: its chair (and co-chair, if applicable), two designated readers, and includes the [UMGSB Graduate Faculty](#) status for all committee members. CVs of all committee members who are not UMBC Graduate Faculty must be included. This form, and all other Graduate School forms, can be found on the Graduate School website at <https://gradschool.umbc.edu/graduation/forms/>. As stated in Section 2, the committee chair and the LLC director should have approved the committee membership prior to the candidate's proposal defense. See section 2 for further details on committee composition.

## **Number and Composition of Members**

Dissertation committees must have at least five official members, but may have as many as seven members. All members must hold a terminal degree in their field. Three members, including the chair, must hold the status of "Regular Graduate Faculty" at UMBC. There are no exceptions.

The rest of the committee's members can either be from UMBC or from another campus (or from an organization or institution). If a committee member is not a UMBC Graduate Faculty member, a CV must be submitted with the *Nomination* form discussed above.

### **UMBC Graduate Faculty**

UMBC faculty must apply with the Graduate School to become either a Regular, Associate, or Special Graduate Faculty member. A complete list with their designated status can be found on the Graduate School website. Obtaining this status can take a month or more after the application is completed. LLC can help faculty with this process.

Additional non-voting members can serve on dissertation committees, but those members are only acknowledged in the dissertation, and cannot vote at the Oral Defense. Their names should not appear on the *Nomination* form.

## **Designated Readers**

Two members of the dissertation committee must be designated as "Readers." Readers perform the official act of notifying the Graduate School that a candidate's dissertation is ready to be defended two weeks before the dissertation defense meeting. Neither designated reader can be the committee chair or co-chair.

**Readiness to Defend: Special Responsibility of Readers**

Both Readers must receive the completed dissertation at least four weeks in advance of the intended dissertation defense. The Readers must agree that the dissertation is defensible; only then can the dissertation defense go forward. Readers must sign a Certification of Readiness to Defend the Doctoral Dissertation form (at <https://gradschool.umbc.edu/graduation/forms/>) a minimum of two full weeks prior to the defense meeting. Often, the entire committee receives the completed dissertation at the same time as the Readers, but this is the chair's decision to make.

If the Readers do not receive the completed dissertation early enough to provide their determination as to its defensibility or if they determine that the dissertation is not defensible, then the defense must be delayed. In practice, many dissertation chairs advise students to communicate with Readers and the other committee members about the content and progress of their dissertations far in advance of these deadlines.

**Dean's Representative**

The Graduate School Dean appoints a "Dean's representative" from among the committee membership. This person is responsible for recording the committee's collective decision on the *Report of Examining Committee on Doctoral Dissertation* form and ensuring that the Procedures for Conduct of Examination are followed. After signing this electronic form, it is automatically routed to the other committee members. Everyone's signature is to be obtained within 48 hours of the oral defense.

**6. Successfully Defending the Dissertation**

**Proper Dissertation Format**

The Graduate School has a format template for dissertations, and candidates are responsible for using that template in the preparation of their dissertations. It is advisable to use their style guide (<https://gradschool.umbc.edu/graduation/dissertations/guides/>) for earlier drafts so as to work out any kinks with formatting.

**Graduate School Forms Due Before Defense**

The electronic *Certification of Readiness to Defend the Doctoral Dissertation* form is due two weeks prior to the defense. It requires the signatures of the candidate's two readers, their chair(s) and LLC's graduate program director. A PDF of the form with all signatures should be emailed to the Program Coordinator after the Docusign process is completed.

An *Announcement of Ph.D. Dissertation Defense* form is also due two weeks prior to the defense. This form should be completed and approved by your chair(s) and emailed to the LLC Program Coordinator at least two days prior to its due date. It requires no signatures. The coordinator will review everything, prepare LLC's own announcement for distribution, and email the form to the Graduate School. The format is established by the Graduate Council. It includes the candidate's name; the time, date, and place of the scheduled defense; the name of the dissertation chair and all committee members; the title of the dissertation; and an abstract, preferably less than one page long. The Graduate School maintains a current list of dissertation defenses on its [website](#) and LLC also disseminates the announcement to the LLC community. All UMBC dissertation defenses invite the public in for the candidate's presentation, so without the public announcement, the defense cannot proceed.

The dissertation title must be exactly the same on the *Certification of Readiness to Defend the Doctoral Dissertation* form and the *Announcement of PhD Dissertation Defense* form. Once those forms are submitted the title cannot be changed. This same title should be on the final Approval Sheet, which is due approximately three weeks before the commencement ceremony.

The dissertation committee cannot be changed in any way without official written notification by the candidate to the Graduate School in advance of filing these two documents two weeks before defense.

Candidates are responsible for ensuring that all required forms are submitted on time. Failure to do so will delay or prevent the approval of the dissertation defense and the application for degree. Chairs should remind candidates of these mandatory responsibilities.

### **Procedures for the Dissertation Defense**

Candidates are responsible for working with the chair and the committee members to schedule a mutually acceptable date and time for the dissertation defense and reserve a room for the defense, or alternatively, schedule a Zoom or Webex meeting with the help of the Program Coordinator. (A virtual meeting must be hosted by the committee chair, not the candidate.) Typically, dissertation defenses take 2 hours. If a chair expects that a candidate will need a longer defense, it should be scheduled accordingly. "Hybrid" defenses are allowable as long as the chair(s) and the candidate are in-person.

Dissertation defenses follow a predetermined format. The candidate arrives, introduces themselves, and then the chair asks the candidate and any audience members to leave the room. The committee chair then quickly polls the committee members to determine whether they agree that the dissertation is "ready to be defended." This agreement only indicates that the defense may move forward; it does not have any bearing on the outcome of the defense. With the agreement of committee members, the defense can proceed.

The chair asks the candidate, and the entire audience, to return to the room and the candidate will give a brief presentation that provides an overview of the dissertation (or, in the case of a proposal defense, the candidate gives an overview of the prospectus/proposal and the intended plan for the research and final dissertation). These presentations typically last about 20 minutes. After the candidate's opening presentation, the chair asks the audience to leave, so that closed questioning of the candidate may proceed. Time permitting, the audience may be given an opportunity to ask questions before the closed part of the defense begins.

The committee members then offer commentary, suggestions and questions for the candidate who answers questions and engages with the committee discussion. In practice, committee members sometimes ask questions in round-robin style, or according to related questions or issues, but practices vary. Candidates and committee chairs take notes during the process for the candidate to review later. When discussion is complete, the chair asks the candidate to leave the room.

The committee members then discuss the dissertation (or proposal) in a closed and private meeting. Committee members may evaluate the candidate's dissertation and responses to questioning; they may make suggestions for necessary revisions; and they may simply comment on aspects of the dissertation or work going forward. When the entire committee has reached agreement that they are now ready to vote, the Dean's representative will conduct an open vote on whether the candidate has passed, passed with major revisions, or failed, and then will complete the dissertation defense form accordingly (a link to the form is sent in advance to the Dean's representative by the Graduate School).

Immediately after the defense is completed, all committee members must sign the *Report of Examining Committee on Doctoral Dissertation* form. Members choose one of three options:

- “PASSED the examination and the thesis/dissertation is accepted with only very minor changes, if any;”
- “PASSED the examination but the thesis/dissertation, requiring significant, non-trivial revision, is accepted provisionally” (with a place to put the names of committee members who will certify completion of the revisions and the date they need to be completed); or
- “FAILED the examination.” (The candidate may make a second attempt at the final oral defense at another time. A failure on the second attempt means the doctoral degree is forfeited.)

The Graduate School suggests a time limit of 60 days to get the FINAL dissertation uploaded to ProQuest or it will be considered a FAIL. The Dean's Representative signs the electronic form and it automatically begins to circulate to the other committee members who should sign the form as soon as they get it. The committee chair is asked to forward a pdf of the completed document to the Program Coordinator for inclusion in the student's file. This entire process should be completed within two business days.

The chair invites the candidate to re-enter the room, announces the committee's decision and communicates the decision and summary details of the committee's review. This review also explains the timeframe for accomplishing any revisions and corrections.

### **Dissertation Revisions and Submission of Defended Dissertation**

The candidate is responsible for planning the timing of the final committee meeting in order to allow time to make possible revisions, keeping in mind the date when the final approved dissertation must be uploaded to ProQuest. Only after the dissertation is uploaded and the “submission is accepted” in ProQuest is the candidate eligible to graduate with the Ph.D. degree. The submission dates for each semester are on the Graduate School website.

### **Approval Sheet**

The *Dissertation Approval Sheet* is evidence of the chair(s)' approval of the revised dissertation that incorporates the committee's comments from the oral defense. As such, it should not be completed until the chair(s) has reviewed the final dissertation. The form can be found on the Graduate School website, <https://gradschool.umbc.edu/graduation/forms/>. A signed, completed PDF of the form should be emailed to the Program Coordinator.

After the Dissertation Approval Sheet is completed, the newly minted doctor can upload their final dissertation to ProQuest <https://gradschool.umbc.edu/graduation/dissertations/submit/>.

## **7. Conclusion**

LLC seeks to empower dissertation chairs to follow their own mentoring styles, make decisions about the intellectual content and research methods in students' dissertations, and guide candidates to produce (and successfully defend) dissertations demonstrating scholarly excellence. The constraints listed in these Protocols are meant to provide guidance and clarification as to the parameters of the dissertation processes in LLC.

### **For Dissertation Chairs**

Thank you for your guidance and mentoring of LLC students in this final stage of their doctoral work. The ritualized process is an important milestone and, in most cases, a unique achievement in our students' lives and the lives of their families. You may have served on many dissertation committees, but the candidate has only been involved in one!

Please contact the LLC Office, the LLC Director, or LLC regular faculty members if you have any questions about these protocols.

## **For Doctoral Candidates**

The LLC Program appreciates your years of dedication to your research and dissertation. These protocols and guidance seek to clarify and demystify the process. They also seek to clarify who is responsible for specific tasks and procedures: whether it is you (the candidate), the dissertation committee chair(s), the Readers, the committee members, or the Dean's Representative.

This explanation of the entire process after reaching candidacy seeks to help you focus on the research and writing rather than searching around for LLC and Graduate School requirements, deadlines, rules, regulations, and templates; that is, this document will help you navigate the process.

You might know that the dissertation defense process began in the late 13th century as "disputations" in Latin that were held in public, and open to faculty, family, friends, and anyone interested; many of the protocols in this document began more than 600 years ago. You are now part of that tradition and we wish you the best in completing your doctoral work.

**REQUIRED FORMS FOR DOCTORAL STUDENTS**  
 who have completed their coursework and comprehensive exam  
 in the Language, Literacy, and Culture Doctoral Program

<b>Title of Form</b>	<b>Whose Form</b>	<b>Signers</b>	<b>Due Date</b>
Proposed Dissertation Defense Committee Form	LLC Program	Student, LLC director	Before proposal defense
Proposal Defense Form	LLC Program	Chair(s)	Day of proposal defense
Application for Admission to Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy	Graduate School	Student, Chair(s), LLC's GPD	After successful proposal defense
Nomination of Members for the Final Doctoral Dissertation Examination Committee	Graduate School	Student, Chair(s), LLC's GPD	At least 6 months prior to dissertation defense
Application for Diploma	Graduate School	None	By enrollment day 10 of graduating semester
Certification of Readiness to Defend the Doctoral Dissertation	Graduate School	Chair(s), Readers, LLC's GPD	2 weeks prior to defense
Announcement of Ph.D. Dissertation Defense	Graduate School	None	2 weeks prior to defense
Dissertation Approval Sheet	Graduate School	Chair(s)	Dec. 1 for Fall graduation; Aug. 1 for Summer graduation; May 1 for Spring graduation
Thesis & Dissertation Electronic Publication Form	Graduate School	Student, Chair(s)	Same date as for Approval Sheet

All Graduate School forms can be found at <https://gradschool.umbc.edu/graduation/forms/>.  
 All LLC Program forms can be found at <https://llc.umbc.edu>.



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