

To: Purdue University Graduate Council
From: James L. Mohler, Associate Dean
Date: November 18, 2021

Subject: Guidelines for Conducting Remote Thesis and Dissertation Defenses

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Purdue University Graduate School modified the policy requiring thesis and dissertation defenses to be conducted in a face-to-face modality. After surveying faculty and students in the fall of 2020 on the effectiveness and convenience of this approach, the Graduate School is planning to extend this exception, possibly permanently, pending approval by the Graduate Council. Likely a decision concerning the permanence of this practice will be decided in the fall of 2021.

In the meantime, the guidelines in this document are being provided to create a set of shared expectations and guidance across campus. It is our hope that the information contained herein assists faculty advisors/chairs, graduate students and committees as plans are made for upcoming defenses.

Faculty Advisors/Chairs

Before the defense

- Work with the student to determine the best video conference software to use (Zoom, WebEx or Teams). Zoom is recommended. It is best if the faculty advisor creates the invitation and sends it out via Outlook to the student and all committee members.
- The faculty advisor/chair should be the host of the meeting and if possible, set up a “waiting room” or similar feature to facilitate private discussions amongst the committee members and to manage who can get into the meeting. You may need to set preferences in the software to enable this.
- Consider making at least one other committee member a host or co-host at the meeting.
- Ensure you know how to permit the student to share their slides and/or control the screen.
- Consider offering a practice run with your student to ensure the technology works and create a backup plan for how you might communicate if the technology fails (for example, texting or a voice call).
- A day before the defense, check in with committee members to ensure they have the information they need to access the meeting. Encourage them to wear headphones in the meeting to reduce noise, feedback and echoes.
- Ask the candidate if they plan to invite guests; have them provide you a list of names ahead of time.
- With the increased security concerns of video conferencing, you may want to check the latest information provided by ITaP:
 - Zoom: <https://www.itap.purdue.edu/zoom/>
 - WebEx: <https://itap.purdue.edu/services/webex.html>
 - Teams: <https://www.itap.purdue.edu/services/microsoft-teams.html>

At the defense

- If possible, start the virtual defense at least 15 minutes before the scheduled start time and check with the candidate to ensure that the audio and video are working correctly.
- At the beginning of the meeting, have the members of the committee introduce themselves, which provides an opportunity to test microphones, speakers and cameras.
- Introduce the candidate as you would in a face-to-face meeting.
- To begin the defense, provide instructions to the candidate, committee and any guests as to the order, etiquette and expectations of the meeting:
 - Microphones and cameras – Committee mics muted (recommended)? Cameras on or off?
 - Order of events – presentation, questions, deliberation, etc.
 - Questions - can they be provided during the presentation? Via audio, chat or hand raising?
 - Public guests - Dismissed at some point or placed in a waiting room?
 - How will the committee privately deliberate?
 - How will results be communicated to the candidate?
 - What is the plan if a committee member or the candidate momentarily drop off the meeting?
 - If "board" work is expected of the candidate, makes sure plans are made to accommodate this option.
 - If part of the committee is virtual and part is in the room, how will discussion occur?
- At the end of the meeting, remind committee members that they will receive electronic forms to complete in the Graduate School Database.

Committee Members

- All committee members are responsible for ensuring that they know how to use the chosen conferencing platform (Zoom, WebEx, or Teams) in advance of the defense.
- As with all video conference meetings, please ensure you remain muted and are in a distraction free location.
- If needed, contact the faculty advisor/chair to do a practice run of the meeting to ensure your technology is functioning correctly.

Candidate Defending

Before the defense

- Work with your graduate coordinator to complete the Graduate School Form 8: Request for Appointment of Examining Committee at least two weeks before the defense.
- Coordinate with your major advisor/chair on the video conference software being used (Zoom, WebEx, or Teams) and make sure you know how to use the software.
- Conduct a practice run with another graduate student to make sure your technology works and that you are prepared for the presentation.
- Consider requesting a practice run with your major advisor/chair.

- Talk with your advisor about how questions will be handled: Chat? Raise hand? Vocally? During the presentation or at the end of the presentation?
- Share your slides with at least your advisor so that they can run them from their computer if something goes wrong on your end.
- Ask your major advisor/chair about the agenda for the meeting and how you will “step out” of the meeting during the committee deliberation period.
- Inform your major advisor/chair about any guests you are expecting to attend the meeting. If you plan to share a URL for the meeting (such as with Zoom or WebEx) do not post it broadly (for example, on Facebook) because it may increase the odds of a “Zoom bomber” or other such event.
- Plan your environment for the defense:
 - Reduce visual distractions (avoid glare, shadow, or an overly cluttered backdrops).
 - Make sure you are properly illuminated and can be seen without a shadow (use a ring light if possible).
 - Make sure you are in a quiet area that will not have distractions.
 - If possible, use a computer that has two monitors so that you may see your slides and your committee at the same time.
 - If board work is expected, make sure you have the ability to accomplish this – ask and plan in advance

At the defense

- Log onto the meeting at least 15 minutes before the scheduled start time.
- When delivering your presentation, make sure there is a good view of you in the camera from the shoulders up. The camera should be at eye level (not above looking down nor below looking up).
- If possible, stand as you present to enable better gestures and non-verbal cues. Even if sitting, remember to use gesture and non-verbal's.
- Remember to look at the camera when speaking rather than a computer screen or other area away from the camera.
- When sharing your screen, it is best to share a specific application window (such as PowerPoint) rather than the entire screen to avoid inadvertently sharing something you don't intend to.

For all participants (including “public” participants)

- Respect your colleagues and don't multitask during the defense.
- Latency creates delays in response; pause before speaking and yield conversational right of way.
- Reduce visual distractions (avoid glare, shadow, or an overly cluttered backdrops).
- Use headphones, if possible, to reduce any potential background noise, feedback or echoes.
- Facial expressions and gestures are often more effective than audio. Use these more frequently.

This guidance has been adapted from The University of Maryland Graduate School's "[Advice for Remote Dissertation/Thesis Defenses](#)".

Proposed Policy Change Permanently Allowing Remote Graduate Examinations and Defenses

November 9, 2021

Proposal

During the 2020 academic year, the Graduate Council and Graduate School provided exception to its stance on remote graduate examinations and defenses to enable students to progress on degree objectives due to the COVID-19 pandemic. After successfully conducting remote examinations and defenses for over a year, and after surveying faculty and students to find that it was favored, this proposal seeks to change the language in the *Policies and Procedures for Administering Graduate Student Programs* to permanently allow remote examinations and defenses.

This proposal also recommends adding the document titled, *Guidelines for Conducting Remote Thesis and Dissertation Defenses* (which was developed and distributed during the COVID-19 pandemic) as Appendix C in the *Policies and Procedures for Administering Graduate Student Programs*.

<https://catalog.purdue.edu/content.php?catoid=14&navoid=16498#establishing-examining-committees>

Existing

E. Conducting Examinations

The Graduate Council has recommended that oral examinations not last more than two hours. If additional time is needed, the examination may be continued at a later date.

If the situation warrants, and it is agreeable with the members of the examining committee and the candidate, one member of the examining committee, or even the candidate, may participate in the examination via electronic media.

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If it is agreeable with the members of the examining committee and the candidate, examinations may be conducted remotely. Chair, committee and candidate should follow guidelines provided in Appendix C.