Guidelines for Doctoral Students and Committee Members

San Diego State University Graduate Council

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The culminating experience of doctoral-level programs at San Diego State University (SDSU) is the completion of a dissertation (published by Montezuma Publishing) or a capstone project (kept in perpetuity on file by the graduate program). Although the intent and construct of a dissertation/project varies by discipline, it is always supervised by a faculty chair and two or more committee members.

This document outlines the roles, responsibilities, and expectations for doctoral students and their dissertation/project committee members. The faculty who serve as committee members play a pivotal role in supporting the students' professional development and degree completion. Clear guidelines and a shared understanding of each person's responsibilities foster a collaborative and supportive environment for graduate student success. These guidelines also promote high standards of quality in graduate student research, creative activities, and writing.

1. Acknowledgment of Faculty Service

Serving on a dissertation committee significantly contributes to the academic mission of San Diego State University. Faculty members who support students in this manner play a crucial role in preparing our next generation of scholars and professionals. SDSU recognizes the time and effort that are required for committee service and encourages departments/schools to support faculty in balancing these responsibilities with other duties.

2. Student Expectations for the Doctoral Dissertation

Doctoral students are expected to assume a leadership role in dissertation conceptualization, research, writing, and approval within the guidelines established by the doctoral program and committee Chair. The student should frequently provide progress reports to the Chair, highlighting significant changes in their personal or professional life that may delay dissertation writing, formatting, or publication. Doctoral students should similarly expect and foster professional, collegial relationships with the other committee members. They should respect advice that is provided by each committee member (especially the Chair) and be responsive to feedback.

The time commitment from each committee member will vary by discipline and by person. Each committee member will have a range of other commitments that press on their time and may not be available outside of the Fall/Spring academic calendar. Therefore, students are advised to discuss and establish reasonable expectations with each committee member as early as possible.

Committee member changes are sometimes initiated by the student (or the member) for a variety of reasons. The Chair should play a central role in discussing and deciding on any such changes with the student, and the student should demonstrate courtesy by communicating directly with the faculty involved.

For each of these expectations, questions that are not answered in the program's handbook should be directed to the committee Chair or doctoral Program Director. As described below, significant issues that cannot be resolved with the committee Chair or Program Director may be directed to the Department Chair/School Director. The Ombudsman or Graduate Dean (or designee) may be consulted when all other avenues have been unsuccessfully pursued.

3. Specific Student Responsibilities

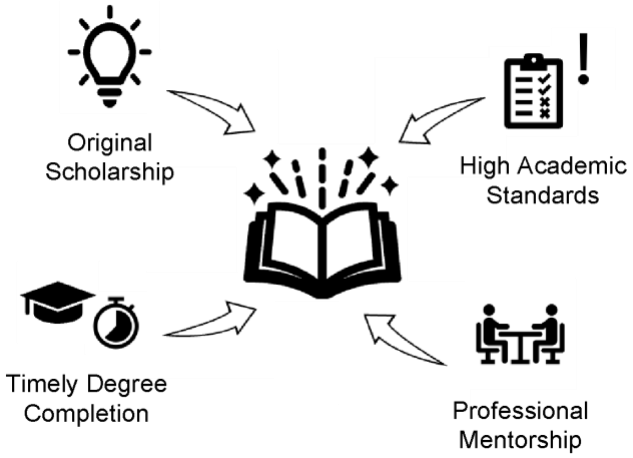
Doctoral students are expected to assume a leadership role in dissertation conceptualization, research, writing, and approval. These responsibilities include (but are not limited to):

1. Choosing and refining the dissertation topic. Constraints for this choice vary widely from program to program, so consult with the committee Chair and Program Director.
2. Researching and understanding program and university policies about academic dishonesty and plagiarism. Students are expected to submit their own original work, and (as appropriate to the field of study), properly cite the work of others. Misconduct in these areas is treated seriously and can result in academic dismissal.
3. Contacting appropriate faculty and request that they serve as a committee member. Consult with the Chair before initiating communication since the expected timing and workflow vary widely from program to program.
4. Communicating and meeting (on a regular basis) with the Chair regarding all research and dissertation matters and thoroughly preparing for each meeting.
5. Obtaining all required research and safety certification/approval. These include (but are not limited to) human subjects research certification and approval (IRB), and vertebrate research approval (IACUC).
6. For the dissertation/project proposal and defense, the student should understand the corresponding format and requirements.
7. Taking the primary role in establishing timelines for all major milestones that lead to committee approval, the dissertation defense, submission for formatting review, and publication. These should be reviewed with the Chair.
8. Understanding and following program procedures for scheduling and communicating dissertation/project-related events such as committee meetings, proposal submissions, and defenses.
9. Thoroughly reviewing and proofreading drafts of written documents before distributing to the Chair and committee, according to standards and schedules set by the program and university.
10. Understanding the dissertation/project style, formatting, and academic requirements before writing begins. When submitted for formatting and publication review (if applicable), the dissertation should be, in the student's opinion, ready for publication in all aspects.

For all ten of these responsibilities, questions that are not answered in the program's handbook should be directed to the committee Chair, Program Director, and/or the university's publishing requirements website.

4. Responsibilities for All Committee Members

All members of the committee are expected to ensure that four important factors are balanced:



Committee member responsibilities include (but are not limited to):

1. Upholding ethical standards and academic excellence and providing subject matter expertise as requested.
2. Fostering a collaborative and professional environment by maintaining a respectful and professional attitude at all times.
3. Making reasonable efforts to attend all meetings or providing timely notice if unable to participate.
4. Providing clear, actionable, and constructive feedback regarding programmatic and scholarly standards for all aspects of research, creative activities, and dissertation/project proposal and progress.
5. Recognizing potential major flaws that may result in failure to approve the dissertation/project and discussing these concerns with the student and Chair.
6. Providing feedback on the dissertation/project and other required documents, such as a literature review or written proposal. Feedback typically includes the document structure, intended audience, formatting, style, grammar and clarity of writing, organization of the literature review, relevance and rigor of the data collection methodology, and relevance and rigor of the data analysis. The specific nature of feedback and expected response time varies by program and committee member position.
7. Indicating approval for the dissertation/project style, format, and academic content by signing the cover sheet.

8. For a variety of reasons, committee members sometimes are unable to continue providing students with the guidance and timely feedback that are required. If this should happen, the committee member should consult with the student and the committee Chair to determine appropriate actions. Demonstrate courtesy by providing as much advance notice as possible.

5. Additional Responsibilities of the Committee Chair

The committee Chair holds the primary responsibility for overseeing the student's qualifying exam (if applicable) and dissertation/project, as well as related events such as a proposal or defense. Their leadership is central to ensuring original scholarship, professional mentorship, timely degree completion, and high academic standards.

Specific responsibilities of the Chair include:

1. Serving as the primary mentor. Providing information and iterative feedback regarding methodologies, procedures, and analysis.
2. As early as possible, establishing clear and specific expectations with the student and committee members regarding research questions or creative activities that will guide the dissertation/project, the specific data collection and analysis methods, and the length and style of the dissertation/project itself. In most programs, this will typically occur two to three years after the student begins their degree. Many programs also formalize these expectations with a dissertation/project proposal process.
3. Being reasonably accessible to the student for both informal and formal meetings.
4. Maintaining familiarity with university and program policies regarding committee membership.
5. Maintaining familiarity with university and program policies and deadlines regarding dissertation/project review, final approval, and publication (if applicable).
6. Ensuring the doctoral Program Director is made aware of the student's timelines towards advancement and degree completion annually. This includes notifying the doctoral program director at least 2 weeks before a scheduled defense.
7. Ensuring that all required research and safety certification/approval is obtained. Taking the lead (or at least assisting) in navigating the relevant approval process.
8. Establishing a written agreement with the student regarding intellectual property, data ownership, and related matters. This may include archival location and ownership of physical and digital data records, publication responsibilities including the order of authorship, publication embargos, and deadlines by which the student must initiate publication submission in a relevant forum (both during their doctoral program and after they graduate).

9. Assuming primary responsibility for monitoring the student's dissertation progress and their ability to meet both program and university deadlines. Evaluating agreed-upon timelines and actual progress against the program's expectations for continual and satisfactory process.
10. Playing a lead role in providing clear, actionable, and constructive feedback regarding programmatic and scholarly standards for all aspects of research, creative activities, and dissertation/project progress.
11. Recognizing challenges that arise and suggesting corrective actions when appropriate. These may include changing data collection or analysis strategies, assigning specific deliverables to the student, or establishing new timelines.
12. As described below, playing a lead role to resolve concerns or disagreements about dissertation content, or other barriers that may impede degree progress.
13. Reviewing and approving written documents before they are circulated to the other committee members.
14. Ensuring that the student is adequately prepared for oral presentations, such as a proposal or defense. Providing information about the format and standards for these events. Organizing practice talks and providing the student with clear, actionable, and constructive feedback. During and after the event, taking the lead in organizing and prioritizing feedback to the student on behalf of the committee and other program faculty.
15. Assuming primary responsibility to ensure that the dissertation/project meets all style, formatting, and academic requirements before indicating final approval by signing the cover sheet.
16. Rarely, a committee Chair is unable to continue acting in this role. Should this occur, the Chair should notify the doctoral Program Director and help develop a plan of action. The program will need to identify faculty members who are able to assume the role of Chair. Reasonable efforts must be taken to minimize delays in research progress, dissertation completion and awarding of the degree. However, changes to the student's specific plans and timeline may be unavoidable.

6. Additional Responsibilities of the Committee Co-Chair

Specific joint doctoral programs require two co-chairs (one from SDSU and the other from the partner campus) rather than a single chair. Some students in other independent and joint doctoral programs may have two co-chairs for a variety of reasons, such as equally relevant faculty expertise or to sensibly divide particular responsibilities. Co-chairs share the same responsibilities as listed above and must coordinate among themselves to ensure that no step towards degree completion is overlooked. Throughout this document, references to "Chair" always implies "Co-Chairs" for these committees.

7. Disagreement Review and Resolution

Disagreement occasionally arises between students and their committee Chair or a committee member. Sources of conflict may include disagreement about a timeline for completing the project, the direction of the study or interpretation of the results, and/or the content, style, and editing of the dissertation/project document.

If a conflict disrupts dissertation/project progress, the student should consider these steps towards resolution.

1. Attempt to resolve the issue with the committee Chair or member who is involved in the conflict. (If unable to resolve disagreement with a committee member, students should then consult with their Chair.)
2. If unresolved, issues may be escalated to the doctoral program director for further review and mediation.
3. If still unresolved, summarize the disagreement in writing. Submit the summary and request a review from the department chair, school director, or equivalent.
4. If still unresolved to the satisfaction of all parties, the Chair or the student may formally summarize the disagreement in writing and submit it to the Ombudsman, Graduate Dean, or designee. Depending on the specific topics, the matter may be co-reviewed with the corresponding academic college Dean or designee.