

Policy on Oral Graduate Committee-Based Defenses and Exams

All members of a student's graduate committee are expected to attend and participate in any oral examination as part of the student's graduate (Master's or Doctoral) degree program. Traditionally, oral examinations are conducted with the student meeting with their committee while gathered in one physical location on campus. However, the need occasionally arises for virtual participation in the oral examination.

If a department or program chooses to allow virtual participation in oral examinations, in addition to the exam policy guidelines described under the degree requirement sections, they must also ensure adherence to the following technical requirements. Departments or programs may enforce stricter guidelines than those outlined, including an on-campus-only policy if deemed necessary and appropriate.

It is the responsibility of the Director of Graduate Studies for each program to ensure that the student and their full committee all agree on any type of exam format other than the standard in-person exam. The Graduate School must be notified of the modality by which the oral exam will be conducted: in-person, virtual or hybrid. This information must be included in the Comment field of the request for the QE or Final exam form and does not need to be approved in advance of the exam.

Technical Requirements

In cases where departments or programs allow any level of virtual participation, from one virtual member to a fully virtual event, they must adhere to the following requirements:

1. Prior to any oral exam, the student and Committee Chair coordinate with other committee members regarding the protocol for the exam.
2. All participants must join using university-adopted videoconferencing tools that allow for fully interactive audio and video communications along with screen-sharing capabilities, which must be maintained throughout the examination and any related discussion.
3. The use of audio-only communications is not permitted.
4. Participation merely by viewing a recording of the oral examination is specifically prohibited.
5. All members of the committee, on- or off-site, must participate in the final evaluation of the examination or defense; provisions must be made to record their votes and collect their signatures as necessary using the system approved by the Graduate School. This must be submitted to the Graduate School as soon as possible, but within 7 days of the exam.
6. The Committee Chair, or another non-student designee, shall be the host of the virtual meeting. A co-host may be assigned so that the event will not be interrupted by technical difficulties. The host should mute all participants (or ask participants to mute themselves) and ask the student to share their screen, if a presentation is involved, in order to make the presentation visible to all attendees. The host must also ensure that appropriate security precautions are taken to prevent any interruptions of the event.
7. Following any public portion of the defense, the host shall ask all non-committee members to leave the meeting, or the host may manually remove them. In programs where the defense has both a public and a private portion, the committee may then continue the event as outlined in their program protocols.
8. Once the committee has completed the examination of the student, the host shall place the student into the waiting room (or have the committee members use a breakout room) so the committee can conduct their deliberations in private.

The Committee Chair must have a secondary videoconferencing system available as a back-up in the case of technical difficulties. Cancellation of the examination should only occur in the case where both the primary and secondary back-up systems fail. If an examination must be rescheduled, it will be done without prejudice to the student. Since committee deliberations are an essential aspect of the examination, completing the examination and final discussion via email or other non-audiovisual means is not an option.

If the student or any committee member(s) have a disability that will be impacted by virtual participation, accommodations for participation must be provided.