Progression to Ph.D. Candidacy through Preliminary Examination, Dissertation Completion, and Doctoral Dissertation Defense

There are three major steps undertaken at the conclusion of the PhD student’s required coursework. The first is progression to candidacy through successful presentation and defense of the dissertation proposal. The second is completion of the Institutional Review Board documents and carrying out the proposed research. The third step is the writing, presentation and defense of the completed doctoral dissertation. Each step is described below in terms of its purpose, elements, format & process, and instructions to students.

I. Progression to Candidacy

Purpose:
Progression to Ph.D. candidacy is a process, the purpose of which is to demonstrate readiness to complete dissertation requirements for the Ph.D. in nursing. This process is intended to foster and evaluate student abilities related to knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of content in the nursing discipline.

Elements:
Progression to candidacy includes several steps following satisfactory completion of identified coursework. The student should have completed all course work except the final nursing education courses (NURS585 and 586) prior to the scheduled preliminary examination. “Completion” of courses means that courses are successfully completed and grades are posted. This ensures that critical study in areas such as scientific inquiry, research methods, concept analysis, and chosen electives is applied in the dissertation proposal. In some cases the student may request to schedule the preliminary examination prior to completing all six credits of electives if the plan for future electives is in place and if the dissertation work will not commence until electives essential to the research are completed. A petition request for dissertation proposal presentation before all necessary coursework is completed should be submitted to the Dissertation Chair and Committee, and if they approve, to the Director of the PhD program for final decision. Each student works with an advisor the first 1-2 semesters of coursework. By the third semester of coursework a dissertation committee is selected by the student. The dissertation committee must be comprised of at least three graduate faculty members from Washington State University who hold a PhD or degree deemed acceptable for doctoral advising. The initial advisor may or may not be part of the dissertation committee. The advisor may or may not be a member of the dissertation committee because once the study conceptualizes the dissertation topic, committee members should be selected based on the expertise needed. The committee is established by the student, the advisor, and the PhD Advisory Committee.
Using the guidance and critique of the dissertation committee, the student demonstrates a synthesis of the educational experience via preparation for an independent research project. This preparation is comprehensive in that the student must apply the body of extant nursing knowledge to her/his chosen area of study and must situate her/his chosen research methodology within a philosophy of science. Culminating the progression process are written and oral presentations of the dissertation research proposal, which constitute the WSU requirement for the preliminary doctoral examination. Therefore, steps in the process include:

1) Satisfactory completion of required coursework;
2) Outline of comprehensive dissertation proposal approved by the dissertation committee;
3) Written dissertation proposal approved by the dissertation committee;
4) Oral presentation of proposal to dissertation committee and all interested graduate faculty;
5) Successfully passing the oral examination that is conducted by the dissertation committee directly following the oral presentation.

**Format and process:**

*Satisfactory completion of coursework*
Coursework will be contributory to the preparation of the dissertation proposal, although content or method interests may evolve or change over this period. As the dissertation focus develops, all course and independent learning will bear upon proposal development. Guidance from the advisor initially, and then the dissertation committee, once it is established, should be sought.

*Outline of comprehensive dissertation proposal*
Upon completion of coursework, the student is eligible to present an outline of the dissertation proposal, to be approved by all dissertation committee members. The outline is to be a detailed description of the proposal content, as follows:

- Chapter One: Statement of the Problem, Background and Study Aims
- Chapter Two: Review of the Literature
- Chapter Three: Methods

Together with the dissertation committee, specific headings and expected content within these chapters will be discussed and outlined. It is at this stage that students will position their specific areas of interest, with respect to content and methodology, within the larger body of disciplinary knowledge. Committee members will be looking for a demonstration of comprehensiveness and will offer guidance as to the expectations for the written work.

*Written dissertation proposal*
Chapters One, Two, and Three, as above, will be written and approved. The proposal is both an academic milestone, and an important pedagogical tool. Students and faculty members should view the proposal as a contract which articulates the boundaries and goals of the student’s first large-scale independent research project. That is, having a formal, approved proposal protects
both students and faculty so that if major changes are recommended by either party, a discussion must be held with the entire dissertation committee.

It should be noted that this proposal includes comprehensive information that demonstrates a synthesis and application of disciplinary knowledge. It will become a substantial portion of the dissertation. However, editing is expected as the dissertation progresses, new relevant literature becomes available, and information included in the comprehensive proposal is honed. Students may submit sections or drafts to particular members of their committee for critique as the proposal develops. The length of this process and of the proposal will vary depending upon the particular needs of the student and the requirements of the respective committee members. All committee members must approve the completed written proposal.

**Oral presentation of proposal**

An oral presentation and defense of the research proposal follows approval of the written work. This constitutes the preliminary doctoral examination. The student will schedule the presentation, ensuring that all committee members will be present. Committee members’ signatures and graduate school approval must be sought no later than 15 working days prior to the date of presentation. The presentation is open to the College of Nursing faculty and doctoral students. Students may invite family members, friends, and colleagues if they choose. Following a 30 minute presentation, the general audience may engage in questions or comments for 25 minutes, after which they will leave and the committee will conduct an oral examination. The oral examination consists of questions elicited from all committee members by the committee chair. Each member will ask 1 to 3 comprehensive questions for which the student has had an opportunity to prepare. Only graduate faculty members are invited to observe the oral examination process if they desire. They may provide written comments to the committee chair following the presentation and prior to committee deliberation if they wish. The procedure is as follows:

1) Committee chair introduces doctoral student, describes process and outlines events, 5 minutes
2) Student gives proposal presentation, 30 minutes
3) Audience may ask questions, offer comments, 25 minutes
4) Break, 15 minutes. General audience departs
5) Committee convenes to engage student in substantive discussion regarding prepared questions
6) Questioning process between committee and student proceeds for 35 minutes
7) Observing graduate faculty may submit written comments, suggestions, or questions to the chair following the presentation and prior to committee deliberation if they wish.
8) Graduate faculty departs
9) Committee deliberates, determines feedback and future guidance for student, and votes, 10 minutes
10) Chair invites student back into room and committee relays decision
11) Chair establishes appointment to meet with student and provide direction and feedback for dissertation pursuits, as appropriate

**Instructions to students:**

1) Complete coursework under direction of advisor and dissertation committee
2) Select dissertation committee members and submit names to Director of PhD program; obtain approval for dissertation committee members by Spring semester of the first year in the program.

3) Prepare detailed outline of Chapters One, Two, and Three, discussing with each committee member until content requirements are clear.

4) Begin writing chapters. Discuss process with committee members and make agreements regarding frequency of critique, as well as amount and type of interaction with each committee member. Upon completion, each committee member receives a copy of the proposal.

5) Committee members have 20 working days to review your proposal. If any member of your committee does not approve your proposal as submitted, you must make all necessary revisions and submit it again.

6) Once your committee has agreed that the proposal is acceptable, you will schedule an oral presentation of your proposal to the Graduate Faculty.

7) Your committee will meet following the oral proposal presentation and each member will vote on the Ballot for the Approval of a Dissertation Proposal. All committee members must approve in order for work to progress on the proposed research. The Director of the PhD in Nursing program also signs to signify approval of the project.

Candidacy
After successful completion of the progression to candidacy process, the student will become a Ph.D. candidate, an acknowledgement that the student is actively engaged in research.

II. Dissertation Completion

Purpose:
Throughout the period of candidacy, the student continues to work with the dissertation committee chair and committee members on a regular basis. The project will be completed as proposed with guidance of the dissertation committee.

Elements:
Several steps are completed before the student commences the research. Necessary electives are completed. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is needed from WSU and any other necessary organizations. The student writes the IRB, working closely with the committee chair. The WSU IRB is submitted with the chair as PI and the student as co-PI. Other organizations that need to approve the study should be consulted for their requirements.

The student may need to obtain funding for the proposed research. The committee and other resources can be consulted for opportunities to submit funding requests. Upon IRB approval and securing funding, the student carries out the proposed research. Regular meetings with the chair and committee members will ensure that adequate guidance is received. All IRB requirements such as reporting of adverse events and safeguarding participant privacy should be stringently met.
Additional consultation is sought as needed. A regular series of meetings to agree upon a timeline and report progression of the research should be established with the committee chair. Arrangements should be made for the chair to visit and view data collection, intervention, data entry, analysis or other parts of the research process as desired by the chair.

**Format and process:**
An essential part of the research process is maintenance of the research methods and results. The student is expected to work with the chair and the Office of Research to plan for safe collection, transfer, and storage of research data. All Research office recommendations and requirements should be followed.

The student completes the research, a process that may involve adapting recruitment, reporting to agency personnel, completing interim reports to funding agencies, arranging for use of equipment, or production of surveys and other research equipment. Ongoing meetings to report progress and challenges to the chair are expected. Critical problem solving should be evident during this process.

**Instructions to students:**
1) Complete necessary coursework
2) Write and submit IRB under direction of chair
3) Establish regular meetings with the chair to plan for timeline and expectations of the research process
4) Regularly report progress and challenges with the research to the chair
5) Rigorously follow research requirements, human subjects protections, and preserve data security
6) Arrange for the chair to visit and observe parts of the research such as data collection, data entry and analysis.
7) Demonstrate an ability to adapt and revise timeline and approach as needed.

**III. Dissertation Defense**

**Purpose:**
The purpose of the dissertation defense is to provide the committee, peers, and Graduate Faculty with the opportunity to learn from, dialogue with and critique the original research of the student. It is the culminating event that follows completion of all course work, conduction of independent research, and completion of the doctoral dissertation and at least one article ready for submission to a peer-reviewed journal. Upon successful completion of the dissertation defense, the student is welcomed as a nurse scientist to the field of nursing and is eligible for the PhD in Nursing degree.

**Elements:**
The end result of the research is a completed dissertation. It is strongly recommended that the student also have at least one article ready for submission to a journal.

- Chapters One & Two: Revise with Revised Background and Literature as appropriate
- Chapter Three: Revise Design and Methods as needed
Chapter Four: Results
Chapter Five: Discussion
Recommended: Article for Submission

The process begins with a review of chapters 1, 2, and 3, along with revision dependent on necessary additions or changes. The content and specific headings for Chapters 4 & 5 are discussed and outlined with the committee. It is expected that synthesis of knowledge and a spirit of inquiry will be demonstrated. In addition, all students are strongly recommended to have at least one article ready for submission to a peer-reviewed journal at the time of dissertation defense, so the journal, its submission format and other details can be discussed with the committee at this time.

Editing is an expected part of this process and the time to complete dissertation chapters will vary depending upon the particular needs of the student and the requirements of the respective committee members. All committee members must approve the final written dissertation. Along with the dissertation, the article(s) for submission are presented to the committee. The student is first author of the article(s) and usually requests co-authorship from the dissertation committee who have been involved in its formation.

Upon approval of the committee, the student may schedule the final presentation of the doctoral dissertation. The committee and Director of the PhD in Nursing program should be consulted prior to scheduling the defense in order to facilitate timing for graduate faculty and student attendance.

Format and process:
An oral presentation and defense of the research proposal follows approval of the written work. This constitutes the preliminary doctoral examination. The student will schedule the presentation, ensuring that all committee members will be present. Committee members’ signatures and Graduate School approval must be sought no later than 15 working days prior to the date of presentation. The presentation is open to the College of Nursing faculty and doctoral students. Students may invite family members, friends, and colleagues if they choose. Following a 30 minute presentation, the general audience may engage in questions or comments for 25 minutes, after which they will leave and the committee will conduct an oral examination. The oral examination consists of questions elicited from all committee members by the committee chair. Each member will ask 1 to 3 comprehensive questions for which the student has had an opportunity to prepare. Only Graduate Faculty members are invited to observe the oral examination process if they desire. They may provide written comments to the committee chair following the examination and prior to committee deliberation if they wish. The procedure is as follows:

1) Committee chair introduces doctoral student, describes process and outlines events
2) Student gives dissertation presentation, 30 minutes
3) Audience may ask questions, offer comments, 25 minutes
4) Break, 15 minutes. General audience departs
5) Committee convenes to engage student in substantive discussion regarding prepared questions
6) Questioning process between committee and student proceeds for 30-45 minutes
7) Observing Graduate Faculty may submit written comments, suggestions, or questions to the chair following the presentation and prior to committee deliberation if they wish.

8) Graduate Faculty departs

9) Committee deliberates, determines feedback for student, and votes

10) Chair invites student back into room and committee relays decision

11) Chair establishes appointment to meet with student and provide direction and feedback for final submission of materials to Graduate School

12) Student completes program evaluation

Instructions to students:

1) Prepare detailed outline of all dissertation chapters, discussing with each committee member until content requirements are clear. Discuss the review process with committee members and make agreements regarding frequency of critique, and amount/type of interaction with each committee member.

2) Prepare outline and proposed article(s) for journal submission.

3) Revise chapters 1-3 as needed and write chapters 4-5 of the dissertation. Submit entire dissertation when student and committee agree that it is ready.

4) Committee members have 20 working days to review the documents. If any member of your committee does not approve your dissertation and/or articles as submitted, you must make all necessary revisions and submit again.

5) Once your committee has agreed that the dissertation and article are acceptable, you will schedule the final defense to the graduate faculty and invited guests.

6) Your committee will meet following the oral presentation and each member will vote on the Ballot for the Approval of a Dissertation. All committee members must approve in order for successful completion of the doctoral defense. The Director of the PhD in Nursing program also signs to signify approval of the project.

Further information about the doctoral dissertation, scheduling and other details can be found on the WSU Graduate School website.

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