

The Dissertation Defense

To satisfy the requirements of the PhD in the Molecular Basis of Medicine, every candidate must submit a dissertation and pass an oral examination of their dissertation (dissertation defense) by a Dissertation Defense Committee consisting of a minimum of five members, one of whom is the designated Committee Chair, and one of whom can be from outside the institution who has expertise in the area of the student's research.

An outside examiner should be selected by the mentor with their name and credentials submitted to the Program Director for approval prior to being invited to serve.

Submission of the Dissertation

The dissertation must be presented to all members of the Dissertation Defense Committee at least two weeks before the scheduled defense. A member of the Committee may require a postponement of the dissertation defense if this requirement is not met. Within one week after the dissertation is delivered (i.e., one week prior to the defense) any Committee member may request a pre-defense meeting of the Committee if, in the opinion of the Committee member, the dissertation is not defensible.

Public Dissertation Seminar

The dissertation seminar, whenever possible, should immediately precede the dissertation defense. This seminar fulfills a New York State requirement that a PhD candidate demonstrate the ability to present scientific material in public. The purpose of the public dissertation seminar is to provide a venue for the student to present research in oral format to the scientific community. The seminar should be for no more than 50-55 minutes, leaving 5-10 minutes for questions by the community.

Conduct of the Dissertation Defense

The purpose of the dissertation defense is to demonstrate in an oral form the knowledge and skills acquired to carry out research that provides new information on a significant problem.

At the commencement of the defense, the student should be excused and the Chair (and/or mentor) will then provide a profile of the student's background, course work, and publication record. The Chair, in consultation with the examiners, will then determine how the dissertation defense will be conducted. If any of the examiners expresses a serious concern with the content of the dissertation, an approach should be developed whereby the questioning can address these concerns in a constructive manner. The student then will be asked to return, and the exam will commence.

The mentor is present during the defense, but is expected to not answer any questions directed to the student unless the examiners ask for clarification.

The Chair should ensure that the defense is conducted in a professional manner, and that each examiner has the opportunity to ask questions. The Chair also should ensure that the length of the exam is appropriate. A typical exam period is 1.5-2 hours.

Dissertation Grading

After the Chair has determined that the defense is at an end, the student is asked to leave the room. The defense is discussed, and vote for passage made by secret written ballot. The decision is determined by majority vote. Students may receive a grade of "Pass", "Conditional Pass", or "Fail." If the vote is for

“Pass” with minor revision of the dissertation requested, then the mentor is usually given the responsibility of checking the final document. If the vote is for “Conditional Pass” with major revision required, one or more members of the Committee are assigned to review and accept the corrections on behalf of the parent committee. The Dissertation Defense Form is completed, recording the decision of the committee with the signatures of the mentor and all Committee members and is submitted to the Program Director along with the Committee report.

A grade of “Conditional Pass” requires the student to complete additional work on the dissertation as set forth by the Committee. The report of the Committee will contain any recommendations for rectifying deficiencies if a grade of “Conditional Pass” has been given. Unless specified otherwise by the Committee, all deficiencies must be corrected within a period of three months of the date of the examination, and the revised dissertation submitted to the Committee Chair or the designated individual(s). If the deficiencies, which must be only those identified at the time of the original defense, are not corrected to the satisfaction of the Committee (or a designated subcommittee), or completed within the three-month deadline, the grade of “Conditional Pass” will be changed to “Fail.” The mentor may appeal to the Program Director for modification if he/she feels that the requirements for removal of a grade of “Conditional Pass” are not achievable by the student within the time frame set by the Committee.

In the event of a grade of “Fail”, re-examination is at the discretion of the student's Committee. Working together with the student and mentor, a written plan to address deficiencies for completion of the degree must be submitted to the Program Director. The grade of “Fail” may lead to dismissal from the PhD program. A student who disagrees can appeal to the Program Director, who may elect to appoint an ad hoc committee to investigate the matter and provide a recommended course of action.