

University of Florida Graduate School Policy on Physical Presence for Examinations

CONTEXT

Longstanding traditions and policy at the University of Florida (and in other distinguished universities) have held that certain graduate study examinations should be conducted in person, and that the student, and members of the student's supervisory committee should be physically present in the same room for the duration of the examination. Faculty signatures attest to the examination outcome and implicitly reflect the faculty members' presence during the examination.

These expectations have applied to:

- Final presentation and defense of a master's degree **thesis**;
- Final presentation and defense of a formal master's degree **project** (in lieu of thesis);
- **qualifying examinations** for the achievement of Ph.D. or Ed.D. candidacy; and
- final defense of the doctoral **dissertation**.

Current circumstances have precipitated new discussion about the practices. The rapid expansion of distance education capacity and the delivery of degree programs by electronic means have created circumstances in which it may be neither feasible nor reasonable to impose a physical presence requirement for a single element in a degree program that is otherwise offered entirely online. In parallel, improvements in both audio and video communication capacity (Zoom, Microsoft TEAMS, etc.) have been making it increasingly possible to conduct electronically events that have in the past been limited to physical meetings. And finally, the forced adaptations undertaken during the COVID epidemic have provided some experience that may guide continuing evolution in these matters.

POLICY

The Graduate School and Graduate Council affirm the value of in-person participation in the examinations noted, while acknowledging current transitions in educational delivery modes.

In **thesis**, formal **project** (in lieu of thesis) and **dissertation** degree programs that are offered on campus and generally use a traditional in-person mode for the delivery of curriculum content, continued commitment to in-person examinations and required physical presence may be entirely appropriate, and is encouraged as a kind of "default" option.

However, academic programs may, with the approval of their department and college, establish alternative expectations for physical presence in accomplishing the examinations noted.

Such alternative mechanisms must be thoughtfully established by the program's graduate faculty. They must be clearly described and rendered into written form. They must be included in student manuals, orientation materials, advising expectations and the like. The resulting policies and practices must be applied equitably.

Degree programs are strongly cautioned that this policy flexibility is intended to support variation in program level practices. Resulting procedures must be implemented in a manner that assures fairness for all program students. The proffered flexibility is not intended to facilitate *ad hoc* decisions made at the last minute as a matter of whim or convenience for a particular student or supervisory committee member. Program policies and practices regarding these examinations may not create, or appear to create, unfair advantage/disadvantage for some students.

At a minimum, programs must develop a form or other device in which to record the planned mode of accomplishing the examination in question. The form must include means to affirm (presumably by signatures) the concurrence of the student, and all supervisory committee members. Some programs may establish an additional level of concurrence, such as a Program Director or Department Chair. The agreed plan for examination mode must be established and recorded substantially prior to the examination itself. The completed and signed form used to establish the examination plan is to be retained by the academic unit.

Programs and departments will be held responsible for assuring the academic integrity of examinations conducted without physical presence, including such items as proctoring, camera angles, identification of the candidate and supervisory committee members, announcements or other devices to facilitate attendance by other interested parties such as family members, other students, other departmental faculty, etc.

Officially recording the examination outcome will continue to be accomplished in SIS, by indication of the date on which the examination milestone was successfully accomplished. That step will continue to require the signatures (retained at the academic unit level, but reported to the graduate School) of all members of the supervisory committee, attesting to their presence, participation and agreement with the examination outcome.

The Graduate School will work with the office of the Provost to establish a path or similar means in the Approvals.ufl system through which programs seeking to modify their current policies or practices regarding physical presence for some or all of the examinations noted here will be able to submit a proposed program revision describing their approach to this question.

RELATED ISSUES

It is noted that non-thesis graduate degrees are also expected to have some form of final, comprehensive assessment of the student's mastery of the subject matter contained in the degree. There is currently considerable flexibility in the precise means whereby these assessments may occur, and concordant flexibility in the requirement for physical presence of the candidate and/or supervisory committee members for any oral component of such examinations.

The University of Florida's Policy regarding examinations for master's level degrees can be found at:

[Supervisory Committees and Final Examinations for Master Level Degree Programs Policy](#)

It is also acknowledged that despite the most thoughtful expression of policy, unanticipated events or circumstances may arise. Academic units may continue to seek approval for necessary adaptations by means of the Graduate School's petitions process.