

PhD Degree: Prospectus Procedures

The prospectus defense (officially known by the Graduate School as the “Comprehensive Exam”) is designed to assess a Ph.D. student’s knowledge of his or her research area and to evaluate a student’s dissertation research proposal. At this meeting the committee will also will review the student’s completion of the coursework assigned in previous committee meetings. A student that has not completed all formally assigned coursework may only advance to candidacy with the approval of the committee.

Assembling a Dissertation Committee

The Dissertation Committee is made up of five people, including the student’s primary advisor and four other members who are approved by the ENVS Graduate Committee and who are in a field related to the student’s area of research. Three of the members must be CU-Boulder Graduate Faculty and one must be from outside the ENVS program. Both the primary advisor and outside member of the committee must have regular or tenured/tenure-track Graduate Faculty appointments. The other committee members must have either regular or special Graduate Faculty appointments.

If a PhD student would like to include a committee member who is not on the CU-Boulder faculty roster, students must submit a request to the graduate school and request a "Special Appointment to the Graduate Faculty." Please consult the Graduate Program Coordinator for details as soon as possible as this process can take as much as one month.

Format of the Prospectus

The student should prepare a dissertation prospectus on his/her dissertation topic. This document is limited to 15 single-spaced pages, including figures and tables, but excluding references. Students who wish to deviate from these guidelines should consult with their advisor and committee in advance.

1. Abstract of proposed work
2. General introduction that puts the proposed project into perspective and reviews the relevant literature in the field
3. Rationale for and importance of the proposed research
4. Relevant preliminary research already completed or in progress
5. Research design, including proposed methods and research plan
6. References (not included in page count)

Students should submit a final version of the prospectus to their committee at least two weeks before the scheduled prospectus defense date.

Defense Meeting

Students should allocate two hours for their prospectus defense meeting. The student should prepare a 20-minute formal presentation on his/her proposed dissertation project. The presentation should be of a format acceptable at a national professional meeting, should highlight the questions addressed by the student’s research, and include sufficient details on methods so that the work can be evaluated by the committee.

After delivering this presentation, committee members will ask questions, provide comments, and will also probe the student’s knowledge of the contemporary and historical literature relating to the student’s proposed research. Students are encouraged to seek advice from all committee members about their expectations concerning subject matter and level of knowledge for this exam. No restrictions are placed upon committee members with regard to subject matter relevant to the dissertation topic.

Following the exam, the committee will vote to determine the outcome of the defense. A majority vote will decide the outcome with respect to three categories:

Pass: No additional requirements. Students should work with their advisor to incorporate the committee's feedback and may proceed in carrying out the proposed research.

Conditional Pass: A student receiving a conditional pass will be required to take additional steps as required by the examining committee and will not pass the exam until they complete these requirements. A conditional pass will be assigned if a student 1) fails to demonstrate a sufficient understanding of the literature in their core research area, and/or 2) fails to articulate the motivation and design of their Ph.D. research in either the proposal or during the oral examination.

Fail: A student who fails the prospectus defense will either be asked to leave the program or will be required to retake the prospectus defense. A student may only re-defend once.

Students should collect signatures of all committee members on the Doctoral Examination Report and submit it to the Graduate Program Coordinator after the defense.

Deadline and Required Paperwork

The prospectus defense should be completed no later than the sixth semester of graduate study in ENVS. Any exceptions to this rule will require the permission of the ENVS Graduate Committee.

During the semester in which a student plans to defend the dissertation prospectus, an Admission to Candidacy application must be completed and approved by the faculty advisor and the Graduate Director. This form must be submitted to the Graduate School *at least three weeks before the prospectus defense*. The Graduate Coordinator will also submit a Doctoral Examination Report at this time to inform the Graduate School about the date of the exam and the composition of the committee.