

# Completing a Dissertation in SSLS

*Revised August 2021 for 2021-22 SSLS Student Handbook*

## **Section 1: Purpose**

The purpose of a dissertation is to create a theoretically-grounded, scientifically rigorous, and tangible contribution to scholarship within a particular field of research. For a dissertation by a SSLS student to be successfully proposed and defended, dissertation committee members must unanimously deem that the student's work has sufficiently met this purpose. In addition, dissertations successfully completed through SSLS must incorporate a leadership perspective. That is, the student must establish the relevance of leadership to the problem, constructs, and variables under study, or vice versa, as well as clearly describe the theoretical and/or practical implications to leadership that the dissertation findings pose.

## **Section 2: Dissertation Process**

There are a number of steps associated with the dissertation process. However, these can be broken down according to two formal milestones—the dissertation proposal defense and the final dissertation defense. The steps associated with each of these milestones as well as the format of the two defense (proposal and final) meetings are discussed in detail below. It is the student's responsibility to be aware of and plan for SSLS and Graduate School deadlines. Because each dissertation is unique, every student should discuss all aspects of the dissertation process and its appropriate deadline with the dissertation chair.

### **Section 2.1: Prerequisites and Getting Started**

The student will identify a research question or questions that aligns with the dissertation purpose criteria described in Section 1. It is expected that the student will discuss with the student's committee chair potential dissertation ideas. The committee chair's approval of the dissertation topic is required.

Once a topic, research questions, and initial research design have been approved by the committee chair, the student must:

- Construct his/her dissertation committee (see Section 2.1.1).
- Develop a research plan and methodology. The student must obtain approval for the research plan from the committee chair, as well as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Section 2.2.1).

Although the student may begin discussing possible dissertation topics and the research plan while completing his/her doctoral coursework, the student must successfully complete all doctoral coursework and pass the comprehensive exam prior to forming his/her dissertation committee and, thus, proposing the dissertation.

#### **Section 2.1.1: Dissertation Committee**

The School of Strategic Leadership Studies uses the “strong dissertation chair” model. We find this works best for the candidate and facilitates clear communication for all. Therefore, the dissertation chair is the point person for the candidate regarding the dissertation. Committee members will communicate through the chair regarding requested changes or additions to the dissertation. Dissertation committee members are selected based on their expertise regarding the dissertation topic and/or methodology. Dissertation committee members function as topical advisors and discussants for the students. Concerns about or changes to the dissertation are directed to the committee chair who determines the manner and format of the response to the student.

Each student’s dissertation committee must consist of at least three (3) approved members of the JMU graduate faculty (one committee chair and at least two additional committee members). At least two (2) of the committee members must be SSLS faculty. The third committee member and/or additional members may be invited from either graduate faculty at JMU or another institution depending on their expertise related to the dissertation topic and/or research design. Students may request any SSLS faculty member to chair his or her dissertation committee according to the research interests and expertise of the faculty member. The faculty member may accept or decline based on the proposed direction of the research.

## **Section 2.2: Dissertation Proposal**

The dissertation proposal is a formal research proposal written in APA style. A successful dissertation proposal is one that convincingly sets forth a set of hypotheses and/or research questions supported by theory and empirical evidence and outlines in sufficient detail an effective method for testing those hypotheses/research questions. SSLS dissertation proposals must also meet the purpose criteria described in Section 1.

### **Section 2.2.1: Preparing the Dissertation Proposal**

The dissertation proposal document typically includes drafts of the first three chapters of the dissertation:

- *Chapter 1* provides a general introduction to study and includes descriptions of the study’s purpose and significance.
- *Chapter 2* includes a comprehensive review of the literature and theory relevant to study hypotheses. Study hypotheses are also posed within Chapter 2.
- *Chapter 3* includes a detailed description of the proposed method for carrying out the study. Within this chapter, the proposed sample, measures, procedures, and data analysis techniques should be clearly described. **Note:** for the dissertation proposal document, Chapter 3 should be written in future-tense. For example, “...*I will sample organizational leaders from...*”, “*I will measure leadership potential using the...*”, “*I will test a series of multiple linear regression models*”.
- A complete reference section and appendix containing all supporting materials must also be included.

The dissertation committee chair will provide the student with iterative feedback on proposal drafts produced by the student. The committee chair will make the determination of when the

proposal is of sufficient quality to disseminate to dissertation committee members. Although time estimates for preparing the proposal are given in Section 3 below, it is important to keep in mind that **the time it takes to complete this phase of the process is dependent on the time it takes the student to produce a proposal document of sufficient quality.**

### **Section 2.2.2: Scheduling the Dissertation Proposal Defense Meeting**

Once the dissertation proposal has been disseminated to committee members, a proposal defense meeting date must be set. Importantly, committee members must be given a minimum of three (but preferably more) weeks, *excluding University holidays and/or breaks*, from the time of receiving the completed proposal to the proposal defense meeting date to ensure committee members have sufficient time to thoroughly familiarize themselves with, evaluate, and develop feedback on the dissertation document. In addition, students must be aware of the difficulties that often exist when attempting to identify a meeting time that works for all committee members. Students must take these issues into consideration and prepare for them when planning out their dissertation timeline.

### **Section 2.2.3: The Dissertation Proposal Defense Meeting**

Defense meetings are approximately two hours in length. The proposal defense meeting will take place as follows:

*Part 1 (student and committee members in attendance)* • Student presentation of the proposed research (20-30 minutes).

- Q&A session allowing committee members to raise questions regarding aspects of the proposed study (30-45 minutes).

*Part 2 (committee members only)*

- Committee members tabulate quantitative scores on the dissertation proposal rating scale (Appendix C of student handbook) and deliberate study strengths and weaknesses and discuss necessary changes to be made prior to the student carrying out the study (15-30 minutes).

*Part 3 (student and committee chair)*

- If the committee deems the proposal to be successful, the committee chair will review with the student the changes determined by the committee to be necessary prior to carrying out the study, as well as debrief on the proposal defense and discuss next steps (20-45 minutes).

After passing the proposal defense, a student officially becomes a doctoral candidate.

### **Section 2.3: Carrying Out the Committee Approved Dissertation Study**

The methodology of each dissertation differs. However, this phase involves executing the research using the proposed methods, pending revisions based on feedback from the proposal defense meeting.

### **Section 2.3.1: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval**

If the student collects data from human subjects, IRB is necessary. The IRB human subjects research application and supporting IRB forms are available here.

Unless otherwise directed by the dissertation chair, IRB approval should not be sought until after the proposal defense, and most importantly, no data can be collected prior to IRB approval.

### **Section 2.3.2: Writing up the Dissertation Results and Discussion**

After completing data collection and data analyses, the student will draft study results (Chapter 4) and discussion (Chapter 5).<sup>\*</sup> It is important that your Chapter 5 discussion does not simply rehash your presentation of results in Chapter 4. Instead, Chapter 5 should focus on, among other things:

- Elaborating on the “why” hypotheses were or were not supported.
- Clearly detailing the theoretical and practical implications of study findings.
- Discussing threats to the study’s internal and external validity and their implications, and proposing approaches to alleviating those threats
- Outlining future research directions. In addition, the student will update Chapters 1-3, based on changes agreed upon during the proposal defense meeting. Chapter 3 will be revised from “future-tense” to “present-tense” or “past-tense”. A polished version of the full dissertation will likely take multiple iterations. Students should expect the timeline for completing the full dissertation document to be similar to that of the dissertation proposal document (see Section 3). The dissertation defense meeting will not be set until the committee chair approves a final draft of the complete document. This document will include Chapters 1-5, a complete Reference section, and any supplemental materials (e.g., participant consent form, list of measures used, tables, figures). Committee members must be given a final dissertation draft at least three weeks prior to a scheduled dissertation defense meeting.

*\*This section describes a five-chapter dissertation model, typical for a quantitative dissertation, as a guideline; however, students should be aware that the number of chapters appropriate for a dissertation are determined by research design and in consultation with a student’s chair.*

### **Section 2.4: Dissertation Defense Meeting**

The schedule for the dissertation defense meeting will be similar to the proposal defense meeting (see Section 2.2.3). The student will present the study (20-30 minutes). Having already proposed the study, the majority of this presentation will focus on the Methods, Results, and Discussion. Committee members will have the opportunity to raise questions relating to the study or other questions related to the research process or leadership studies more generally (30-45 minutes). Committee members will convene without the student present to discuss the adequacy of the

completed study (15-30 minutes). Finally, the student will return, the committee chair will share with the student the committee's determination (Pass/Pass with Major Revisions/Fail):

- Pass: Student is required to make minor revisions to the document prior to depositing the final version with the Graduate School. Final approval on revisions are given by the committee chair.
- Pass with Major Revisions: Student is required to make one or more major revisions to the document, in addition to any minor revisions, prior to depositing the final version with the Graduate School. Final approval on revisions is given by the committee chair in consultation with the member(s) requesting the major revisions.
- Fail: Student is required to propose a new dissertation.

Guests are permitted and may be invited by the doctoral candidate during the oral presentation and committee questions so long as the dissertation chair approves and space permits.

### **Section 2.5: Depositing Completed Dissertation Documentation**

The student must deposit the final, formatted dissertation with the Graduate School in order to officially graduate. Below are the typical deadlines for submitting completed<sup>1</sup> dissertation documents to the Graduate School:

<sup>1</sup> Completed is defined as a full dissertation document that has been successfully defended and, if necessary, revised based on dissertation defense feedback. Completed dissertation documentation requires a dissertation approval form, which you can find here.

*For December Graduation:* Mid-November

*For Spring Graduation:* Mid-April

*For Summer Degree Conferral (note dissertations completed in the summer are invited to walk in December commencement ceremonies as there is not a formal summer commencement ceremony):* Late June

**Please note that SSLS does not schedule dissertation defenses during the month of July.**

### **Section 3: Typical Dissertation Timeline**

*These are approximations. Timelines differ based on the scope of study and the student's ability to complete each step in a timely fashion.*

*Please adapt the following dissertation timeline benchmarks to your planning for the semester in which you hope to graduate. SSLS will not approve the conferring of a degree for a semester in which the deadline for submitting a dissertation to the Graduate School is not met.*

*Dissertation Proposal (16-32 weeks):*

- Development and Approval of Research Topic and Research Plan (3-8 weeks)
- Literature Review and Writing of Chapters 1-3 (10-16 weeks)
- Committee Review of Dissertation Proposal and Proposal Defense Meeting (2-4 weeks)

<sup>2</sup> Students can move onto literature review and proposal writing while waiting for IRB approval.

*Dissertation Defense (14-24 weeks + data collection)*

- Creation of IRB form (1-4 weeks; additional 4-8 weeks for approval)
- Collect Data (dependent on data source)
- Data Management and Statistical Analyses (3-5 weeks)
- Writing of Chapters 4 and 5/Revising Chapters 1-3 based on Proposal Feedback (7-11 weeks)
- Committee Review of Full Dissertation Document and Final Defense Meeting (2-4 weeks)
- Final Revisions and Document Formatting, Graduate School Submission, and Final Approval (2-4 weeks)

To reiterate: It is the student's responsibility to be aware of and plan for SSLS and Graduate School deadlines. Because each dissertation is unique, students should discuss every aspect of the dissertation process and its appropriate deadline with the dissertation chair.

**Section 4: Additional Resources**

JMU "Thesis, Research Project and Dissertation Information" Website:

<http://www.jmu.edu/grad/current-students/thesis-dissertation/information.shtml>

"Guidelines for Writing a Thesis or Dissertation":

<https://www.jou.ufl.edu/grad/forms/Guidelines-for-writing-thesis-or-dissertation.pdf>

**Enrollment Requirement for Final Dissertation Defense.**

Students must be enrolled in dissertation credits (LEAD 900 or LEAD 899 if you have already completed 12 hours of LEAD 900) during the semester of the dissertation defense.