

Completing a Dissertation in SSLS

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.

Section 2.1: Prerequisites and Getting Started

The student will identify a set of hypotheses to empirically test 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 has 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. 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 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 at least three 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).

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.

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).^{*} 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 Method, Results, and Discussion. Committee members will have the opportunity to raise questions relating to the study (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.

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 completed¹ dissertation documents to the Graduate School:

¹ 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.

Fall: Mid-November

Spring: Mid-April

Summer: Early July

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.

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)

²Students 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 approval²)
- 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)

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>

Deadlines

Comprehensive exams must be successfully completed before the dissertation defense. Within one year of passing comprehensives and within the first five years of coursework, the student must present a committee-accepted dissertation proposal. The student is expected to complete the defense of the dissertation within three years from the time of the comprehensive exams. Otherwise, the student may need to take new comprehensive exams. Note that the student is responsible for keeping abreast of and meeting all deadlines specified by The Graduate School, and that the School of Strategic Leadership Studies will require students to meet internal deadlines which precede these, in particular, surrounding dissertation and graduation.

Dissertation Final Process. When the student has completed writing the dissertation and the chair has approved the final draft, a dissertation defense will be scheduled. Copies of the dissertation should be distributed to the committee at least two weeks prior to the defense. Committee members are encouraged to submit to the chair any serious concerns about the student's preparation to defend.

At the oral defense, the student presents a summary of the dissertation, followed by comments and questions from the committee. After the defense is concluded, the dissertation committee meets privately to reach a decision. The committee members may decide the dissertation should be accepted, accepted contingent on specific revisions, or not accepted at this time. The student is informed of their decision at that time. If the dissertation is accepted contingent on revisions, the committee chair is responsible for certifying these revisions. The chair may rely on the judgment of other committee members as appropriate. If the dissertation is not accepted, the student and committee (as individuals or as a group) will work out a plan for further work the student should do before attempting another defense.

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.

Problem Identification, Remediation and Retention/Termination

The School of Strategic Leadership Studies adopted the following procedures and policies for problem identification, remediation and retention/termination decisions. The department considers not only academic abilities, skills, and performance when making remediation and or retention decisions about students, but also student characteristics and conduct such as appropriate levels of maturity, judgment, competence, emotional stability, sensitivity to and respect for others, and personal/professional openness and self-awareness.

All programs in the department strive to create a climate of mutual respect among faculty, staff, and students. Students, faculty, staff, and externship site personnel are expected to interact with others in a professional and respectful manner. In this regard, students should demonstrate behavior and attitudes that reflect positively on the program, department, university and profession. Review of student progress each semester will incorporate an assessment of each student's performance and conduct, and feedback will be provided.

In the event a program faculty member considers a student is not making adequate progress in performance or conduct, despite feedback and/or a remediation plan, the student may be dismissed from the program. The following steps will be followed.

Step 1. Informal Resolution and Consultation

In most cases, the best way to address a problem with student progress is for faculty to meet directly with the student and discuss any issues or concerns. Because this step is so often necessary if not sufficient for problem resolution, there should be very compelling reasons for its nonoccurrence. Problems or conflicts appear to have the best chance of successful resolution when the parties involved (1) exercise ethical sensitivity, maturity, good judgment, discretion, and care, (2) remain open to feedback and dialogue, (3) take responsibility for personal and professional growth and development, (4) attempt to discern whether problems should be attributed to situational or dispositional factors, and (5) recognize graduate-level training can be difficult and stressful at times. Of course,