

THE DOCTORAL DEFENSE : DIVERSITY OF PRACTICES IN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES*

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ABSTRACT

The doctoral defense is one of the most unique and pivotal events in the life of a young academic prior to launching a career in the university. And yet, there is very little information regarding the actual protocol of this defense experience and, where protocol exists, there seems not to be any nationally standardized formula for that process. In this study of twenty of the top Ph.D.-granting universities in the United States, I have described the various forms the doctoral defense takes, including (1) prerequisites to sitting for the defense such as residency, qualifying exams, languages, time factors, etc., (2) the composition of the defense panel itself, (3) who may, if any, be permitted to sit in the gallery or be present as silent observers and even non-faculty participants in the questioning of the defendant, (4) the time frame for the defense, (5) protocol in terms of questions, responses, etc., (6) who chairs the defense panel, and (7) the various levels of pass/fail permitted and employed by the panel, and tellingly, (8) may the defense be repeated in case of failure. The findings are both interesting because of the range of options operative within the American university system and startling due to the lack of either a standardized formula or a recognized protocol. Obviously, there is an opportunity here for discussion of the process.

Keywords: Doctoral Defense, Defense Protocol, American Universities, Dissertation, Thesis

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, I did a data base study of the ABD (All But Dissertation) phenomenon in the United States. I became interested owing to my teaching experience at Oxford of its near absence from the terrain of doctoral studies in Europe and the United Kingdom. When I enquired of various colleagues at a range of universities in the United States, I came to learn that it was a very common occurrence that individuals would complete their doctoral course work, fulfill their language requirements, pass their doctoral qualifying examinations and still not ever complete the dissertation or receive the Ph.D. I was sufficiently disturbed by this revelation that I did a national study of the top twenty academic institutions offering the Ph.D. in the field of theology and wrote the book entitled, *Unfinished Business: The Terminal All-But-Dissertation Phenomenon in American Higher Education (A National Study of Failures to Complete Doctoral Studies in Theology)*, published by Cloverdale Books in 2003.

During the writing of that book, I also became interested in the doctoral defense as a *rite of passage*, its protocol, and its variations within these distinguished universities. A fine example of this formalized ritual of defending one's thesis is found at the American University <http://www.gtfeducation.org/images/dynamic/file/faculty/Doctoral-Defense-Protocol-A->

* This paper was recently presented at Doctoral-Level Seminar at Oxford University's International Summer Programs.

[Study-of-American-University-Practices1.pdf?1335536602970](#). Knowing Oxford University's protocol and procedures as I do, having been on the Board of Studies for the University's international summer school for sixteen years, I have become fascinated with what I have discovered in my research of the wide range of differing practices regarding this ancient ritual. Surprisingly, there has not been a data-base study of this phenomenon the doctoral defense in the United States, though there is a plethora of pundit articles addressing practical issues for students on how to get through it. I have felt that much could be learned by actually conducting a formal survey, calling for a descriptive delineation of the components of the doctoral defense as practiced in a selective list of distinguished American universities. What will make it even more interesting, sometime in the future, is to include a similar description of the practice as conducted in the United Kingdom. For a contrast to the USA and UK practices, Radboud University of Nijmegen, Holland has an even more extensive elaboration of the process of oral defense of the doctoral thesis.

<http://marianvanbakel.wordpress.com/2013/02/27/defending-your-phd-thesis-the-dutch-way/>

Though there has not been such a study done before, yet, the doctoral defense is one of the most unique and pivotal events in the life of a young academic prior to launching a career in the university. The University of California at Santa Barbara has specific instructions regarding even audience attendance and participation.

<http://www.cs.ucsb.edu/~pconrad/ccs/phdExams/>

In this study, I have described the various forms the defense takes at a select number of top Ph.D.-granting universities in the United States, including (1) prerequisites to sitting for the defense such as residency, qualifying exams, languages, time factors, etc., (2) the composition of the defense panel itself, (3) who may, if any, be permitted to sit in the gallery or be present as silent observers and even non-faculty participants in the questioning of the defendant, (4) the time frame for the defense, (5) protocol in terms of questions, responses, etc., (6) who chairs the defense panel, and (7) the various levels of pass/fail permitted and employed by the panel, and tellingly, (8) may the defense be repeated in case of failure.

The method of gathering this information constituted a challenge. Rather than doing a massive data-base study of hundreds of universities, I decided to focus upon only twenty of the top institutions in the country (see Note A), believing that their protocol would be more or less normative and, where not, I believed I would hear from "alternative" protocol institutions in due time. Columbia University has gone so far as to post "hints" for doctoral defense candidates preparing for the defense of the thesis.

<http://www.cs.columbia.edu/~hgs/etc/defense-hints.html>

I drafted ten major questions (see Note B) with sub-sets, where called for, in the questionnaire. I gave assurance to each respondent that the questionnaire would take five minutes and that copying and returning via email with their answers was all that was required. Finally, I offered them a copy of the report by email if they were interested when the study was completed. I had previously made the decision not to identify specific institutions when discussing the various responses to the questions in hopes of assuring candor in the responses. The goal was to determine whether or not and, if yes, what is the normative protocol in the U.S. for doctoral defenses. I intended to identify, if possible, the normative protocol for the U.S. rather than highlighting specific institutions for scrutiny. The following constitutes the commentary on each question asked with background, rationale, and findings.

1. What are the prerequisites for sitting for the oral defense?

___ Courses completed ___ languages passed ___ examinations passed

Percentages: 100% require all courses/languages/examinations to be completed.

Commentary: Though every university in the U.S. does not require written or oral doctoral qualifying examinations before proceeding to the writing of the thesis, many if not most do. In order to establish the normative prerequisites for the sitting of the doctoral defense, the respondents were asked to identify which of these three requirements – courses, languages, and examinations – must be completed before sitting the defense. All twenty indicated that courses, languages, and qualifying exams must be completed before sitting for the defense. However, there is a wide range of course credits required for the Ph.D. (from 30 to 90 credit hours depending on the prerequisite for admission into the program) and in several instances languages are only required where needed for the thesis research and not as a blanket university requirement. Manhattanville College Doctoral Defense Protocol website is indicative of this practice.

<http://mville.digication.com/Doctoral Program Yiping Wan/Dissertation Defense Protocol>

Also, some institutions require all qualifying exams to be written while others require both written exams and an oral exam before departmental faculty before the student can sit for the thesis defense. In some cases, universities no longer required qualifying examinations and, therefore, following completion of course work and fulfilling language requirement (if relevant), the student may commence thesis writing.

2. What is the composition of the defense panel itself?

Who make up the panel? How many panelists?

Percentages: 4 faculty members is the average panel size.

Commentary: This question did not concern the thesis supervision committee which some institutions have while others only have a thesis supervisor. This question was concerned specifically with the actual make-up of the defense panel itself when the defendant sits for the thesis defense. See

<http://www.rug.nl/education/phd-programme/promotieregeling/bijlage7?lang=en>

For the University of Groningen's Doctoral Defense Protocol for a European slant on this ritual process. The number of panelists ranged from three to ten with the normative number being four. The composition of the panel was not specified by some institutions other than "departmental members of the faculty" while the normative composition consisted of the first and second readers and the thesis supervisor with one panelist from outside the department.

3. May non-panelists be present for the defense? ___ Yes ___ No

If yes, may non-panelists ask questions or make comments?

Percentage: 90% allow non-panelists to sit in but only 50% allow them to participate.

Commentary: This history of the doctoral defense is fascinating and reaches far back into the Middle Ages in Bologna, Paris, and Oxford. Present-day practices with respect to attendance and participation is less normative than might be expected with some institutions not allowing any non-panelists to be present while others invite the general public. The Eindhoven Technological University Doctoral Defense Protocol represents both a European take on this phenomenon and with a particular slant reflective of the technology community's valuation of the process. See it explained <http://www.tue.nl/en/university/about-the-university/organization/support-services/general-affairs-department/office-of-doctoral-presentations-and-academic-ceremonies/phd-defenses/> And, with respect to non-panelists' participation, there is a wide range of practices from "anyone may question and participate" to "no one may question or participate." However, the normative character of the attendance and participation component of thesis defense protocol is that almost all of the surveyed

institutions permit attendance of non-panelists with half permitting participation with questions of non-panelist attendees and half forbidding such participation. Comments from respondents regarding this specific component of the thesis defense protocol centered around whether the defense process was thought of as “highly formalized” or “rather casual” in nature, with the more formal institutions disallowing outside participation while the more casual institutions inviting participation.

4. How much time is set aside for the actual defense itself? ½ hr____ 1 hr____
More_____

Percentage: 100% say the defense lasts more than one hour and less than two hours.

Commentary: With only one exception of an institution setting aside three hours for the thesis defense, the normative time frame for the entire process was reported to be between 1 ½ hours and 2 hours. The entire process included introduction of the defendant and panelists, welcoming remarks, questions and comments, final considerations, faculty consensual reporting, and congratulations to the defendant. Southern University has a very helpful and extensive explication for the student preparing for the oral defense of the Ph.D. thesis <http://www.subr.edu/assets/GradSchool/OralDefenseDissertation2012.pdf>

5. How is the question/response format handled?
____Chair as moderator _____ round robin/formal _____spontaneous/casual

Percentage: 50% chaired by moderator and 50% by round robin.

Commentary: The formatting of the defense panel’s work and the defense process reflected the institution’s formal or casual nature, with half of the responding institutions indicating that the panel was moderated by a designated chairperson while the remaining half of the responding institutions were equally divided between using either the round robin/formal or spontaneous/casual approach to the question/response period of the defense. There was, interestingly enough, a direct correlation between those institutions which welcome outside attendance and participation and the use of the spontaneous/casual approach to the question/response process. For a closer look at the Canadian assessment of this process, see <https://www.grad.ubc.ca/current-students/final-doctoral-exam/doctoral-examination-final-oral-defence>. Where the University of British Columbia delineates the Doctoral Defense Protocol. More formal institutions were consistent in disallowing outside involvement in the process and the expectation of a moderated defense chaired by one of its own faculty members.

6. Who chairs the defense panel?
Dept. chair_____ Thesis supervisor_____ Other_____

Percentage: 50% by department chair and 50% by thesis supervisor.

Commentary: While only one of the responding institutions indicated that the chair of the relevant department chairs the doctoral defense panel, one in four required a departmental faculty person to chair but not the thesis supervisor. However, there was a preponderance of institutions requiring the thesis supervisor to actually chair the defense panel and the process. The Doctoral Defense Protocol for Ohio State University’s Medical School is of particular interest here because of the intricate detail of the process, related but not a duplicate, for the Ph.D. defense http://www.medicine.osu.edu/bsgp/documents/Appendix_Q_updated_7_26.pdf Some concern was registered with regard to this practice, fearing, as was suggested, that there was room for a potential “conflict of interest” with the thesis supervisor chairing the thesis defense.

7. Are there levels of pass/fail as determined by the panel? ___ Yes ___ No

If yes, are these levels applicable?

___ Honors ___ As Defended ___ Minor Revisions ___ Major Revisions ___ Fail

Percentage: 50% say the panel determines the level of pass. None authorize “honors.”

Commentary: Only three institutions indicated that the panel report included “levels of pass” designations while the vast majority of respondents indicated that no such provision was made in the work of the defense panel. Of those so indicating levels of pass, two indicated that the levels were “As defended,” “Minor Revisions,” and “Fail,” while one indicated that “Major Revisions” was also a level of pass. Saint Louis University’s Doctoral Defense Protocol formula for the College of Education is very insightful <http://www.slu.edu/college-of-education-and-public-service-home/schools-and-departments/educational-leadership-and-higher-education-home/current-students/public-defense-protocol>. None of the responding institutions indicated that “honors” was a category for pass, leaving the reader to surmise that since these entire institutions award degrees at the “summa cum laude” level that distinction must reside outside the panel, possibly with the department faculty or the academic dean’s office.

8. How is the level of pass/fail determined by the panel?

___ Consensus ___ voice vote ___ secret vote

Percentage: 70% determine level of pass by consensus; 20% by voice; 10% by ballot.

Commentary: Only one institution indicated that the panel actually used “voice vote” for determining the pass/fail status of the defense while one other used the “secret vote” for such determination. All of the remaining institutional respondents indicated that the pass/fail determination was made by general “consensus” of the participating panelists. The University of California at Los Angeles has one of the most elaborately delineated protocol directives for doctoral defense students <http://is.gseis.ucla.edu/academics/degrees/phd/dissertation.htm>.

9. In case of failure, is the defendant permitted to re-submit and defend? ___ Yes

___ No

If yes, how much time is allowed for the re-submission? ___ months? ___ years?

Percentage: 70% allow resubmission with 3 months.

Commentary: Of the twenty participating institutions, only one indicated that there was no allowance made for a student to re-submit the thesis for a defense but that the defense was a one-time event in which one either failed or passed finally. All others indicated institutional policy allowed for a “re-submission and defense,” with the average time for re-submission being less than a year and some indicating a ninety-day time-frame.

10. May the defendant fail and re-submit more than once? ___ Yes ___ No

Percentage: 70% indicate resubmission allowed and none more than once.

Commentary: There was unanimous denial of more than one re-submission of the thesis for the defense. In times past, individuals who failed the re-submission and defense process were granted a lower level terminal degree than the Ph.D. but that practice seems to have gradually disappeared from normative practice among American universities. The City University of New York has a long-standing tradition of formality with respect to the doctoral defense protocol and it still serves as a model for many institutions in the US. Their website is definitive.

http://www.gc.cuny.edu/CUNY_GC/media/CUNY-Graduate-Center/PDF/Psychology/Forms/Defense-of-Dissertation-Protocol.pdf. However, it might be pointed out here that some major institutions award an “advanced masters degree,” sometimes called the Master of Philosophy, when doctoral students have completed their course, language requirements (if any), and qualifying examinations (if any), prior to submission and defense of the doctoral thesis.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To sum up in a brief paragraph what we have learned from this modest data-base study is simple enough. Using these top twenty American universities as the source of our data, we can say that the doctoral defense normative protocol consists of the requirement that the doctoral defendant have completed all course work, fulfilled what language requirements there are, and have sit, if required, for the written qualifying examinations and, if relevant, sit for the oral examination. Furthermore, there are usually four panelists consisting of the thesis supervisor and possibly one faculty from outside the relevant department with the defense process taking about an hour and a half with the panel being chaired by the thesis supervisor and some non-panelists present but not participating in the question/response defense process. The panel does not normally indicate a level of pass, only indicating pass/fail usually by consensus and, in the case of a failure, the usual expectation of a re-submission and defense scheduled within twelve months.

This study was, indeed, fascinating if for no other reason than, to my certain knowledge, there has never been a data-base study of the doctoral defense protocol as practiced in the American university system. There is ample room for this study to be expanded, both in the U.S. as well as in other countries. The possibility of an international comparative study leading to a report reciting the “normative” nature of doctoral defense protocol around the world would certainly prove of some interest to members of the academy.

REFERENCES

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- <http://www.cs.ucsb.edu/~pconrad/ccs/phdExams/> Audience Protocol for Guests at University of California at Santa Barbara
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- <http://is.gseis.ucla.edu/academics/degrees/phd/dissertation.htm> UCLA Doctoral Defense Protocol
- http://www.gc.cuny.edu/CUNY_GC/media/CUNY-Graduate-Center/PDF/Psychology/Forms/Defense-of-Dissertation-Protocol.pdf CUNY Doctoral Defense Protocol

APPENDIX

Note A: Roster of Institutions Selected for this Study

Yale University, Princeton University, Vanderbilt University, Duke University, Stanford University, Fordham University, Indiana University, Michigan State University, Ohio State University, Pennsylvania State University, University of Massachusetts, University of Connecticut, University of Tennessee, University of Texas, Texas Christian University, Massachusetts of Technology, Johns Hopkins University, University of Virginia, Boston University, Harvard University.

Note B: The Survey Questions for this Study**WRITTEN RESPONSE SURVEY SAMPLE**

I have recently stepped down as a member of the Oxford University Board of Studies for the international summer programs and in the process have just completed a postdoctoral appointment as Visiting Scholar to Harvard University. Presently, I am engaged in a study of *doctoral program protocols* in the United States and the United Kingdom to be presented to the Director of Religious Studies within continuing education at Oxford University.

In preparation of this report, I would greatly appreciate your participation in answering a few questions about your institution's doctoral defense protocol. Please know that no institution or individual will be identified relative to specific information neither in this report nor will participating respondents be named. Rather, our sole interest is in determining to what extent, if any, there is a normative protocol for doctoral defenses in the United States and the United Kingdom and, if there is, what the component parts of that protocol are.

To respond, simply copy and return via email with your answers. Thank you sincerely.

QUESTIONS FOR RESPONSE VIA EMAIL

1. What are the prerequisites for sitting for the oral defense?
 Courses completed languages passed examinations passed
2. What is the composition of the defense panel itself?
 Who make up the panel? How many panelists?
3. May non-panelists be present for the defense?
 Yes No
 If yes, may non-panelists ask questions or make comments?
4. How much time is set aside for the actual defense itself?
 ½ hr 1 hr More
5. How is the question/response format handled?
 Chair as moderator round robin/formal spontaneous/casual
6. Who chairs the defense panel?
 Dept. chair Thesis supervisor Other
7. Are there levels of pass/fail as determined by the panel? Yes No
 If yes, are these levels applicable?
 Honors As Defended Minor Revisions Major
 Revisions Fail

8. How is the level of pass/fail determined by the panel?
____ Consensus ____ voice vote ____ secret vote
9. In case of failure, is the defendant permitted to re-submit and defend?
____ Yes ____ No
If yes, how much time is allowed for the re-submission?
____ months ____ years
10. May the defendant fail and re-submit more than once? ____ Yes ____ No

NOTE: Would you like to receive a copy of this report when completed? ____ Yes ____ No

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF AUTHOR

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