

107 DISSERTATION

107.1 – Overview

(updated 2010)

An independent research or scholarly project relevant to clinical social work is required of all Ph.D. students. Through completion of this project, students demonstrate their capacity to contribute to the development and dissemination of knowledge for the profession. Completion of the dissertation is the academic project that marks the transition from student to scholar.

107.2 – Standards for the Dissertation Project

The dissertation project is expected to be a defensible, original inquiry into an issue of potential professional relevance. It is not essential that a project succeed in clarifying an issue, only that it constitutes a well-grounded attempt to illuminate a matter of relevance. (Quality standards for evaluating the dissertation may be found on Moodle "Dissertation Planning Guide.")

- Students are expected to demonstrate mastery of relevant prior work that has bearing on the substantive issue, an informed selection of relevant study methodology and a strategy for inquiry, the effective conduct of the study as outlined in the proposal, and a grasp of the results of this inquiry and their connection to prior knowledge. Normally, experience in the conduct of research clarifies the aptness of certain choices and the pitfalls of other choices. It is expected that students develop a balanced perspective on their project and succeed in making the results of it clearly and conveniently available to an interested audience.
- Responsibility for the initiation, design, conduct, and defense of the dissertation project rests with students. The School undertakes to assist students in meeting these responsibilities through provisions intended to enhance the productive use of students' time and to support their learning and achievement. In addition to maintaining continuity in advising, we attempt to provide students with ready access to advisory and committee assistance and with expeditious review of written material. Through these and other means, the Program attempts to assist students in timely completion of dissertation work. While students are expected to take advantage of opportunities available in the Program for pursuit of their dissertations, the success of the enterprise is viewed in terms of active, ongoing learning achievements and the ultimate completion of a defensible inquiry, rather than in terms of a time interval.
- The time limit on dissertation work is five years from completion of Session V. This limit is meant to aid the timely completion of the project, not to undermine the educational function of the dissertation project or compromise the project's integrity. Specific information about time limits may be found in the section (following) on Extensions for Dissertation Work.

107.3 – Guidelines for Authorship, Ownership, & Acknowledgment

The School offers guidelines for collaborative student/faculty undertakings. (see Appendix D (<https://catalog.smith.edu/ssw/phd-program/doctoral-program-student-handbook/appendix-d/>))

107.4 – Supports for the Dissertation Project

The Ph.D. Program supports students' development and completion of the dissertation project in several ways.

- The first is through the series of required research courses that provide the foundation of knowledge needed both to assess the prior work of others and to develop work of one's own. In particular, a dissertation design seminar is offered in the third summer. (In those instances where a student is well along in the preparation of a proposal by the second summer, the dissertation design seminar may be taken then, with permission from the director.)
- Secondly, a Research Adviser (RA) is assigned to each student.
- Finally, a dissertation committee is appointed for each student to assist in the development of a dissertation proposal and in completion of the dissertation.
 - a. The Research Adviser (RA)**

The role of the RA is covered more fully in this Handbook in the section on the Comprehensive Exam. Briefly, one role of the RA is to assist the student in identifying and refining a preliminary area of study and preliminary plan for the dissertation.
 - b. Post-Residency Dissertation Advisement**

Post-residency students are encouraged to keep in touch with the RA through phone calls, written communications, and in-person visits so as to advance toward completing their dissertation. The School cannot support travel by RAs to visit with students. However, contact is encouraged, as needed, between students and faculty members who are visiting in the student's geographic area.
 - c. The Dissertation Committee**
 - The dissertation committee consists of a minimum of three people: a chair and at least two members. It is required that each person on the committee bring expertise in some significant aspect of the proposed work. At least one member of the committee must have methodological expertise in either qualitative or quantitative research.
 - The dissertation chair must have an earned Ph.D., and it is preferable, though not necessary, that committee members have earned Ph.D. degrees and hold at least the rank of an Associate Professor with tenure. While the chair is often a member of the School's resident faculty, with approval of the School, appropriately qualified members of the adjunct faculty (i.e., Adjunct Instructors, Faculty Field Advisers, or Research Advisers), or persons who are recruited specifically for a role on the committee, may serve.
 - One member of the committee may be a person not otherwise serving in a faculty role at Smith. If the chair is not a member of the School's resident faculty, then both committee members must be. Occasional exceptions to this policy can be made by petition to the director. Dissertation chairs not on the School's resident faculty are paid a small honorarium by the School. The School also pays a nominal honorarium to outside committee members when they have read the dissertation proposal and the dissertation report.
 - Students are responsible for identifying and recruiting the chair and the members of their dissertation committee. Because the chair usually functions as the principal adviser

for the work, it is generally prudent to recruit the chair first, and then to consult with her/him about possible committee members. The student's RA may or may not be the logical person to work as dissertation chair, depending on the goodness of fit between the dissertation content area and the RA's areas of interest and expertise. The RA and the program director are both available to consult with students about the composition of their dissertation committees.

- Request for approval of the dissertation committee must be made by the student in writing. This request must be sent to the program coordinator prior to finalization and defense of the dissertation proposal. Outside committee chairs or committee members are asked to furnish a curriculum vita prior to appointment. As a matter of policy, the program's director serves as ex-officio member of the dissertation committee. Only after approval of the comprehensive examination may students make their request for approval of the dissertation committee. Typically, the research internship is completed before the start of dissertation work.
- The chair of the dissertation committee oversees the dissertation proposal and dissertation process. Students should consult with the chair about all aspects of the dissertation process, beginning with the formulation of a researchable question, the development of a research methodology, data collection, data analysis, and writing the dissertation. Typically, the chair coordinates and discusses with other committee members (during, and in some cases, prior to the scheduled defense) the student's completed work.
- A cover sheet recording the composition and approval of the dissertation chair and all committee members, including the program director, must be attached to, and submitted to the School with each completed dissertation proposal and dissertation report. A model for the cover sheet may be found on the Moodle Post-Residency and Dissertation Resources page or requested from the program coordinator (sswphd@smith.edu).

d. Working with the Chair and the Committee

Chairs may work differently. In preparation for a proposal review, some Chairs may wish to involve all committee members; others may prefer to work principally with the student, bringing members into the process when the proposal is nearly ready for review. Issues of working style are part of what students should consider when selecting a chair.

The ways students and chairs work together will vary. Student and chair should develop a working relationship that accommodates the needs of both. Establishing a reasonable working relationship may begin with clarification with the chair and committee members about how you should work with each other. Students might ask questions regarding:

- How frequently there should be contact between the chair and the student;
- Whether the chair prefers to review whole drafts of chapters, relatively polished drafts, or smaller chunks of less well-formed writing;
- What might be a reasonable time frame within which the student could expect to receive comments from the chair;

- What kind of feedback the student would find most helpful at different stages of the writing process;
- How the chair would prefer to work with committee members

Keep your chair informed about your progress. Chairs can be most helpful if they know what you are working on, what problems you are experiencing, and the progress you have made. Some students see their dissertation committees for the proposal hearing and then never see them again until the final dissertation defense. Other students prefer more frequent contact. It may be appropriate to request a consultation with the full dissertation committee when the student is floundering. Committee members might offer very helpful suggestions for overcoming some of the obstacles in completing a dissertation.

107.5 – Proposal Hearing & Dissertation Defense

(updated 2018, 2021)

The School uses in-person, Zoom, or a hybrid of both methods for *dissertation proposal hearings* and *dissertation defenses*. The purpose of the *proposal hearing* is to permit direct interaction between students and committee members as they discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the work. The *dissertation defense* also centers on critical appraisal of the work, as well as offering an opportunity for students to describe and explain their work to an audience of interested and knowledgeable professionals.

No funding is available from the School to cover travel expenses associated with in-person *dissertation proposal hearings* or *dissertation defenses*. While in-person meetings are optimal for *dissertation proposal hearings* and *dissertation defenses*, the use of technologies such as Zoom are allowed to contain costs.

Dissertation proposal hearings and *Dissertation defenses* are scheduled to meet the availability of the committee and the student. They are not open events. Family and friends are not permitted to attend.

1. Scheduling the Proposal Hearing or Dissertation Defense

The student, with consultation and assistance from the dissertation chair, has the responsibility for scheduling the *proposal hearing* or *dissertation defense* with the Program Coordinator (sswphd@smith.edu). These take about 2 hours. Once the student has determined a date and time convenient to all committee members, **the student must contact the program coordinator who will arrange the Zoom meeting and send all pertinent information to the committee and student.**

Meetings may be scheduled any date or time with the exception of School holidays and Winter break, when the College is closed.

Prior to the scheduled *proposal hearing* or *dissertation defense*, the student has the responsibility of providing copies of the work, with the unsigned cover sheet, to all members of the committee, **including the program coordinator.**

2. Procedure of the Proposal Hearing or Dissertation Defense

Both meetings begin with the student waiting outside the room while the committee chair and members consult with each other about the issues they will wish to have discussed and the questions they will wish to ask. If this is a Zoom meeting, the dissertation Chair is responsible for creating a breakout room for this private discussion. The student is then invited into the room and begins by offering an overview of the work. Committee members then ask their questions of the student. Overall, the presentation and discussion takes about an hour. At its conclusion, the student is asked to leave the room while committee members again consult with each other. Again, if this is a Zoom meeting the dissertation Chair is responsible for creating a breakout room for the committee members to have their discussion. Finally, the student is invited back into the room to hear the committee's comments and its decision as to whether or not the work is to be accepted as written.

3. Signing Off on the Proposal or the Dissertation

The committee's decision is recorded by the chair on the cover sheet of the dissertation proposal or dissertation by checking the appropriate box and entering the date of the meeting. If the meeting is in-person, this part of the process is completed with committee members signing their names on the cover sheet above their typed-in names. It is the student's responsibility to see that all signatures have been obtained on the cover sheet, and that the signed cover sheet is returned to the Program's Coordinator. If the meeting is a Zoom meeting, the program coordinator will email the cover sheet to each committee member for their signature and once complete, will email the signed cover sheet to the student. The student should retain a copy of the signed cover sheet for his/her own records. Model cover sheets for the dissertation proposal and the dissertation may be found on the Moodle Post-Residency and Dissertation Resources page.

4. Follow-up to the Dissertation Defense or the Proposal Hearing

The decision of the committee may be to *accept the work as is*, *accept the work pending minor or more extensive revisions*, or *reject the work*. Should the committee require any revisions of the work, the Committee Chair will send a letter/email to the student outlining the required revisions. A copy of this letter/email will also be emailed to the Program's Coordinator. These revisions should be accomplished by the student, in consultation with the chair, in the manner and within the timeframe set by the committee. Once the required revisions have been completed, the dissertation chair is responsible for notifying the program coordinator and providing the date revisions are complete. A finalized copy of the revised dissertation or dissertation proposal should be emailed by the student to the Program Coordinator (sswphd@smith.edu).

If the committee accepts the document with extensive revisions requiring another full committee review and rejects the work for a second time, the student will be automatically dismissed from the Program.

107.6 – Developing the Dissertation Proposal

The development of a dissertation proposal or prospectus offers Ph.D. students an opportunity to pursue a special professional interest in depth and to acquire the skills necessary for undertaking independent scholarship or research. Research and scholarly activities that contribute to an evolving body of verified, synthesized, and communicable knowledge vary greatly in method. The School's general objective for the proposal allows wide scope for both area and style of study. Choice of

method will depend, in part, on the state of knowledge in the subject area selected. Topic is limited only to those with demonstrable relevance to clinical social work. Method and its suitability to the topic is determined by the dissertation committee.

1. Selecting a Subject

It is suggested that you select a subject you believe to be important and about which you would like to know more. Bear in mind that every study effort is selective and that no study effort is definitive. Consequently, in developing the focus of your effort, you should be prepared to narrow the scope of your study area so that you can formulate a specific problem for investigation that can contribute to knowledge that is useful for practice. The narrowing of a study effort may occur through deliberate selection on the part of the student based on interest or hunch about what is more important or valuable about the subject. Of course, narrowing a research effort can be most coherently attained by making use of what is already known about the area. The knowledge about any study area you are likely to find helpful will probably include the following:

- **Clinical and Theoretical Literature.** Reports of practice or theoretical papers in which some attempt is made to abstract concepts about practice problems may be useful.
- **Research Studies.** It is difficult to find a subject in relation to which some prior study has not been attempted. The most closely related studies should be used.
- **Clinical Experience.** It is possible to collect the experience of skilled practitioners who are in a position to have thoughts about a study area. Do not exclude your own experience as a resource in the process of isolating significant focal points within an area.

2. Refining the Study Issue

The kinds of questions to bear in mind include the following. About what points is there general agreement and where do differences lie in the literature and/or experience? What aspects of a problem are not adequately explained by the literature or experience-based observations? Are there any clues about possible explanation of processes that lie in the fringe areas of knowledge?

After locating a productive and specific professional issue or question, plan to re-examine sources of insight into this topic. That is, plan to review the clinical and research literature as well as clinical experience from the standpoint of the tentative explanations that are suggested from this material. It would be usual to complete more focused reading and review of experience after a highly specific issue is located than would be possible prior to that time. During this review, attention should be given to the evidence consistent or inconsistent with specific explanations or hypotheses.

You may be able to assemble and weigh the evidence in relation to a single hypothesis, or you may instead identify the tenability of a series of alternate explanations for a clinical event, question, or issue.

Once having formulated the specific study issue you intend to address, you will want to consider the most feasible method for carrying out the proposed study - the design strategy. Thus, you will have to consider the type of research that you propose for the study and the procedures you propose to use in sample selection, data collection, the measurement of the major variables, and the data analysis.

3. Planning the Proposal Document

A proposal is a working document intended to help in the process of developing productive research. The proposal provides an intellectual and methodological roadmap for the proposed study. Only by attempting to orchestrate an inviting study issue, an accessible study opportunity, and effective study means, can the promise of a plan be appraised. And only by attempting to synthesize the components of a total plan can one foresee its problems. Thus, in order to progress toward the goal of an effective project, the proposal is expected to serve as a stimulus for consideration of the choices it expresses and their alternatives. In planning and conducting further development work, in weighing elaborations or revisions to the proposal, the student has an opportunity to exercise substantial initiative. The following outline identifies matters that normally require some treatment in a proposal. It is not necessarily expected that all be developed in comparable detail. Indeed, brevity consonant with clarity should be sought. If you would like consultation of a faculty member or others in advancing your planning effort, the proposal should provide the basis for an informed review of your thinking.

- **Statement of the Study Issue.** The statement of the study issue is the most important component of a study. It tells the reader:
 - i. the issue, problem or concern the study addresses,
 - ii. why it is important,
 - iii. how the study will answer some part of the problem, issue, or concern, and
 - iv. briefly describes the evidence from the literature of practical experience that justifies the study issue.

State the central focus of the study in as few words as possible (in 250 words or less). It is best to capture the study issue in a single sentence. Then clarify and elaborate so that a reader can grasp the subject of the proposed inquiry.

- **Rationale.** The rationale is an articulation of the reasons why the proposed study should be conducted. It places your research in a context that clarifies why it should be done (e.g., its importance or urgency). Provide some information about the current conditions or positive consequences of the proposed research by explaining the contribution this research will make to general knowledge or the need for your research data to further work in this area, etc.
- **Specific Aims.** In one to two pages, state one or two clearly focused aims. The aims should be specific, measurable and time-phased objectives. Indicate how these aims relate to the research plan (e.g., the aim of the study is to describe; to compare; to explore; to predict, to develop or to conceptualize theory, etc.).
- **Prior Relevant Work.** All good research and scholarship start with a thorough examination of the literature. Attention should be directed to both theoretical material related to the topic and to prior investigations bearing on it. Rather than simply cataloging the work of others, present your analysis of it. Make clear its scope and limitations for illuminating the issue of concern.
- **Method.** This section should include a description of the general plan and design of the study, and the basis for its choice. Projects with substantial empirical emphasis should identify the data source, sampling techniques, and size of the sample envisioned, the method and procedures by which the student expects to secure the data, and the procedures to be followed in analyzing the data. Ethical issues and the measures employed to address them must be addressed. For projects not emphasizing the collection of original data, an outline of the proposed course of work should be offered. Be as clear and as explicit as possible in describing the methods to be used.

- **Feasibility.** It is important to determine whether the resources needed for the pursuit of a project exist and are accessible. An efficient way to investigate the feasibility of the plan is to try it out. Experience in attempting to implement a plan often serves quickly to identify the unanticipated problems; part of design work is charting a course around such obstacles.
- It may not be possible at this stage to clarify every part of the plan in full. However, it is useful to attempt to specify as far as possible the plan in its entirety so as to identify the aspects that need further work. For the aspects of the plan that cannot be specified, the statement of design should indicate the procedure by which clarity about these matters can be achieved.

4. Preparing the Proposal Document

Students are expected to follow the instructions available on Moodle, describing "Preparing the Dissertation Manuscript," to have proper scholarly citations for their dissertation proposal literature review in accordance with the instructions contained in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (7th edition., 2019). Refer also to the dissertation proposal samples on Moodle.

107.7 – Human Subjects Review

All dissertation projects must be reviewed for conformance with current ethical standards in the conduct of research. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) process generally takes place after the dissertation proposal has been approved but must occur before any sample members are contacted or any data are collected. If the sample is to be independently recruited, the student must secure review and approval of the research proposal through Smith College's federally constituted Institutional Review Board (IRB). If the study sample is to be drawn from an agency or other institution, the student has the responsibility of securing review and approval first from the study site and then from the College's IRB. Please contact Sherry Wingfield, Program Coordinator of the Smith College IRB at (413) 585-3562 or irb@smith.edu to indicate your plans to prepare an IRB application and receive updated information on the application process.

The purpose of the institutional review (Human Subjects Review) is to weigh potential risks to participants in relation to potential benefits that may be gained from the research. Data collection procedures should be designed to reduce risks to participants, and consent issues should be handled so as to ensure that participants are free from coercion and informed when they are first approached about the nature of their participation and about the risks and benefits of participation. Confidentiality is usually a major issue to be addressed in reducing risks. The Dissertation Committee Chair can assist in the IRB process and may be required to document his or her supervision of the project in some settings.

The procedures described in the IRB application, once approved, cannot be altered significantly without re-review. Once a project is approved, you, as the researcher, have entered into a contract with the reviewing institution to conduct the research in the manner described, and all terms of the contract, including details of the storage of data and feedback to participants, must be fully honored. Requirements and procedures for obtaining approval on research using human subjects may be found on the Smith College Institutional Review Board website (<http://www.smith.edu/irb/>).

This information is also available on the on the Moodle Post-Residency and Dissertation Resources page.

107.8 – The Dissertation Manuscript

(updated 2009, 2010, 2013)

Normally dissertation manuscripts consist of five basic chapters that include an introductory, literature review, methods, findings, and discussion chapter. Complete guidelines for the dissertation manuscript are found online on Moodle. In general, the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (7th Edition., 2019) is the reference to be used on matters of form and style for the dissertation proposal and dissertation manuscript. As the APA Manual indicates, however, certain adaptations to its standards are desirable when preparing a dissertation manuscript. This is because the dissertation is a final copy. Unlike a manuscript that is being prepared for publication in a journal or book, the dissertation manuscript will be published as is. The guidelines provided on Moodle give the standards for preparing Ph.D. dissertations at Smith, identifying how they are consistent with, and differ from, APA article format.

If the committee accepts the dissertation with extensive revisions requiring another full committee review, and rejects the work for a second time, the student will be automatically dismissed from the Program.

107.9 – Dissertation Deadlines

(updated 2020)

The School has established a time limit on dissertation work of **5 years** following completion of the final academic session (Session V). To be eligible for award of the Ph.D. degree at the School's August commencement, students must successfully defend their dissertations no later than **May 31**. Approved final manuscripts must be submitted no later than **June 30**. If the committee requires revisions to the dissertation, these must be completed in time for the manuscript to be sent to the School by the June 30 deadline. Students unable to meet these deadlines may elect to receive their degree in the mid-year graduation. To be eligible, students must defend their dissertations no later than **November 1**, with approved final manuscripts sent to the School no later than **December 5**.

1. Extensions for Dissertation Work (updated 2009, 2010, 2020)

Ph.D. candidates in good standing with the School who have not completed their dissertation within 5 years following completion of Session V may petition the School for an extension. A written request for extension is to be addressed to the program director. The request should detail any extenuating circumstances and, most importantly, should outline the progress that has been achieved toward completion of the dissertation. Normally, it is evidence of progress in the work that is deemed most important in determining whether or not an extension should be granted.

Extensions are granted for only **one year** at a time, and must be received at the School by **April 1**. Students who have not submitted their extension request by that date will be withdrawn from the Program.

A total of **no more than 3 extensions** may be granted. If the dissertation has not been completed by that time, action will be taken to withdraw the student from the Program.

2. Billing during the Post-Residency Period (updated 2013)

Refer to the **Financial Matters** section of this Handbook (section 600)

- a. Fees & Expenses (600.3)
- b. Post-Residency Enrollment Fees (600.4)
- c. Waiver of Post-Residency Enrollment Fees during Leave of Absence (600.5)