Guide to the Dissertation Defense and Graduation
Graduate Program in Genetics
January 2020

Administrative matters and deadlines

Graduate School tasks and deadlines:

There are several important deadlines imposed by the Graduate School. These must be observed, and it is your responsibility to make sure that they are.

- **Apply for graduation**: Be sure to apply on the Graduate School web site, not SOLAR. The link for the application is [https://grad.stonybrook.edu/academics/graduation_application.php](https://grad.stonybrook.edu/academics/graduation_application.php); the form is at the bottom of the page. There is a deadline if you want to be listed in the program for Commencement. The deadlines are near the bottom of the page at [https://grad.stonybrook.edu/academics/graduation_information.php](https://grad.stonybrook.edu/academics/graduation_information.php).

  It is a matter of filing a single, simple form if you don’t meet the deadline for graduation and want to ‘roll it over’ to the next semester. So it is better to err on the side of caution and apply if you think that there is any chance that you will be graduating in a given semester.

  Do not worry about the exact title of your dissertation on the application form – you won’t be held to it if you decide to change it later.

- **Dissertation Committee Approval**: The Graduate Program Director (GPD) must submit a form requesting approval of the examining committee to the Graduate School at least four weeks before the defense. But there is no need to wait, since this task does not require a known defense date. As soon as you are confident of the composition of your committee (generally the same as your research advisory committee), send the list to the GPD, indicating who is the chair and if anyone will be Skyping in (see below). You must keep in mind that the GPD may be unavailable around the time of the deadline, so allow ample leeway. The GPD can request a revision to the approved committee if unexpected circumstances occur, but the revised committee must still satisfy Program and Graduate School guidelines.

  A CV or NIH Biosketch must be provided for any committee member who is not part of the Genetics Program or on the graduate faculty of a Stony Brook University (SBU) department. This requirement extends to any faculty at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (CSHL) who are not members of Genetics.

  The approval form must indicate if any committee members plan to participate via Skype or other streaming service. The guidelines of the Graduate School state, “At the program’s discretion, committee members may participate in a dissertation defense using Skype or video conferencing. However, a minimum of three committee members must be physically present at the defense, one of whom MUST be the chair. Additionally, the student should be physically present at their dissertation defense...No extensions or exceptions will be granted to the signature page submission deadline due to a Skyping committee member. Students should plan their dissertations accordingly and with ample time to obtain all committee member signatures to meet this deadline.” Whether a member participates by Skype or not can be changed after the committee has been approved, but the GPD must be notified so that he or she can request a revision from the Graduate School.
• **Doctoral Defense Announcement:** The GPD must submit a Doctoral Defense Announcement (DDA) at least **three weeks before the defense**. Because the GPD reviews these forms for accuracy (and, again, may not be available at the time of the deadline), the form should be submitted to her or him at least 4 weeks ahead of time. The form posted on the Graduate School web site ([https://grad.stonybrook.edu/academics/Forms.php](https://grad.stonybrook.edu/academics/Forms.php) under ‘Forms for Graduating Students’) must be used, and the length restrictions must be observed.

The form requires an abstract of the dissertation. It does not have to match the abstract in the dissertation exactly, but it must be a complete scientific description of the research as one would find in a journal article.

The form also requires that the time and place of the defense be known. The location must be spelled out in full – no abbreviations for the buildings. The Graduate School in general requires that defenses be held on the SBU campus. However, the Genetics Program has received permission to schedule defenses at CSHL, with the stipulation that the public talk be made available to anyone interested at SBU via a streaming service. For that reason, CSHL dissertation talks must be held in rooms that have the necessary AV resources.

In general, a large lecture room (such as Life Sciences Building Room 038) should be reserved for the public lecture. A smaller conference room should be booked for two hours for the subsequent private defense. For defenses at SBU, the Graduate Program Coordinator (GPC) can assist in reserving rooms.

• **Submission of the Dissertation:** Degrees are conferred three times a year, in May, August, and December. For each, **there is a strict deadline for electronic submission of the dissertation.** No exceptions are made. The deadline is 4 PM on dates that can be found at [https://grad.stonybrook.edu/academics/graduation_information.php](https://grad.stonybrook.edu/academics/graduation_information.php). Defenses should be scheduled far enough in advance of the submission deadline to allow for any revisions required by the defense committee. You must also submit the original copy of your signature page (see below) by this same deadline. It is strongly recommended that you or a trusted friend hand-deliver it to the Graduate School.

**Program tasks:**

• Your committee must grant you formal permission to write the dissertation. Confirmation of permission to write must be provided to the GPD. Committee chairs should be consulted about the best way to obtain this permission (e.g., through a face-to-face committee meeting, via an electronic ‘conference’). This permission is an important safeguard for you, since it confirms that the committee deems that you have performed an adequate amount of research for a dissertation.

• As soon as the DDA has been prepared, you should send a scientific image from (or related to) your dissertation to the GPC for use in a flyer announcing the defense.

**Task for international students:**

• It is essential that international students meet with the Visa & Immigration Services office early to begin the application for Optional Practical Training (OPT), if you want to stay in the US. You cannot work (or be paid) in the US after graduation unless you have OPT in place. It can take a couple of months to get this squared away.
Preparing and submitting the dissertation

- **Submitting the dissertation to your committee:** The written document must be distributed to committee members at least two weeks before the defense. Any shorter time period must be approved in advance by your committee chair, but recognize that it takes a long time to carefully read and evaluate such an extensive document. And it will take longer (probably much longer) to write and assemble the dissertation than you think. Don’t schedule an unrealistic defense date and expect your committee to read the dissertation at the last minute. Additionally, the dissertation should be as polished as a manuscript that you submit to a journal. Allow ample time for your mentor to review it and for careful proof-reading.

  Committee members generally appreciate a bound hard copy (with figures in color if relevant). Staples charges only a few dollars to prepare a spiral-bound copy. If you’re not sure if members want a hard copy, you should ask. For members off-campus, offer to mail a hard copy.

  Lastly, make a copy for yourself so that you can refer to it if committee members have specific questions at the private defense.

- **Writing the dissertation:** The Graduate School has strict formatting and submission requirements. Instructions are at [https://grad.stonybrook.edu/academics/thesis_dissertation_guidelines.php](https://grad.stonybrook.edu/academics/thesis_dissertation_guidelines.php); follow them carefully. Additionally, use the ‘Dissertation Template – PHD’ for the face pages. ([https://grad.stonybrook.edu/academics/Forms.php](https://grad.stonybrook.edu/academics/Forms.php) under ‘Forms for Graduating Students’).

  Dissertations have been rejected by the Graduate School for mistakes as small as incorrect numbering of the face pages. (Of course, they do allow you to revise, but it slows down the graduation process.)

  Beyond the face pages and general formatting guidelines, there are no hard and fast rules about how dissertations should be prepared. Some students use multiple published papers or manuscripts in a ‘chapter’ format. If you go this route, be sure that you aren’t unnecessarily repeating information (e.g., in Materials and Methods). Typically, dissertations are expected to include a substantial introduction (a very rough rule-of-thumb is 25 double-spaced pages and at least 100 references). And committees generally like to see a ‘Future Directions’-type section after the Discussion. This section highlights the significance of the dissertation work, points out questions in the field that remain to be answered, and often contains material that would be considered too speculative to include in a journal article.

  However, the ultimate content and organization of the dissertation (excluding the face pages) is up to you, your advisor, and your committee.

- **The day of the defense:** Again, it is up to you, your advisor, and your committee chair, but in general your oral presentation should be about 45 minutes long to allow time for questions from the audience. There is no need to cover all the information that is in the written document. Acknowledgements should be included, but don’t go overboard – short and sweet is generally most appreciated.

  Bring at least a couple of copies of the signature page to the private defense (sometimes signatures get messed up or written in the wrong spot). Note that the template for this signature page is
slightly different than for the list of committee members that you will include in your dissertation. It is called ‘Original Signature Page – PHD’ (https://grad.stonybrook.edu/academics/Forms.php under ‘Forms for Graduating Students’). It is an excellent idea to email this form to your committee members in advance of the meeting so that they can check names, titles, and affiliations for accuracy. It should be signed with a black ball point (not gel) pen.
Defense and Graduation Checklist

_____ Apply for graduation (as soon as possible)

_____ Obtain formal permission to write from your research committee and have confirmation sent to the GPD (as soon as possible)

_____ Consult with VIS about applying for OPT (international students only; as soon as possible)

_____ Send confirmed list of dissertation committee members to the GPD (as soon as possible and no later than 5 weeks before the defense)

_____ Submit Dissertation Defense Announcement to GPD (as soon as time and place are set and no later than 4 weeks before the defense)

_____ Send image for flyer to GPC (as soon as DDA has been submitted)

_____ Distribute written dissertation to committee (no later than two weeks before the defense)

_____ Upload the electronic dissertation to the Graduate School by the deadline

_____ Deliver the hard copy of the signature page to the Graduate School by the deadline