

Doctoral Defense Protocol

A Study of American University Practices

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Background and Rationale

Several years ago, I did a data-based study of the ABD (All But Dissertation) phenomenon in the United States. I became interested, owing to my 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, and 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 20 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. Knowing Oxford University's protocol and procedures as I now do, having been a tutor and on the Board of Studies for the University's international summer school in theology for 16 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-based study of this phenomenon of the doctoral defense in the United States, though there is a plethora of pundits' 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.

About the Survey

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. 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 anyone, be permitted to sit in the gallery or be present as silent observers, or 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, (7) the various levels of pass/fail permitted and employed by the panel, and, tellingly, (8) if the defense may be repeated in case of failure.

Methodology

The method of gathering this information constituted a challenge. Rather than doing a massive data-based study of hundreds of universities, I decided to focus upon only 20 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. I drafted 10 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 there is a normative protocol in the U.S. for doctoral defenses. I intended to identify, if possible, the normative protocol for the U.S. rather than highlight specific institutions for scrutiny.

The following constitutes the commentary on each question.

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

___ Courses completed ___ Languages passed ___ Examinations passed

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, examinations, must be completed before sitting the defense. All 20 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. Also, some institutions require all qualifying exams to be written while others require both written exams and an oral exam before departmental faculty in order that

the student can sit for the thesis defense. In some cases, universities no longer require 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 makes up the panel? How many panelists?

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. The number of panelists ranged from three to 10 with the normative number being four. The composition of the panel was not specified by some institutions other than “departmental members of the faculty”; the normative composition of the panel was 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?

COMMENTARY: The 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 are less normative than might be expected, with some institutions not allowing any non-panelists to be present while others inviting the general public. 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 from 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

COMMENTARY: With only the 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 one and one-half hours to two 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.

5. How is the question/response format handled?

Chair as moderator Round robin/formal Spontaneous/casual

COMMENTARY: The formatting of the defense panel's work and the defense process clearly 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. 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

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). 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

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 which indicated 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. None of the responding institutions indicated that "honors" was a category for pass, leaving the reader to surmise that since all of these 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

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.

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?

COMMENTARY: Of the 20 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 that institutional policy allowed for a “re-submission and defense,” with the average time for re-submission being less than a year, while some institutions indicated a 90-day time-frame.

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

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. However, it might be pointed out here that some major institutions award an “advanced master’s 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, whether they pass or fail.

Concluding Remarks

To sum up in a brief paragraph what we have learned from this modest data-based study is simple enough. Using these top 20 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 has completed all course work, fulfilled what language requirements there are, and has sat, if required, for the written qualifying examinations and, if relevant, sat for the oral examination. Furthermore, there are usually four panelists, including the thesis supervisor and possibly one faculty from outside the relevant department, with the defense process taking

about one and one-half hours, and 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, usually expecting a re-submission with a defense scheduled within 12 months.

This study was, indeed, fascinating, if for no other reason than, to my certain knowledge, there never having been a data-based 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.

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NOTE A: Roster of Institutions Selected for this Study

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

NOTE B: The Survey Questions for this Study

WRITTEN REPONSE 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 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, if there is, what are the component parts of that protocol.

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

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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