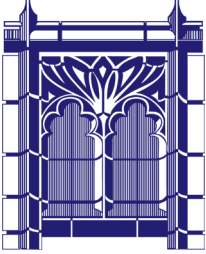


Forming an Interdisciplinary Dissertation Committee



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
mentor memo
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This Mentor Memo, part of a series, responds to graduate students' requests for advice about navigating graduate studies successfully.

The series also addresses topics in career preparation and professional development. For more information and to suggest topics, contact Graduate School Dean Jerry Baldasty at baldasty@u.washington.edu.

Doctoral students in interdisciplinary programs face unique challenges forming dissertation committees. Based on our experience as directors of three such programs (Public Health Genetics, Urban Design and Planning, and Astrobiology), we offer the following suggestions.

Your first challenge

Find the optimal set of members—especially the right chair (or two co-chairs) for your committee. Committee members need to:

- be the best match for your intellectual interests
- have the expertise to help you succeed in designing and completing your dissertation
- be able to help you prepare for your career

In planning for a dissertation, you should consult extensively with faculty members in your program for guidance about:

- potential research questions
- planning/timing
- methodology
- potential committee members

The role of the committee

The final decision about the appropriate content of your project rests with the Dissertation Supervisory Committee. You should work closely with the committee (especially the chair) to determine the project's scope and content. The committee will guide your research and should meet regularly with you. Being sure you and your committee agree on what is meant by "regular" meetings is also a good idea. You may find it useful to meet individually with the members and obtain their feedback at several stages of your dissertation process. The interdisciplinary nature of your work may require that feedback at an advanced stage of your dissertation will be provided by the committee in an integrated form. You may want to discuss with your chair how the committee could produce a collective memo integrating their shared feedback.

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The composition of dissertation committees

The Dissertation Supervisory Committee must have at least four members, including the chair and the Graduate School Representative (GSR). At least three committee members (including the chair and the GSR) must be UW Graduate Faculty members with an endorsement to chair doctoral committees; a majority of your committee members must be Graduate Faculty members, identifiable through the Graduate Faculty Locator: <http://www.grad.washington.edu/gradfac/>.

Committee members should include faculty expertise in your dissertation's core fields. You might consider having five members, especially if your project involves different disciplines requiring advice and guidance in all areas. Four committee members must attend general and final exams—so having five on your committee provides flexibility if one member cannot attend. However, having more than four committee members may make it more difficult for them to find time to work together.

Selecting a Graduate School Representative

You must select the Graduate School Representative (GSR) for your committee by consulting with your chair, other committee members, and/or program directors. The GSR votes and represents the interests of the Graduate School. GSR requirements:

- be a Graduate Faculty member
- have an endorsement to chair doctoral committees
- no conflict of interest with you or your committee chair

Also, the GSR may not have an official faculty appointment within your committee chair's department(s) or the department in which your program is housed. This can be challenging for students in interdisciplinary programs. Exceptions to this rule can be made, with appropriate justification, by petition to the Dean of the Graduate School.

More information about dissertation committee composition, roles, and responsibilities:

<http://www.grad.washington.edu/Acad/gsmemos/gsmemo13.htm>

<http://www.grad.washington.edu/stsv/doccommroles.htm>