

**Occupational Therapy Department
East Carolina University
Graduate Research Thesis Process and Procedures**

Graduate programs are complex entities with student involvement serving multiple purposes. First, and foremost, must be the academic needs of the student. Faculty members must be ever conscientious of their ethical obligations in that regard. However, it is also recognized that student involvement represents a potential benefit to faculty members in advancing research agendas. Likewise, students are expected to be conscientious of the time invested by a faculty member in making student thesis/project work collaboration possible.

By its nature, directing graduate research is a demanding task that requires both faculty members and students to devote time to bringing the work to fruition. Thesis or masters' projects completed by each student is a uniform expectation of the program. Departmental faculty members are expected to participate in this part of student education as part of the faculty teaching load (unless the Department Chair grants a specific exemption).

Clinical Research Scholars

Clinical Research Scholars are highly motivated and gifted students who seek the opportunity to complete a research thesis under the guidance of a faculty member with research experience. As part of the award and responsibly, the Clinical Scholar receives an award of graduate assistantship monies.

Clinical Scholars are selected through an application process that coincides with application to the occupational therapy program but is a separate process. Clinical Scholars are offered the awards simultaneously with admission, although an applicant can decline the Clinical Scholar Award if desired and still be admitted into the program.

Once the Clinical Scholar award process is completed, each scholar is assigned a graduate faculty mentor and topic identified prior to start of the program in the fall. If cases where the Clinical Scholar and/or Faculty Advisor feel a change in assignment is need, the student should follow the *Change in Thesis Advisor Policy*.

As stated, the Clinical Research Scholars is receiving a financial award to complete a thesis. In working towards that goal, the student is responsible to work approximately 10 hours per week as a graduate assistant for the Thesis Advisory while receiving the award. In addition, he or she will be asked to assist with Departmental functions (e.g., Departmental programs, open houses, conferences, graduate recognition ceremonies) as needed. If at any time, the scholar fails to complete these responsibilities adequately, he or she may be at risk for losing the scholarship. In addition, failure to make sufficient progress on the thesis may also result in immediate loss of the financial award and/or result in requirement of the student to refund reward money to the university.

Thesis Process

This summary discusses components and process for students who wish to complete a *Master's Thesis* in the Department of Occupational Therapy. While this outlines the important components and processes, it is critical for the student to review the process and components from the Graduate School Perspective. The Graduate School offers seminars and guidelines that will supersede our guidelines. For example, the Graduate School states specific deadline dates for submission each semester. Accordingly, it is the student's responsibility to know and abide by the guidelines for successful admission.

Expectations: Thesis students are encouraged and expected to submit their work for presentation at state and/or national conferences, at the Graduate Research and Creative Achievement Week, and required to submit to the College of Allied Health Sciences Research Day, which is typically on reading day in the spring semester. If a student submits his/her research work for presentation at the national AOTA conference as a student, he or she may be able to utilize funds from supporting ECU organizations as appropriate (i.e. SOTA, SGA, and/or Pi Theta Epsilon).

Courses: To ensure a student has adequate time to complete a thesis and graduate with his/her occupational therapy class, thesis students take the first research course in the first fall of the program. This course is *OCCT 6600 Concepts and Practice of Research in Occupational Therapy (3 credits)*. The intended outcome of this course is an initial draft of the thesis proposal. The student is encouraged to share the product of this course with their Thesis Director.

In the second semester (spring), thesis students take two research courses. The second occupational therapy research course *OCCT 6650 Conducting Research in Occupational Therapy (3 credits)* is designed for the student to focus on completing the thesis proposal and prepare for the collection of data which may involve learning new assessments, processes, and seeking additional information for the literature review. This course is under the direction of the specific Thesis Director with the ideal goal of defending the thesis at the end of the spring or during the summer semesters. The second course in this spring semester is the biostatistics course *BIOS 7021 Biostatistics for Health Professionals I (3 credit)* needed to prepare the student for data analysis. This course is the additional course a thesis student is required to enroll that is not part of the occupational therapy curriculum.

Starting in the fall of the second year, thesis students are to take thesis credits, specifically: *OCCT 7000 Thesis (3 credit)*. *OCCT 7000 Thesis* is repeated each semester while working on the thesis, as the student must be continually enrolled until the thesis is successfully defended and the thesis is approved by the Graduate School. During the second summer session, *OCCT 7000* is taken for one credit unless the thesis has been approved as complete. Please note, that only a maximum of 6 thesis credits is awarded towards the degree, although the course may be taken up to 4 separate times.

Thesis Director: In order to be eligible to serve as a Thesis Director, the faculty member must be an occupational therapy faculty member with a doctoral degree as well as have the designation as either Associate Graduate Faculty or Graduate Faculty through the Graduate School. There are two processes of Thesis Director selection.

In the process of selecting *Clinical Scholars*, the *Clinical Scholar* is assigned to the Thesis Director prior to the start of the program. During this application process, the Clinical Scholar has an opportunity to identify and justify their choice of Thesis Director based on the faculty members accepting thesis students. However, the ultimate decisions for this process is with the Department.

Incoming first-year students interested in completing a thesis need to contact the instructor of record of the Fall section of *OCCT 6600 Concepts and Practice of Research in Occupational Therapy* to determine if the student has the appropriate prerequisites, motivation, and/or training to complete a thesis. If the instructor agrees this is a potential option, a meeting with the departmental chair will be needed for approval. If approved, the student must identify and meet with possible faculty mentors to discuss their lines of research and possible thesis topics. Once the student identified a thesis topic in conjunction with a faculty member who agrees to serve as his or her thesis chair, the student must develop an agreement to commit to the Thesis Director and thesis student relationship. This faculty member will become both the Thesis Director and advisor for this student until the student graduates. Although the student has the responsibility of selecting the Thesis Director, the faculty member must agree and also has the right to decline being Thesis Director. It will be the responsibility of the faculty member to inform the student if he or she determines that he or she cannot be the student's thesis advisor.

Change of Thesis Director: A change in the thesis director is discouraged, although there may be times when it is necessary such as: 1) the original thesis idea is not possible, 2) the thesis director becomes

unavailable due to unforeseen circumstances, or 3) there is a conflict between student and Thesis Director. The student should work with the Thesis Director to make any changes, if possible. If that is not possible, the student should follow the following process.

1. Discuss their intention with the Graduate Program Director as to understand the process and possible ramifications.
2. If the student intends to move forward after this initial meeting, the student submits a written request to the Graduate Program Director, with a copy to the Department Chair, previous thesis director, and proposed thesis director.
3. The Departmental Chair, previous and proposed thesis chairs have 15 days to respond to the Graduate Program Director in writing about the change. If all agree, the change will be confirmed without further action. If any disagree, the Graduate Program Director will organize a meeting to resolve any issues with faculty members. Only under extenuating circumstances if agreement is not made, assignment will be made by the Departmental Chair.
4. Upon agreement, a new *Master's Pre-Thesis Research Approval Form* is completed, submitted to the Graduate Program Director, and then submitted to the Graduate School. A copy will be made for the Department.

Thesis Committee: The Thesis Committee must consist of at least three members: Thesis Director and one faculty member from the Occupational Therapy Department and one faculty member from the Department or College. A fourth member may be a faculty member from another College or Department in the University, from another University or an expert from the professional community. The Thesis Committee members serve as a team whose duties are to advise the student throughout the thesis-writing process. The Thesis Director guides the student in terms of choices for the Thesis Committee by discussing the committee appointment and roles of the committee with the selected faculty members. This should likely occur during the first spring semester as the student prepares their thesis proposal.

Process: There are multiple steps to the thesis process under three general categories: 1) Proposal development and defense, 2) implementation and analysis, and 3) defense of the thesis. All thesis students are required to attend an Electronic Thesis and Dissertation workshop sponsored by the Graduate School to understand the specific demands of thesis process and particularly submission of the completed document.

Proposal development and defense:

1. The general process to develop the thesis proposal is covered in the course OCCT 6600. However, it is important to understand that after that course is complete, the Thesis Director may have additional or different criteria for the thesis proposal. Thus, as the student progresses to the next course (OCCT 6650), close collaboration with the thesis director is essential.
2. Once the student and the thesis director determine a working title and research question, the student should complete the *Master's Pre-Thesis Research Approval Form* from the Graduate school. The form identifies the working title of the project, the director of the thesis, and the committee members. After the form is signed by the Thesis Director, it is submitted to the Graduate Program Director, then submitted to the Graduate School. A copy will go into the student's file.
3. The Thesis Proposal Defense is the student's presentation of the research idea, methods, and discussion of research outcomes before the Thesis Director, committee, and invited audience members. The outcome is an approval of moving forward with the research study.
4. This should occur in the first-year spring or summer semesters.
5. *Thesis Proposal Defense.*
 - a. Students submits multiple written drafts of the thesis proposal to the Thesis Director for feedback in preparation for the defense.

- b. Only after the Thesis Director informs the student that the proposal is ready for defense, the student sends each member of the Thesis Committee a copy, giving the members at least 10 business days for review of the proposal.
 - c. The student is responsible for arranging a two-hour block of time in which all members of the thesis committee can attend. This includes reserving a location for the thesis proposal defense through the departmental office assistants and informs the members of the time and location. Any conflicts of time should be discussed with the Thesis Director for guidance.
 - d. Typically, the student prepares a brief (e.g., 20 minutes, 20 slides) PowerPoint presentation emphasizing the research question, methods and analysis.
 - e. Thesis Committee members must be prepared to discuss all components and question the student about all aspects of the proposal.
 - f. The Thesis Director or committee members may recommend changes in any component of the study proposal. All changes should be discussed and agreed upon by all members.
 - g. After discussion, the student leaves the room and the final outcome is decided by the committee. The final outcome of the Thesis Proposal Defense is:
 1. Accepted with minor changes to be done and approved by the Thesis Director,
 2. Accepted with significant changes to be approved by select or all members of the committee or
 3. Not approved.
 - h. In accepting the proposal, the Thesis Committee is agreeing the thesis topic is relevant, the method to study the problem is appropriate, ethical considerations have been documented; all needed approvals are likely to be obtained, the study is manageable and can be completed, and the student has access to needed resources.
6. Upon approval of the defense, the student may finish the Institutional Review Board process.

Implementation and Analysis:

1. Implementation of the study can only be started once Institutional Review Board approval is obtained. While the student can begin the process prior to the defense, it cannot be submitted to the Institutional Review Board until after the defense. In some cases, the Institutional Review Board may already be completed as part of a larger or another study.
2. Implementation and analysis should follow the proposal closely with any changes discussed and agreed upon by the Thesis Director. It is not unusual to have to change components of the thesis based on recruitment or other issues. However, it is important for the student to always consult with the Thesis Director or/and committee members as needed.
3. It is typically useful to plan a timeline for implementation of the study including the preparation for the defense. Creating a timeline with appropriate due dates with the Thesis Director and then meeting those due dates ensures the work moves forward without a delay in graduating. It is the student's responsibility to initiate the timeline, keeping to the due dates, and being aware of Graduate School deadlines.

Preparation and Defense of the Thesis:

1. The preparation of the thesis document is a significant process that needs time and planning. If it all possible, students should try to complete this process prior to fieldwork level II, although it will likely mean working on the thesis during semester breaks.
2. Revisions of the thesis chapters are typically significant. Typically, students are to revise individual sections or chapters at least three times with the thesis director before being ready for the formal thesis defense. This includes the literature review, as there is constantly new studies being published and if any component of the research has changed, the literature review needs to be aligned accordingly.

3. There are many formats to thesis; however, in the Occupational Therapy Department, it typically includes: Chapter 1. Introduction, Chapter 2. Literature Review, Chapter 3. Methods, Chapter 4. Results, Chapter 5. Discussion, and Appendices. Again, consult with the Graduate School as some specific forms and letters are necessary for the Final Thesis document (e.g., signature page, Institutional Review Board approval letter, Table of contents).
4. *Formal Thesis Defense.*
 - a. Students submits multiple written drafts of the complete thesis to the Thesis Director for feedback in preparation for the defense.
 - b. Only after the Thesis Director informs the student that the thesis is ready for defense, the student sends each member of the Thesis Committee a copy, giving the members at least 10 business days for review of the final thesis.
 - c. The student is responsible for arranging a two-hour block of time in which all members of the thesis committee can attend. This includes reserving a location for the thesis defense through the departmental office assistants and informs the members of the time and location. Any conflicts of time should be discussed with the Thesis Director for guidance.
 - d. The defense must be advertised in the manner determined by the college/department. This is the student's responsibility.
 - e. Typically, the student prepares a thorough presentation of the Thesis emphasizing the research question, methods, results and discussion and be prepared to answer any aspect of the research.
 - f. Thesis Committee members must be prepared to discuss all components and question the student about all aspects of the thesis. Questions from the Thesis Committee may include, but not limited to: 1) the relationship of the study to literature, 2) justification of approaches and techniques chosen for the study, 3) discussion of issues of reliability, validity, and/or trustworthiness, 4) explanation of data analysis including statistics or qualitative measures, 5) applicability of study finding to occupational therapy practice, 6) discussion of limitations, 7) discussion of the results and implications, and 8) recommendations for further study. Members of the audience may ask questions, but their comments do not warrant being addressed unless confirmed by a committee member.
 - g. After questions and discussion, the Thesis Committee evaluates the thesis and thesis defense in a closed meeting of only thesis committee members. The outcomes include
 - i. Approval of thesis and defense,
 - ii. Approval with minor revisions to be monitored by the thesis director,
 - iii. Approval with major revisions to be monitored by the thesis director and/or one or more of the committee members, or
 - iv. Not approved.
 - v. The committee decides who should review the revisions and if there needs to be a second formal thesis proposal following the same process.
 - h. At the conclusion of the committee's deliberation, the student is informed of the decision privately. It is the Thesis Director's responsibility to ensure the student understands all aspects of the feedback, the recommendation ramifications, and what the student needs to do next.
 - i. Once all corrections are made to the approval of the Thesis Director, the student must obtain signatures of all committee members on the signature page of the thesis and scan it to upload with the thesis submission to the Graduate School prior to the submission deadline.
5. Prior to or after the Thesis Defense, the *Authorship and Data Agreement* is completed and signed by thesis student, Thesis Director, and others as needed. Copies of this agreement will be kept in the student's file.
6. *Submission of thesis to Graduate School*
 - a. This is the final step of the process.

- b. All corrections to the final thesis must be made and approved by the Thesis Director with consultation with the Thesis Committee prior to uploading it for submission for review to the Graduate School.
- c. The thesis should be submitted online by the date identified by the Graduate School during the student's final semester, typically **at least 10 days** prior to the last day of classes of the student's final semester.
- d. The student is required to complete and submit the *ECU Non-Exclusive Distribution Agreement* to the Graduate School with the Thesis student and Thesis Director's signature and online approval.