TO: Department Chairs, Directors of Graduate Studies, and Dissertation Directors  
FROM: Chad Heap, Associate Dean for Graduate Studies  
DATE: September 9, 2020  
RE: Virtual Ph.D. Examinations/Dissertation Defenses

These instructions for Ph.D. examinations (or, dissertation defenses) reflect a continuation of those that were emailed to departments on March 13, 2020.

In accordance with GW’s Fall 2020 Plan to move nearly all instruction online, Ph.D. examinations will continue to be conducted virtually until the university resumes normal on-campus operations.

Until further notice, departments should conduct all Ph.D. examinations using Webex and should ensure that all required participants—including the student, the dissertation committee (director or co-directors and two readers), the two examiners (one from within the academic unit and one from outside), and the chair of the examination—all have access to the necessary hardware, software, and internet connection to conduct the examination online.

The dissertation director should take responsibility for initiating the virtual exam and may want to establish trial connections with each required participant a day or two in advance of the scheduled exam to make sure all participants know how to use Webex. Best practices for a successful meeting can be found on GW’s Information Technology Web & Collaboration page. Participants should also be aware that only one Webex room can be set up and active on an account at one time.

Because CCAS believes it is important to replicate our usual Ph.D. defense procedures as much as possible in a virtual environment—including our practice of allowing other doctoral students, scholarly observers, friends, and family to attend CCAS students’ dissertation defenses—we recommend that the department use Webex Meeting ii to conduct the defense. This set-up will allow the host of the Webex meeting (either the chair of the examination or the dissertation director) to admit participants to the meeting for the public part of the defense and to move the student and observers to the Lobby, while the dissertation director makes the case for the merits of the dissertation and the student’s performance during the examination and the committee members discuss and evaluate the dissertation. At the conclusion of the examination committee’s deliberations, the meeting’s host can re-admit the student and observers from the Lobby to the meeting to inform the student of the decision that the examination committee reached by majority vote. (Please see these instructions on how to Move Attendees to and from the Lobby in Webex Meetings.)

As much as possible, please follow CCAS Ph.D. Defense Procedures when conducting virtual examinations. (The instructions for the student and examination committee to stand or not stand as the results are announced can be disregarded.)

CCAS is grateful for your flexibility in conducting Ph.D. examinations in these unprecedented times. We know these changes create new challenges for faculty members and students, and the CCAS Office of Graduate Studies is ready to assist you in any way that we can.

Please contact Nicole Davidson, Manager of Doctoral Student Services, with any questions you may have about the examination process or how to report the results to our office.

i Departments that require defenses of master’s theses can use this framework as a model for conducting those defenses.

ii As of the writing of this memo, GW is in the process of acquiring Zoom; the Office of Graduate Studies will update these virtual defense procedures with Zoom options once they become available.