Sent on behalf of Stacey F. Bent, Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Postdoctoral Affairs:

Dear Colleagues,

As you know, the rapidly changing COVID-19 situation is affecting many long-established academic policies of the university. The VPGE Office has been contacted about the university policy that requires that the student, principal dissertation advisor, and out-of-department chair be physically present for the university oral dissertation defense (see Gap 4.7 4.7.1 Doctoral Degrees, University Oral Examinations & Committees):

"...With the agreement of the principal dissertation advisor and student, a member of the University oral examination committee may participate by telephone or video conferencing. The principal dissertation advisor, the student, and the out-of-department chair must be present and may not participate virtually. If the conferencing technology fails and the examiner can not fully participate, the committee may fail to reach its quorum. In this case, the examination must be rescheduled."

In light of the rapidly evolving COVID-19 situation, Vice Provost Stacey Bent has temporarily delegated responsibility to approve an exception to this policy to the department or program faculty Director of Graduate Studies (DGS). If the DGS is unavailable or is participating in the defense, the department chair may grant approval.

Exception to the above policy would allow the student, the principal dissertation advisor, and/or the out-of department chair, as well as other committee members, to participate remotely. Thus some defenses may be conducted completely remotely, though not all automatically will be fully remote. Delegating review of exception requests to local faculty leaders allows decisions to be made quickly, taking into account individual needs in response to the changing COVID-19 situation.

This delegation will be in place for dissertation defenses occurring from March 9 - April 15, 2020, with the possibility of further extension as the COVID-19 situation evolves. The chair of the Committee on Graduate Studies, which oversees the university's graduate academic policies and grants the VPGE office the responsibility to approve certain exceptions such as this one, has been informed of this temporary delegation.

It is important to acknowledge that conducting a defense with one or more individuals connecting remotely can add significant stress onto the student. In addition, technology can fail, resulting in the need for the defense to be postponed. These factors should be taken into consideration when scheduling the defense, if not all participants can be present.

With appreciation for all you do for our community.

Helen

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