Revised Graduate Student Proposal Process

A student’s thesis proposal is a critical opportunity for the faculty to guide and shape the dissertation research. The proposal process succeeds when it leads the student to a sound and detailed plan for the dissertation. The faculty should provide the student with constructive criticism on proposed methods and approaches, force the student to question assumptions, and challenge the student’s perspective on the problem. The proposal process described below has been devised with this in mind. It has the following steps:

1. The student, in consultation with his or her advisor, prepares a rough draft of the proposal document. Potential thesis committee members are also encouraged to participate in this process, if practical.

2. The student assembles a working committee of at least two Statistics faculty members other than the advisor and preferably an additional outside member. Working committee members should be given the rough proposal document at least one week before the formal committee meeting.

3. The student meets with the working committee in a formally scheduled, two hour session with the goal of constructively refining the proposed research. The format of this meeting is to be chosen by the working committee, but we recommend the following:

   (a) To get the discussion started, the student presents to the committee a brief executive summary of his or her research plans and objectives. This presentation can be formal or informal, from slides or from a short written summary. However, the student’s presentation should not last longer than 10 minutes.

   (b) The student and committee discuss the proposed research in detail.

   (c) The student and committee formulate specific suggestions for changing the
document and specific action items. They also decide if further meetings are necessary.

The goal here is to guide rather than test the student, so the discussion should be conducted in that spirit. All those present at the meeting should be fully prepared with the substance of the proposed research prior to the meeting. This includes, but is not limited to, reading the draft document.

4. The student, in consultation with the working committee, revises the proposal document. The rules governing the structure of this document will remain unchanged.

5. Once the student and the document are determined to be ready by the working committee, the revised document is distributed to the full faculty for a two-week review period. Faculty comments should be directed to either the advisor or the student, as appropriate.

6. After the student addresses any comments or issues that arise concerning the proposal document, the proposal is approved by the faculty. The Director of Graduate Studies is responsible for certifying and recording that the proposal is approved. (The student’s advisor is still responsible for collecting signatures from the faculty.)

7. Once the proposal is approved, the student and advisor form a final thesis committee, which will typically (though not necessarily) be a strict superset of the working committee. The thesis committee must include a member from outside the department.

8. Later, the student gives a formal presentation describing his or her proposed research. The entire department will be invited.

9. Finally, the faculty will meet and, barring any additional concerns, will officially confer Ph.D. candidate status on the student.
The working committee meeting (step 3) is the key element of the proposal process. This meeting is a formal milestone, to be taken seriously by the student. Both the student and the members of the working committee are expected to be fully prepared. The student should expect thorough questioning, constructive criticism, and other guidance, all geared towards shaping the proposal in *specific detail*. Other graduate students are *not* invited to the working committee meeting. It is possible that sufficient progress will not be made in the first working committee meeting. In this case, the working committee should schedule any additional meetings that are necessary. The proposal document is not distributed to the full faculty until the working committee is satisfied that the document and the student are ready.

Faculty review of the proposal document (steps 5 and 6) begins once the student’s working committee accepts the proposal document as ready. The student should arrange for copies to be distributed to every faculty member. In the ensuing two-week period, each faculty should read the document and make suggestions for changes. Typically, comments should be addressed to the student and advisor, but they can be directed to either individually, as appropriate. If for extraordinary circumstances (e.g., extended travel), a faculty member needs more time to complete the review, he or she should speak to the student’s advisor. Once all faculty suggestions have been accommodated, the student’s advisor then must obtain appropriate faculty signatures, and the student submits a final copy of the document to the Director of Graduate Studies, who certifies the proposal as approved.

The purpose of the presentation (step 8) is to give students practice at planning and giving talks, to let our students see their colleagues in a professional capacity, and to provide an opportunity for department-wide interaction. It is *not* an exam. Student presentations will occur on a dedicated “Proposal Day”, scheduled at the end of each semester and the summer. All faculty and students are expected to attend. Each student whose proposal was approved prior to that day will give a brief (30 minute) presentation of their proposed research, with questioning from the audience afterwards. This is expected
to be a professional-quality talk. At the end of the Proposal Day presentations, the faculty will meet briefly and privately to collect additional feedback and give final approval for officially conferring Ph.D. candidate status on each student.

The members of the working committee are selected by an informal process. However, the following desiderata should apply:

1. Any Statistics Department faculty member (visiting or regular) may be a member of the working committee, but the advisor must be a regular faculty member.

2. All faculty within the Statistics department should be invited to serve on the working committee. To this end, while forming the committee, the student should circulate by email to the entire faculty an abstract describing the proposed research. This constitutes an invitation to serve. To maintain an open process, the committee should be formed before the working committee meeting is scheduled.

3. The student and advisor may also encourage particular individuals to serve on the working committee.

4. The student and advisor may also select a member from outside the department, based on his or her expertise in the topic under investigation.

5. Although the working committee is likely to form the core of the dissertation committee, this is not required. As the research progresses, new members can be added or replaced at the committee’s discretion, and members who feel they are no longer of service may excuse themselves. The student is also free to request changes in the committee, either through the advisor or to the committee as a whole.