

**New Format for Private Ph.D. & M.S. Defenses
Department of Microbiology & Immunology**

A. Background

When our department separated Ph.D. and M.S. defenses into a private defense and a public seminar in 2010, we also stated that the private defense would be "without a seminar-style presentation of results". It was thought that no presentation was necessary at the private defense because (i) the committee will have read the dissertation and (ii) the student would make a presentation at the public seminar. However, in the intervening four years, confusion remained among faculty and students concerning the format of any student presentation to be made at the private defense. The expectation by some faculty that students should make a presentation led to actual and threatened cancellations of multiple private defenses when students followed department policy and did not prepare presentations.

The situation provides a creative educational opportunity. Specifically, the thesis committee is expected to read the thesis before the defense. If the committee is doing their job, then the private defense will be postponed for any student whose thesis is not satisfactory. Thus, the primary purpose of the private defense itself is not to judge the thesis (which has largely been accomplished prior to the defense), but to ascertain whether or not the student has become a mature scientist. A short student presentation based on their thesis research, but not limited to summarizing results, seems appropriate. The content chosen by the students would likely be revealing and provide an interesting starting point for conversation.

New Policy

The department faculty approved the following policy on November 6, 2014. The policy will be in effect for all defenses on or after December 1, 2014.

"Final Ph.D. and M.S. defenses will take place in two stages:

(1) First, a private defense in front of the thesis committee. The student should meet with the committee chair beforehand to discuss and agree upon general expectations for a brief initial presentation of no more than 10 slides. The presentation can include a synopsis of dissertation highlights, but should highlight broader or unresolved aspects of the thesis research and facilitate a forward-thinking conversation. The intent of the presentation is to help the committee assess whether or not the student has become a mature scientist. The committee will engage the student by asking questions arising from the presentation, the dissertation, and if applicable, peer reviews of a manuscript used to satisfy the publication requirement but not yet accepted for publication. If the student passes the defense, then all committee members, including the advisor and chair, will sign the appropriate graduate school document. The thesis committee chair will certify (by initialing the final exam form) that the dissertation has been approved for electronic submission at the time of defense if no edits are requested, or after any required edits are completed and approved.

(2) The student will present a public seminar of their research results no sooner than two weeks after their successful private defense. Thesis committee members are encouraged but not required to attend the public seminar. A final grade for Mcro994 will not be submitted until after the required public seminar."