

## Glossary of Grad School Terms

**Assistantship:** A form of financial aid in which the graduate student is paid for work performance. This work is often related to the student's studies or area of specialization. A research assistantship or "RA" pays a student to assist a professor on an experiment or research project; a teaching assistantship or "TA" pays a student to teach sections or classes of undergraduate courses, or to help grade papers and examinations.

**Committee:** This may refer to one of several types of important committees:

1. **Admissions Committee:** This committee considers applications for graduate school. Decisions are made by a committee of faculty members within an academic department. For example, students applying to an engineering department will be admitted or denied by the admission committee composed of faculty members in engineering rather than by a central admissions director within the university's administration.
2. **Thesis/Dissertation or Examination Committee:** A committee of faculty members usually chosen by the graduate student from his or her department or from closely related departments. This committee helps the student plan the thesis/dissertation or determines the general content of the qualifying examination for the final thesis/dissertation defense.

These committees usually serve both as advisors to the student and as examiners on the material studied or research performed.

**Committee Chair:** The chairperson of the thesis/dissertation is a faculty member in the department the student is studying in. Choice of a chairperson is made by the student according to his/her proposed area of research. The chairperson acts as the academic advisor, as well as assuming primary responsibility for guiding the student throughout the thesis/dissertation research project and completion of the thesis/dissertation. The chair is responsible for the integrity and scholarly intent by insuring the thesis/dissertation is consistent with the standards of research in the discipline.

**Comprehensive Exam:** Exams usually taken in the final year of the graduate program. The type of exam varies on the program and degree earned, but is usually a minimum of 8 hours in length. Exam questions are open ended to allow the student to demonstrate their comprehensive knowledge of the discipline. Usually, exam answers are evaluated by the committee of faculty who wrote the questions. Each question must pass by a majority vote for the student to pass the exam and be allowed to graduate.

**Defense:** This is the final examination on a graduate student's thesis/dissertation, and the final requirement for the Master's or Ph.D. The defense may take one of several forms, such as a lecture on the thesis/dissertation topic, or a formal oral examination. The graduate student explains and defends the accuracy and significance of the research and arguments in his or her thesis.

**Director of Graduate Study:** Also called a Graduate Advisor. The faculty member in a department who is responsible for disseminating information about the graduate program, answering questions from the applicants, and advising graduate students who have not yet selected a thesis/dissertation topic. The Director of Graduate Study usually sits on or chairs the department admissions and is the best source of information for the potential applicant.

**Discipline:** A broad field of study such as psychology, physics, English, or computer science.

**Dissertation:** The independent project conducted by a graduate student after completing coursework and general examinations. The dissertation will vary in form and length depending on the discipline and

nature of the research project; it usually requires one to three years to complete. The dissertation is supposed to show mastery of knowledge and research tools, and should contribute something new to the discipline in which it is written.

**Doctorate:** Another word for the Ph.D. or Doctor of Philosophy degree. Those who earn the Ph.D. are entitled to use the title "Doctor."

**(GAPSFAS):** The Graduate and Professional School Financial Aid Service. The GAPSFAS form is a standardized, detailed financial aid form many graduate schools ask applicants to complete if they apply for financial aid. GAPSFAS is a department of Educational Testing Service.

**(GRE):** The Graduate Record Examination is for graduate school applicants what the SAT is for college applicants. It is a standardized test designed by the Educational Testing Service to measure knowledge and skills; it is scored on a 200-800 scale. The GRE Aptitude Test has three sections: verbal, quantitative, and analytical. There are also GRE Advanced tests in specific disciplines such as French, mathematics, philosophy, engineering, and so on. GRE scores are often an admissions application requirement.

**General Examination:** This is also called the preliminary or qualifying examination. The general exam tests the depth and the breadth of a graduate student's knowledge in his or her discipline. It may be written or oral, is often divided into sections corresponding to the specific fields within the discipline, and is usually taken after the completion of coursework. The student prepares for it independently. After passing "generals" or "qualifiers" the student begins work on the dissertation.

**Master's Degree:** The degree of professional certification in the field, following the Bachelor's. A master's curriculum usually rests on one to three years of course work and may involve a thesis, a limited research project or a comprehensive exam as the final requirement. The master's is not often a prerequisite for admission to a Ph.D. program.

**Outside Fellowship:** A fellowship awarded by a source outside the student's university or graduate department such as a corporation, government program, or foundation.

**Ph.D.:** The Doctor of Philosophy degree, a research degree which usually involves coursework, special and general examinations, a major research project leading to the writing of a dissertation, and defense of the dissertation. The Ph.D. can require anywhere between three to seven years to complete depending on the discipline, institutional policies, and the student's preparedness.

**Postdoctoral "Postdoc" Position:** A position which allows individuals who have completed a Ph.D. to gain additional experience in their chosen field.

**Proposal:** Also called a prospectus. A statement or paper in which the graduate student proposes to his or her department committee a thesis/dissertation topic with details on what the thesis/dissertation will accomplish, and how the research will be conducted. The proposal must be approved before work on the thesis/dissertation begins.

**Reader:** A professional responsible for advising, reading, and approving a graduate student's thesis/dissertation. A student usually has two or three readers (the "first" reader being the main adviser), all of whom have some special interest or expertise in the student's field, and are thus in a good position to help supervise the research and writing of the thesis/dissertation.

**Research Degree:** A degree, like the Ph.D., which prepares the student for a career in research, scholarship, and college or university teaching. The program of study requires substantial independent research and presentation of the results in a dissertation.

**Stipend:** A grant of money to a graduate student for expenses beyond tuition and fees. Graduate

fellowships sometimes pay both tuition and a stipend, which can be applied toward living expenses.

**Thesis:** A research paper presented as a major, and usually the final, requirement of a degree program. The thesis is sometimes used interchangeably with "dissertation," in Ph.D. research. More often it refers to a project more limited in scope completed as a Master's requirement.

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