The Dissertation Defense in Anthropology is a capstone demonstration of a student’s success in meeting the Program’s learning goals. It requires skills and knowledge specified in all the learning goals of the Program, but it is especially appropriate to assess Program Learning Goals 7 and 8:

7) Capacity to design an independent research project that constitutes a significant contribution to knowledge in the relevant field(s)
8) Ability to convey knowledge clearly in oral and written form.

These goals map onto three Institutional Learning Goals: specialized knowledge in the discipline (part of goal 1), oral and written communication skills as well as other skills and experience appropriate to the discipline (goal 2) and a substantial and original contribution to the field of study (goal 4).

Assessment Effort

The dissertation defense is the final step in a three-stage sequence evaluating a student’s dissertation research and results. The first is a defense of the research proposal which is included in the Second Examination. The second step is a required draft meeting in which all the internal members of a student’s dissertation committee convene after reviewing the first completed draft of the dissertation. The actual defense is the third and final step. Since we evaluated the proposal defense in last year’s assessment efforts regarding the Second Exam, we did not review it as part of this assessment, but we did review the Dissertation Draft Meeting along with the actual Defense.

A general faculty meeting was called in Fall 2014 to decide on the mechanisms best suited to assess the dissertation process and its specified learning goals. In advance of the meeting the results of dissertation defenses in the program over the past two years were compiled and shared. From Fall 2012 to Spring 2014, 30 students defended their dissertations. Of those dissertations, exactly half were approved by the examiners with no revisions. The other 15 dissertations were approved contingent on minor revisions to be approved by the supervisor. No dissertation required major revisions and none were failed. In all cases, the decision was unanimous. On this basis it seems the dissertation process in anthropology is functioning well. Moreover, of the dissertations that required minor revisions, the length of time students required to make those changes varied from a few days to four months, with the average being two months. This time frame confirms that the revisions were indeed relatively minor. Of the 30 graduates included in this assessment 10 had secured tenure track or renewable academic appointments in teaching or administration, 2 were on post-doctoral appointments and 2 were employed in jobs outside the academy in which they reported that their dissertation helped secure their job. This number was deemed respectable given the difficult job market in the field, but certainly an area to try and improve. Over the same two-year period 24 students received fellowships to conduct their dissertation research from external sources. Some students do not require or apply for such funds, so this reflects an approximate success rate of 75% for students needing and searching for dissertation research funding. This was considered a high rate and an indication that the program
is doing an adequate job in helping students develop their dissertation topics and prepare for research.

To get to less obvious aspects of the Dissertation Defense, we decided to solicit more subjective impressions from faculty and students who had been through the process over the last two years. Some faculty had not served on enough recent defenses to feel confident in their ability to assess the process generally. So we decided to organize “focus groups” with different sets of faculty, two to four in number, who had been on more than one dissertation defense over the last two years. Three such groups were convened, with the EO attending all meetings. We also decided to conduct individual interviews with recent graduates regarding their experiences writing and defending the dissertation. We completed seven of these interviews. We had intended to do 10, but scheduling difficulties prevented us from completing all of them in this assessment cycle.

Faculty were asked to reflect on the depth of content and quality of recent dissertations. They were also asked to assess graduates’ evident command of research tools and methods. The discussions indicated that faculty were generally satisfied with the quality and content of dissertations. They emphasized the value of the draft meeting in helping the student pull the thesis together and address the shortcomings of the thesis prior to the defense. The major concern raised was the effort of students to move too quickly from draft meeting to defense date, which does not allow time for them to fully implement the guidance and suggestions of committee members. Faculty suggested that we might consider establishing a minimum time period between the draft meeting and defense. No time frame was agreed upon, but 2 months was a popular suggestion. This proposal will be discussed over the coming year with the full faculty and students. It was also suggested that students might benefit in terms of professional development by encouraging broader program and public attendance at the defense. Since this idea was primarily intended to advance professional development it was tabled for consideration in the assessment cycle dealing with that topic. Faculty expressed concern that students sometimes convene a draft meeting before they had completed drafts and that these cases were not of maximum value for the student. It was agreed to remind students that a complete draft is required prior to the draft meeting.

The primary concern raised in the focus group discussions was about students who do not get to the point of a draft meeting. Faculty agreed that the current satisfactory progress reviews and requirements worked to encourage students toward completing the dissertation, but they also wanted to consider other options. From this it was decided that advisors should identify students who are not making expected writing progress and perhaps enlist other committee members into a collective effort on the model of the draft meeting to assist the student and perhaps get them on a path to completion. This proposal will be encouraged.

Turning to the alumni, they were asked about whether the program had prepared them adequately for dissertation research and writing, about their knowledge of the faculty prior to selecting an advisor, their advisor’s availability and assistance, as well as their experience with the other faculty members on their committee. They were asked about the factors that slowed their progress and those that facilitated it. The results were revealing, and mostly positive regarding the dissertation process. Students indicated that the greatest barrier to completion and more rapid progress toward a defense was the need to support themselves financially while writing. The limit of funding to the first 5-6 years made the last crucial years of writing extremely difficult. With continuing tuition increases the need to cover tuition has become an additional and increasingly heavy burden. Students advocated uniformly for an extension of the
tuition coverage for adjunct teachers to at least 14 semesters. Students also suggested that difficulty scheduling the draft meeting and defense (especially working around the sabbatical/research schedules of various committee members) sometimes distorted the writing process by forcing them to schedule a draft meeting or defense before they were comfortable doing so.

Four of the seven students reported having published part of their dissertation in the form of an article or chapter, and two were soliciting interest from editors about publishing their thesis as a book, it was evident that the most recent graduates might not be the appropriate sample for these assessment measures since they have not had sufficient time to expect results on these fronts. We also determined that we needed more data on all of these questions.

**Implementation:**

During Fall 2015 we will solicit opinions from the full faculty and student body regarding the utility and/or disadvantages of a minimum time requirement between the draft meeting and dissertation defense.

We will encourage advisors to call a progress meeting of a student’s full dissertation committee when the advisor is concerned about the student’s lack of progress or direction.

Program descriptions of the dissertation process will be amended to note that complete drafts of the dissertation are required for the draft meeting

We will initiate efforts to solicit more feedback on the dissertation process from graduates at the time of completion. We will request a CV for their file at that time. We will also attempt to construct an online survey to send to graduates from the last 5-7 years that will hopefully provide more data for the next assessment cycle on the questions that arose this time, and also provide a better sense of any developments or trends in the effectiveness of our dissertation processes.