

# Graduate Handbook

**vcuarts** | theatre

Please read this handbook carefully.

You are responsible for knowing everything printed within.

This Graduate Student Handbook is supplemental to the departmental student handbook. Please refer to the departmental student handbook for department contact information, health services, and facilities references. Additional information can also be found in the Guild of Graduate Students pages. (Included here).

# MFA IN PERFORMANCE PEDAGOGY & THEATRICAL DESIGN LEADERSHIP

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# VCUarts THEATRE

## ANTI RACISM STATEMENT

The faculty and staff of the Department of Theatre at VCUarts unequivocally condemn all forms of bigotry, racism, and anti-Blackness.

We recognize that the history of theatre and performance in the United States is inextricably linked with white supremacy, and we undertake to dedicate ourselves and our department to dismantling the racist structures within theatre education that have enabled the perpetuation of bigoted, racist, and anti-Black systems within theatrical institutions.

We are committed as a department to developing an anti-racist curriculum and production season, and we pledge as individuals to engage in concrete anti-racist work on both a personal level and in our work as educators, artists, and scholars in order to promote real and lasting change.

We are determined to support all our students by mindfully creating a culture of both safety and accountability within our department where BIPOC students feel seen and all our students feel valued, and we will devote ourselves and the resources of our department to eliminating bias, discrimination, and racism from our curriculum, our training, our classes, and our productions.

-VCUarts Theatre Faculty & Staff

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# PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

## 1. VCUarts THEATRE MFA Program MISSION STATEMENT

The Performance Pedagogy Master of Fine Arts Program at Virginia Commonwealth University offers concentrations in both Performance Pedagogy, Stage Design/Technical Theatre, and Costume Design/Design Technology. Design areas comprise the professional option while the performance area is addressed through a vibrant performance pedagogy option. Focus areas in performance pedagogy include movement, performance, and voice/speech. All offerings are focused in collaborative practice and presented by nationally known and professional faculty in order resulting in a robust, concise, and nationally recognized Master of Fine Arts degree.

## 2. WHAT IS PEDAGOGY?

Based on "Pedagogy for Beginners,"  
by Dr. Aaron Anderson\*

The "science" of teaching is called pedagogy (from the Greek paidagogikos, a "child's tutor"). However, not all pedagogical theory is useful for the training of adults. (Andragogy is the term that more accurately describes the methods and principles of adult education).

There are a lot of buzzwords and politically charged catch-phrases associated with teaching, but you don't actually have to know any of these terms to be a good educator. Still, knowing a little bit about basic pedagogical structure will make your teaching much more effective. This is a brief overview of that structure. Even though there is an empirical side to pedagogy, teaching is also nevertheless very much an art form.

So think of this information, not only as a brief excerpt but, more importantly as a starting point for your own pedagogical philosophy.\*

As you progress through your program of study and become "more experienced", you will develop your own approaches and your own philosophy. In fact, in order to become an effective educator you must do this. There is no single "correct" approach to teaching, so you must find the approach that suits your individual needs. VCU Performance Pedagogy provides graduate level students with the necessary tools toward creating your own teaching practice and philosophy. Personal experience is always the best teacher, and your real "teaching philosophy" isn't just words—your philosophy is rendered from what you do each and every time you teach. The best teachers constantly question and refine their methods. You should too.

At VCU Performance Pedagogy we provide students with the understanding that "A teacher's primary role is planning and directing experiences that will help students learn on their own."

## 2.1 GRADUATE READING LIST

The VCU Performance Pedagogy Reading List is comprised of plays, historical works, and theoretical works that serve as the core and primary knowledge base for the Performance Pedagogy MFA degree. Each year the list is adjusted in order to provide a concise, yet up to date overview of the changing landscape of theatrical performance and design-based practice. Prior lists are archived and available on the VCU Theatre Department website.

## 2.2 DRAMATURGY

(From "Dramaturgy: Best Practices" by Dr. Keith Byron Kirk)

Dramaturgy is an elective part of the VCU Performance Pedagogy degree plan. Each student is provided with the opportunity to pursue dramaturgy as a part of mainstage, professional, and student generated performances.

### What is a dramaturg?

The role of the dramaturg has been at times difficult to define in the American theater because it is difficult to quantify in terms of an end product. Directors direct productions, actors act, and designers design, so what is expected of the dramaturg? A dramaturg's product, unlike that of other members of a production team, might change from production to production and duties sometimes vary within a single production. But the role of the dramaturg can be defined by his/her/their commitment to artistic process and educational outreach.

In the VCU Theatre Department, dramaturgical duties include the following:

Dramaturgs in the Theatre Department enhance the exchange of ideas between members of the artistic team and support the artistic growth of students. They will offer research to clarify and contextualize the world of the play. They will work to strengthen ties with the university and greater Richmond communities

as the production requires. They will also foster dialogues about the production, which extend beyond the theater. Most importantly, they bolster and maintain collaborative practice through the sharing of information and vibrant acts of discovery.

## 2.3 TEACHING ASSISTANT ASSIGNMENTS / BEST PRACTICES / WORKER'S RIGHT-TO-KNOW

The role of the VCU Department of Theatre Teaching Assistant is that of assisting faculty members or teachers of record by performing teaching or teaching-related duties as needed or presented by the instructor of record. The primary goal of the TA is to provide support to teaching artists and instructors during lessons, meetings, rehearsals, and performances. Your primary goal is to observe and, when instructed, to assist in the sharing of information toward a seamless undergraduate learning experience. Each newly enrolled theatre graduate student must read and sign the 'TA Best Practices and Responsibilities' document (See Dr. Kirk). The signed document is then retained in the student's file.

### Teaching or mentoring one-on-one or with small groups of students.

Teaching Assistants will most often be assigned to support learning in a general way. First and foremost, this occurs in the TA's role as primary in-class support for the instructor or professor of record. As the lead instructor lays out the primary structure of the course located in the course syllabus, the TA is most effective through support and when they quickly become adept at identifying what aspects of the class may require additional support. The role of teaching assistant requires a great deal of flexibility as instructor and teaching assistant work together to ensure that their time and energy is best spent in ways that optimize learning and lead to positive outcomes for students

and instructors alike. At no time should a TA present alternative methodology or point of conflict during the teaching session. The instructor's course of study is structured toward a specific set of outcomes, so TA's must never interrupt, contradict, or present tangential information thus destabilizing the standard of learning established by the instructor of record.

### **Preparing the space or classroom for lessons.**

A key role of teaching assistants lies in the preparation of the classroom or space for group work. This can involve a number of activities such as photocopying handouts, setting up equipment necessary for the day's lesson, or learning specific warm-ups as presented by the instructor of record so that they can assist and, in some cases lead, warm-up related activities. In short, the teaching assistant is responsible for organizing peripheral aspects of the course as needed by the instructor of record. This includes preparation of formatting lesson plans, notations, correspondences, meeting minutes, in-class reflections, and other course related documentation on an as needed basis.

### **Pedagogy**

Because the majority of VCU Department of Theatre graduate students are on a pedagogy related track it is strongly recommended that TA's be given the opportunity to plan and lead at least one (or more) class sessions following the basic parameters set by the instructor of record. In order to do so, a majority of the TA's time and effort in the classroom must be given to observation of those classroom practices presented by the instructor. These observations are important in that they provide the teaching assistant with a set of first hand examples of the tools required to lead a course of study. It is common, though not required, for TA's to grade some or all of the class assignments. Depending upon the experience of the TA, this should begin under the oversight of the professor with specific grading guidelines. In many cases, a professor might share grading responsibilities with a less experienced TA.

An additional document ('Worker's Right-to-Know'—see Dr. Kirk) must also be signed by all incoming graduate students who plan to lead or teach any courses on the VCU campus. This document is generated for the safety and wellbeing of students who may encounter the use of hazardous materials or those who may be required to utilize specific tools or materials during the execution of your daily duties. [See sample document at end of handbook].

## **3. PERSONNEL**

### **3.1 THE DIRECTOR OF GRADUATE STUDY**

The Director (DGS) is a faculty member appointed by the department chair and the Dean of the School of the Arts (SOTA). The Director is the student's de facto advisor during their tenure as a student in the MFA program. Students meet with the Director regularly to discuss courses, goals, and progress.

The Director will also be the students' de facto advisor for the beginning of the second year, as they identify thesis committees. Once the student selects a thesis committee chair, that person will share advisory duties with the Director of Graduate Study as the student's primary advisor. The Director's other responsibilities include chairing the Executive Committee (see Section 3.3); liaising with the department chair and relevant faculty (see Section 3.2); convening the individual cohorts, semester colloquia, and professional development workshops (see Section 7.3); coordinating the review of applicants and recruitment of new students; administering the area's financial aid awards (if applicable); assigning students' teaching responsibilities (see Section 9); and other routine matters.

### **3.2 GRADUATE STUDIES AND THESIS COMMITTEES**

Graduate faculty can be chosen from across the university but are primarily members of the theatre department faculty and staff and are eligible to chair (a.k.a. direct or supervise) a thesis committee. At least two (of three) thesis committee members must be on the Graduate Faculty. Students are encouraged to think about the widest possible range of suitable faculty for course work, advising, and supervision of research, seeking expertise in their topical area(s), practice, methodology, and theoretical approach.

### **3.3 THE GRADUATE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEES**

The Executive Committee consists of three to five Graduate Faculty members, inclusive of the Director, who chairs the committee, and two students plus an alternate (see 3.4). Faculty members of the Executive Committee are chosen and invited by the Director annually. The Executive Committee is responsible for review of students' progress; derivation and implementation of policy; admissions; and other routine matters advisory to the Director. Faculty members are drawn equally from the theatre department and can include faculty from both the Department of Music or Department of Dance, but may also include members from other areas of the university. A range of expertise is ideal. Faculty may serve for multiple years.

### **3.4 GRADUATE STUDENT REPRESENTATIVES TO THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

Executive Committee Policy on Student Representation (Agreed August 2020) specifies that each year two student representatives, chosen by vote or consensus from among the current graduate cohorts, will serve on the VCU/PP/DP (Performance Pedagogy/Design Pedagogy) Executive Committee. In order to represent the broadest range of graduate experience possible, it is recommended that one student be 1st year and one student be 2nd (or 3rd) year. A third (alternate) representative may also be designated. Nominees will identify themselves and elections will be held via hand-count during VCU/PP/DP's annual Fall orientation meeting.

Student representatives to the Executive Committee will be notified in advance of all Executive Committee meetings by the Director. Each representative will be a full participating and voting member on all matters coming before the committee, except in discussions pertaining to admission, evaluation, and funding recommendations of prospective or current students. Student representatives may contribute items for the Executive Committee's agenda. The student representative alternate attends when other students cannot.

The responsibilities of these students are as follows: to establish and maintain all practices pertaining to the activities of the Guild of Graduate Students (GOGS); to consult with all students registered in the program and report to them on the business of the Executive Committee; to canvas and contribute the views of the graduate students to all relevant discussion; to assist the Director in recruiting new students; to promote student involvement in all aspects of the Program's activities; and to serve in other capacities as the need arises.

# PART II: FOR STUDENTS AND APPLICANTS

## 4. PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

Students of the M.F.A. program in Performance Pedagogy must exhibit exceptional skill in theatre practice and a well-developed personal aesthetic. Requirements of the Performance Pedagogy concentration include 18 credit hours in core courses; 12 credit hours in the focus area and six credit hours of thesis/thesis project. The balance of credit hours will be in approved electives, which may include additional practica, research and production, or teaching internships. Students take four to six courses in their areas of concentration and additional directed study courses in performance. Students will take practical courses and assist faculty in teaching. Their teaching effectiveness will be evaluated by area faculty. Students will also have assignments as dramaturgs for both departmental and outside productions. Students are encouraged to take electives in all areas of pedagogy and performance when applicable to their area of interest, in addition to their focus area. Some courses may be repeated with permission of the graduate program director.

### 4.1 THE ADVISING SCHEDULE AND REVIEWS

1st, 2nd year and continuing students must meet with the Director at least twice per semester (or more often, if deemed necessary or desirable) to discuss progress, air any concerns, and plan the course of study. Once students have completed the first year, advising is shared between the Director, chair of the thesis committee (see Section 5.2), and other committee members, as needed. However, students are strongly encouraged to meet at least twice per year with the Director to review progress.

### 4.2 END OF SEMESTER AND YEAR REVIEWS

First-year students must present end-of-semester materials to the DGS no later than the final week of classes. These materials should consist of two fully realized research related papers (from course work) and one practice related project. Either one of the papers or a performance-based project will be presented at the January Winter Colloquium. Also, an end-of-year review of student course materials will be presented for discussion by the Executive Committee on or before 15 May (or the next non-Holiday weekday if the 15th is a weekend or holiday.) This consists of a letter or expository explanation of progress presented by the student to the executive committee and goals for the next year.

This is reviewed in conjunction with the student's transcript and written or oral evaluations from faculty. The Executive Committee will review the plans of study, grades, quality of work, rationale for course choices, and progress toward the thesis. In some cases, a sample essay or other materials from a recent class may be requested. Based on these materials, the Executive Committee can recommend a) continuation in the program, b) conditional continuation in the program, or c) discontinuation from the program. The results of the Executive Committee discussion will be communicated in writing to the student; students will also meet with the Director to discuss these results. Should it become an issue of the student's continuing in the program, a written appeal to the chair, associate chair, and director of graduate studies is necessary to continue.

### 4.3 CORE COURSES

All students must take a select core of graduate level courses across their two years of study. Select courses

of study are provided each semester while certain others are presented biennially and must be taken as available. (See course map). The graduate core is supplemented by a selection of directed study courses across multiple areas of study. (Movement, Voice & Speech, Dramatic Lit., Dramaturgy).

Courses satisfying these requirements emphasize a breadth of historical and performance practice related coverage as well as significant methodological inquiry into historical practice. Each semester students should consult with the Director to ensure that their courses meet the necessary requirements. In addition to departmental classes that fulfill these requirements, courses taught in other departments may be taken the Director's prior approval. In recent years this has included such courses as Medieval and Renaissance drama, history of opera, and Greek theatre, and education to name a few. Other options include arranging with professors of 400-level classes to adjust the syllabus for you so that you can take it as a graduate-level course, or arranging an independent study performance or design-based project with an appropriate faculty member. All modified 400-level courses and independent studies must be approved by the Director. For more information on coursework, see Section 4.4.

#### **4.4 OTHER COURSEWORK**

As mentioned previously, in addition to core courses, students will take additional coursework to help them prepare for the dissertation. (Directed Study, Independent Study, Professionalization) It is to be expected that some courses will be of primary use in honing the skills necessary for advanced graduate study: course management, critical reading, thorough research, and concise and persuasive writing. Further coursework may deepen a student's knowledge of a particular subject, time period, theoretical area, research method, or other component of their research topic. Because of the wide range of topics and multiple disciplinary approaches in which VCU/PP/DP students engage.

#### **4.5 SUMMER EFFORTS**

In the past summers have been utilized by graduate students to pursue various outside projects and have also presented a chance for students to engage in performance opportunities outside the VCU stages. Most importantly, a number of students have pursued certificate studies in various areas of performance practice (Alexander, Meisner, Suzuki, Viewpoints, etc.) or any of the multitude of internships offered across various national and international venues.

## **5. PROGRAM PROGRESS**

### **5.1 YEAR ONE MILESTONES**

In year one, students take 30 course credits (fifteen per semester) that explore professionalization, topical, disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological experience relevant to the anticipated thesis related areas. This may include directed study courses and other Core classes. Satisfactory work in classes must be accompanied by growing clarity about the thesis topic and approach.

- 1.** First-year students are expected to take steps to prepare themselves to teach by way of lessons learned in THEA 619 (Performance Pedagogy) or THEA 610 (Proseminar in Text & Performance); individual TA assignments or by requesting and observing classes taught by various faculty members and reading about pedagogy

- 2.** The first summer is usually devoted to developing bibliographies and reading toward possible thesis topics and methodological fields of study, however field or archival visits are appropriate.

**3.** First-year students can serve as Research Assistants to a faculty member for course credit (THEA 697 (Research & Special Problems), often a member of the Executive Committee, for one or two semesters (by assignment of the Director; these may be any faculty members). This provides experience in some aspect of academic work (e.g. editing, bibliographic research, pedagogical preparation, literature review, data analysis, or writing-up of results) in a close mentorship model with a member of the Graduate Faculty or, in some cases, faculty from another department.

**4.** First-year students are assigned a teaching assistantship with a member of the departmental faculty. The assignment is made by the Director after reviewing the student's hoped for outcomes and a discussion with the student regarding their desire to work with specific faculty on a given project. (See TA Best Practices) TA assignments (1 semester) are geared to give students a wide range of experience – i.e. in different departments, kinds of classes, and pedagogical situations – that prepare them to run small-group discussions and take responsibility for undergraduates' education. Typically, students act as TAs for courses in the Theatre Department.

## 5.2 YEAR TWO MILESTONES

In year two, students also take 30 course credits (15 per semester), including any Core classes not taken in the first year.

**1.** Major activities in year two include mapping the thesis, writing the prospectus (see Section 6), identifying a thesis committee, and preparing for the thesis defense (see Section 7.3).

**2.** Student will create a shortlist of readings from the Master Graduate Reading List, thesis milestones, and research needs for the thesis in consultation with the thesis committee.

**3.** Year two culminates with the thesis defense (see Section 7) and admission to candidacy (see Section 7.5).

**4.** Although not required, students are encouraged to serve as dramaturgs to a VCU Theatre main stage production.

## 5.3 WINTER COLLOQUIUM

A Winter Colloquium during which each first-year student will present either a written research paper (conference length) or a brief performance or practice related project. This event takes place after the return from winter break. In each case, the materials presented will allow faculty to gauge a student's ability to continue in the program while, at the same time, providing students with a much needed opportunity to present their work to fellow students and faculty.

## 5.4 CHOOSING A CHAIR AND COMMITTEE

The thesis chair and committee are chosen in consultation with the DGS. The chair is generally chosen early in the second year, other committee members should be confirmed well in advance of beginning to write the thesis document. If difficulties arise, students may consult with the Director or any member of the Executive Committee for advice. Students should be on the lookout throughout their course work for potential thesis chairs suited to their research/practice needs and personal temperament. A good working relationship of scholarly rigor, interpersonal trust, and mutual respect is critical. It is inappropriate for faculty to "lobby" students to choose them as chairs or committee members. However, friendly, constructive, and supportive feedback on work may be taken as a sign of confidence from faculty members. In some cases,

the student is ready to select a thesis chair late in year one. When the student is ready, he or she must ask the intended professor to be their thesis chair. If the answer is yes, the student must report it to the Director of Graduate Studies.

The master's degree must be completed within six years. If there are unusual circumstances warranting a formal extension, the student may request one from the Graduate Faculty Committee on Advisement and Policies. Degree requirements may be completed in no fewer than three semesters.

## 5.5 CANDIDACY

A graduate student admitted to a program or concentration requiring a final research project, work of art, thesis or dissertation must qualify for continuing master's or doctoral status according to the degree candidacy requirements of the student's graduate program.

Admission to degree candidacy is a formal statement by the graduate student's faculty regarding the student's academic achievements and the student's readiness to proceed to the final research phase of the degree program and to the writing of the MFA thesis.

Graduate students who are eligible for master's candidacy must complete and sign the degree candidacy form, then submit it to their graduate program directors for approval and processing.

Graduate students should complete the form using DocuSign (electronic submission). You will need to identify the name and email addresses of the following university faculty/administrators before you begin. [Initiator/Student/Major Advisor/Graduate Director/School Dean Designee]. Check

with the DGS to confirm this information.  
<https://graduate.vcu.edu/student/candidacy.html>

## 5.6 JOB PLACEMENT AND MOCK INTERVIEWS

VCUarts Theatre/MFA takes pride in the vast number of students who are now working in the artistic educational mainstream. Here at VCUarts Theatre/MFA we feel that one of the most effective ways to prepare for the academic job market is by participating in mock interviews. These departmental interview sessions provide students with the opportunity to practice their interviewing skills and receive feedback from faculty who have experience serving on both university and departmental search committees, receiving tenure, or securing a tenure track job.

Faculty interviewers provide students with constructive commentary and crucial insights regarding interview processes and the students' performance during the interview. Mock interviews are structured as in-person sessions and can, when time permits, include a virtual component via Zoom. They are a total of 50 minutes, including a 30-minute interview and 20 minutes of feedback from the faculty interviewers. Supporting materials include a picture and resume (when applicable), an up to date CV (curriculum vitae), cover letter, teaching philosophy, diversity statement, etc. These materials are generated by the student during the first semester in the THEA 619 Performance Pedagogy course. As the student progresses through the program of study, these materials are fine-tuned toward mock interviews and, ultimately their initial steps into the job market.

Students are provided with online links and resources to various jobs and it is suggested that they apply for those positions that may be right for their areas of interest. Students are also provided with a document, 'Mock Interview Best Practices' (see Dr. Kirk).

# PART III: STUDENTS AND ADVISORS (THESIS PREP)

## 6. WRITING THE THESIS

(PERFORMANCE PROJECT,  
RESEARCH OR DESIGN)

### 6.1 THESIS PROPOSAL

Normally, one's thesis committee advisor/chair reads each chapter as it is completed and gives feedback directly to the student. The proposal is submitted first, to the advisor and then to the committee members as they are selected. When additional expertise is needed, other members of the committee may be consulted, however the chair is the primary contact throughout the writing phase

### 6.2 THESIS TYPES AND CONTENT

**1.** The final outcome of this process is an MFA thesis that you will complete during your final spring semester. You may generate either a research thesis, performance project thesis, or design thesis. Each is based on specific criteria and departmental requirements. (See THESIS TYPE)

**2.** The goal of the fall semester is that you identify a research topic, find a research mentor, formulate a hypothesis, understand the background of your project, develop or adapt appropriate methods, and summarize the state of your project as a thesis proposal. The goal is to progress as far as possible with the elements gleaned from your overall time at VCUarts Theatre. The more you can accomplish during the fall, the further you can drive the project in the

end, and the more relaxed the spring semester is going to be for you (and us).

### 6.3 ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY [5 - 7 pgs.]

In brief, this is a listing of citations to books, articles, and documents each followed by a brief descriptive evaluative paragraph. You will be required to generate ten initial sources annotated toward a discussion of how you intend to utilize the materials found in the book or article.

### 6.4 REVIEW OF LITERATURE ESSAY [25 pgs.]

In brief, a comprehensive summary of the existing pertinent research on your chosen thesis topic or area of study. The goal is a review of scholarly and practice-related materials such as articles, books, and other sources relevant to your thesis document.

### 6.5 ARTISTIC AIMS AND BACKGROUND ESSAY

[10pgs.] & [25 pgs.]

**1.** The Background Essay [25pgs.] maps the student's path toward the chosen thesis topic and might take the form of an analysis of a performance or literary genre; a history of an art form or phenomenon; a philosophical study of an aesthetic concept; or a critical/biographical analysis of the work of an influential artistic figure.

**2.** The Artistic Aims Essay [10 pgs.] Here, the student is required to articulate their goals in mounting their particular artistic project or clarifying and unpacking their research project or topic of that research. For instance, what is the student attempting to accomplish

in writing short stories, a screenplay, a novel, presenting an evening of dances or songs, making a film or mounting an art exhibit? The student should also explain their approach to the artistic work through applying relevant questions. What were the relevant influences on the artistic work? How did your training prior to and during your time at VCU influence your artistic choices? How did the end product or outcome of your research meet your stated goals?

**The combined essays mentioned serve as the building blocks to your final thesis document.** Department expectations suggest a three chapter document with an introduction, conclusion, and standard bibliography. [See Thesis Info]

It is useful to think of the thesis proposal as a memorandum of understanding between the student and the committee about the actual thesis. The thesis proposal is not a contract specifying provisions to be fulfilled. The student will shift and change their mind on many aspects as work proceeds, and the committee members will accept this as natural. At the same time, students must seek their committee's advice and approval if they envision substantial departures from the topic, scope, or method of the original proposal. The committee, at their discretion, may require an amended thesis proposal. Such formal revision of the proposal is especially important if the student intends to reduce the scope of the document, delete authors and topics, or make significant changes in data gathering or the coverage and treatment of secondary literature. It is the student's responsibility to keep the committee informed of what they are doing and to make sure that the finished thesis is a realization of plans that the committee has had a chance to ponder and approve.

Formally, the student's communication with the thesis committee will be through the thesis advisor/chair,

who chairs the committee and has the major responsibility for supervising progress. It is the chair's responsibility to make sure that the parts of the thesis are presented to the committee in a sufficiently coherent and substantial form to permit evaluation and advice. No member of the committee is required to read any part of the thesis until it has been reviewed by the chair but any committee member may request materials prior to the submission of a first draft.

Within this framework, it will be up to the student to develop a relationship with the committee that will work best for the dissertation. Some candidates will work mainly with the chair, and other members of the committee will serve primarily in a review function.

## 7. THESIS DEFENSE/ PERFORMANCE REVIEW

### 7.1 SUBMISSION OF FIRST DRAFT

When the main body of the thesis document is written the student often feels that the process is almost over. Some of the faculty on the committee may have already read some or all the chapters and given feedback. However, there is a major evaluation that can only take place when the thesis advisor has received the entire document, from title page to complete bibliography with all the notes in approved form. At this point the advisor can gauge whether the work fits together as a whole; refers to a full range of pertinent literature; has a relatively consistent style, and develops a consistent argument.

Each faculty member works differently, but as a rule of thumb two weeks are needed from the time an advisor receives a thesis draft until feedback can be expected. Note: It is always best to alert faculty or committee members before submitting a full document to read.

## 7.2 PREPARING FOR THE DEFENSE

Once the advisor has read the whole dissertation, and agrees it is substantially defensible, it can be sent to the other faculty on the committee. (Of course, it may be found lacking, and more work will have to be done by the student before it can be sent to the committee. And other members of the committee may have read parts of it already. Such factors will alter the schedule.) The advisor will contact the other members of the committee to let them know that the dissertation will be delivered to them, give a context (the candidate's plans, observations and criticisms that the advisor has at this stage, etc.), and try to get a sense of the committee members' schedules and availability.

## 7.3 THE ORAL DEFENSE

The oral defense is attended only by the committee and the candidate.

## 7.4 THINGS TO KNOW

**1.** The student should be ready to verbally defend the thesis document, especially the central argument made and the appropriateness of the methodology and expression.

**2.** Faculty may challenge any part of it, and the student is expected to be able to satisfactorily respond. (This is in fact an activity that takes place at various

scholarly gatherings, when giving papers or lectures and dealing with peer audience responses, so it helps to think of the oral exam as a step toward professionalization rather than a hazing ritual of graduate study.)

**3.** The defense functions as a face-to-face meeting about the thesis document, a chance for the candidate to discuss the process of doing the research and writing and what was learned, to evaluate the work, and to discuss future professional work.

**4.** Assuming that faculty have carefully read the complete thesis document before agreeing to schedule the defense, there should be no surprises at the defense.

**5.** The defense may reveal specific questions or problems that require additional research or revisions. In some cases some major rewriting is needed and committee members may not sign off on the thesis document until they review the revised version.

**6.** In most cases some additional refinement (revision) is needed, so it is best if the candidate schedules the defense at least 2 weeks before the final version must be turned in to VCU.

**7.** VCU's campus requires an ETD (Electronic Thesis and Dissertation) form for the submission of the graduate thesis to the SCHOLARS COMPASS system.

**8.** Please check the Spring ETD forms for up to date information on thesis and document submission. All information can be submitted electronically via DocuSign.

**9.** So, in order to meet a May graduation deadline for a Spring graduation, students should have completed a first draft (thesis or design portfolio) by early April (for a Spring graduation); early June (for an August graduation), or by late September (for a December graduation).

<https://graduate.vcu.edu/facstaff/forms.html>

# PART IV: ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

## 8. FUNDING

### 8.1 TEACHER ASSISTANTSHIPS AND MORE

All students admitted to the VCU/MFA receive some funding from either the Graduate School, School of the Arts, Theatre Department, or through scholarships provided by outside organizations such as Virginia Repertory Theater. Each student must submit an up to date federal FAFSA form to be considered for any funding. All funding is provided with an eye toward financial need and availability. Please note: Graduate Teaching Assistant assignments are not a guarantee of GTA awards.

## 9. CONFERENCE FUNDING & TRAVEL

### 9.1 CONFERENCES

To the fullest extent possible, the School of the Arts' budget will be directed to support students' travel to conferences. Students giving papers may apply for assistance with costs; additional funds are available for those only attending but not presenting on a first come first serve basis from SOTA. Interested students should apply during the early Fall or Spring semesters for those available funds. The DGS should be informed of all conference funding requests.

**All administrative practices stipulated in this Handbook or elsewhere are subject to the policies and procedures of the VCU Department of Theatre, VCU School of the Arts, and University.**

**Contact Dr. Aaron Anderson with any questions.**

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[Read faculty and staff bios here](#)

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Bonnie McCoy, Chair, Department of Theatre

Member of NAST (National Association of Schools of Theatre)

Please direct all Graduate Student Handbook changes or suggestions to  
Dr. Aaron Anderson | [adanderson@vcu.edu](mailto:adanderson@vcu.edu)



# VCU