Making the most of the virtual dissertation defense

Graduate students dream of their dissertation defense, the culminating moment when they present years of research in front of their doctoral committee members, peers, family and friends. The event usually ends in celebratory handshakes, hugs and the official completion of a Ph.D.

But now, amid a pandemic and physical distancing, students are having to reimagine this academic milestone.

In late March, two weeks before she was scheduled to defend her dissertation, Ana Florea was informed she could no longer hold a public defense.

"My defense went from public to invitation-only, to less than 30 people, and then down to committee members only," said Florea, who earned a doctorate in epidemiology from the Mel and Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health.

In the end, she presented from campus with only her committee chair — public health professor Elizabeth Jacobs — in physical attendance, while the rest of her committee and supporters joined via video chat.

The college "stepped up" and was well prepared, Jacobs said, noting in particular the efforts of graduate student adviser Michael Tearne and the IT support team.

Florea was impressed with the smooth transition.

"It was weird not being able to see everyone, but it worked in my favor because I don't like talking in front of people. I talked to the screen while my committee chair was off to the side taking photos of me. We made sure to keep our distance," Florea said.

Brittany Uhlorn, who also recently defended her dissertation, receiving a doctorate in cancer biology, got in touch with her family three weeks before she was scheduled to defend, telling them to cancel their flights.

"I was very sad it had to be done virtually," Uhlorn said. "The defense was important to me. That is the moment where you become a doctor. It's a celebratory thing. For at least six months, I have been envisioning my defense day, and I even dreamt about it? seeing my family and hugging them."

Uhlorn said that the change in format calmed her nerves and "turned out to be a blessing."
When she presented from a small conference room on the Health Sciences campus, the only person in the room was her husband. But she knew others were witnessing her achievement over video chat.

Uhlorn estimates that more than 80 people logged in to watch, some from the East Coast and Alaska. Florea had nearly 70 tuning in for her presentation.

"It did help friends from out of state 'attend,'" Florea said. "In that regard, it was nice because it allowed more access."

Florea, Uhlorn and Jacobs offered tips for doctoral candidates who are preparing for virtual defenses.

**Florea's Tips**

- Test your technology ahead of time, especially if you are defending on campus and are not familiar with the equipment.
- Run through the presentation with other people to assess how your presentation looks on the screen.
- Remember to record your presentation.

**Uhlorn's Tips**

- Dress like you would for an actual defense.
- Create a space that makes you feel supported and comfortable. (Uhlorn included objects behind her computer such as flowers from a friend and a sticker that says "Girls are Brilliant.")
- Take the time to look at everyone in virtual attendance so you know who is supporting you from afar.

**Jacobs' Tips**

- The Zoom platform does make slides more important than in a normal defense, so check for typos.
- Since people can't see the presenter's body gestures as clearly when viewing remotely, pay more attention to verbal expression.
- Make sure committee members are proficient in Zoom so that the doctoral student and committee members can move to a private room for a discussion immediately following the presentation.

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