34) The Student Advisory Committee

Composition of the Advisory Committee. The Student Advisory Committee consists of several (typically 2-4) faculty members, in addition to the faculty mentor. The Committee members usually are faculty of the Graduate Division, but in some cases may be from other Departments or even outside Institutions. It is not essential that all members be expert in the field, but it helps to find at least one, and each member should be capable of providing cogent, timely, and relevant feedback. Students should choose members whom they can trust to provide honest advice and critiques. Ideally, the Advisory committee will consist of “smart” scientists who suggest if an Aim does not sound feasible or if an approach seems too risky or unlikely to yield significant results. Students are strongly encouraged to get to know the Advisory Committee Members. They can provide useful letters of recommendation but only if they are truly familiar with the student and the work. The Committee plays an important role in guiding the student through the academic program and must meet with the student at least once each year, starting in the 2nd year, and as frequently as needed by the student to obtain direction. A subset of the Advisory Committee typically comprises at least a part of the Thesis Defense Committee.

The composition of the Student Advisory Committee is meant to be dynamic and may go through several changes during the time a student progresses to the Dissertation. All first year students are advised by the Director and Associate Director. Anytime during the second year, once a student declares a Thesis Laboratory, the Advisory Committee is formed in consultation with the mentor, and in accordance with appropriate Department policies. Departments may organize the formation and timing of Student Advisory Committee Meetings, according to specific Department policy. The Advisory Committee will recommend courses, review academic progress, advise on the research plan and monitor progress of the Thesis Research. The student in consultation with the mentor may change the composition of the advisory committee at any time. The Graduate Office should be informed of the change.

Purpose of the Advisory Committee. The purpose of the Advisory Committee is to make recommendations for course work, to provide critical feedback on the research plan, to assess experimental progress, and to advise the student when to write/defend the Thesis Dissertation. While it is expected that every student will take the Qualifying Exam in the spring of the 2nd year, the Advisory Committee may make a recommendation on whether the student should take the Qualifying Exam at that time. The Advisory Committee is charged to aid the student in moving efficiently towards the PhD degree, while at the same time maximizing the significance and impact of the Thesis Research. Although each Department may set additional meeting requirements or schedules, the Graduate Division requires at least one completed meeting form submitted each academic year prior to registration in the Fall. Students who have not had an advisory committee meeting in the previous academic year will be blocked from on-line registration in the succeeding Fall. Release of this block and continuation in the PhD program requires approval of the Assistant Dean.
35) A Typical Advisory Committee Meeting: What to Expect

Advice to the student. The student is expected to run the Advisory Committee meeting and should therefore be well prepared with an agenda and efficient in the presentation and discussion. The student is expected to take an active (NOT passive) role in the meeting. Decide what you need to get out of the meeting and direct the discussion in this direction. Be prepared to ask for specific points of advice.

There are two general rules to consider regarding preparation for an Advisory Committee Meeting:

1) The hardest part of the Meeting is getting it scheduled. Start early and present the faculty Members with several options (date and time) to find a compatible fit with everyone’s schedule. Remember to include your mentor in this deliberation. Once a feasible time is arranged, be certain to confirm this immediately with all members. Schedules fill quickly and if you delay to confirm someone will inevitably fill in a conflict. Remember that you will need to book a suitable conference room and A/V equipment as necessary.

2) The Meeting always takes longer than anticipated. Plan for a 30-40 minute meeting, expecting it may take an hour. If you expect a very long meeting (over an hour), be sure that the faculty members are informed initially of the time commitment. It is usually to your advantage to schedule one short meeting every 6 months, rather than one long meeting each year, but this will obviously depend on your needs.

There are two common misconceptions on the part of students (and sometimes faculty) with respect to Advisory Committee meetings. Note:

1) The Meeting is NOT an examination or qualification of the student’s achievements. The student is seeking advice and input, not a grade or benchmark approval. Therefore, you should not wait for “good data” before scheduling a meeting. While it is true that your Committee will comment on your progress, your goal is not to gain a high mark in this regard, but rather to confirm (or not) the significance of your goals, achieve focus on your approaches, develop consensus on your Aims, and obtain new perspectives, for example on caveats that you might not have fully considered.

2) The Meeting is NOT meant to confirm success or good progress. When progress in the laboratory is good, the need for a meeting is least important. The best time to schedule a meeting is NOT when results have been achieved, but rather when you may be struggling or you may have reached an intermediate turning point that requires discussion and outside expert opinion.

Typical Advisory Committee meeting. A typical meeting starts with a brief discussion of the student’s progress and any over-riding problems. While this often occurs in confidence (your time enjoyed in the hallway), it need not be and is rarely more than a summary of progression through the program. If there are more serious problems, it is recommended that these be addressed together with all members of the Committee, the student, and the faculty mentor present. Remember that the Student Runs The Meeting, and so should feel free to organize this preliminary discussion, depending on Department policy. It may also be appropriate in rare occasions to ask the faculty mentor
to leave the room for a brief discussion, in case there are conflicts or problems about which the student wishes to inform the Committee in confidence.

Following this brief overview, the student typically makes an approximately 20 minute presentation of the Background, Significance, and Specific Aims. Powerpoint presentations are expected. In subsequent meetings it should be less necessary to provide background, unless the topic has shifted significantly or new members need to be informed. The presentation is not a “journal club” and you should anticipate that most faculty will not need to be presented with very basic background material. Attempt to move as efficiently as possible to your Aims.

The rest of the meeting should be spent discussing your specific plans for each Aim, indicating your proposed approach(es), possible caveats, and alternative approaches that you might need to consider. The main focus should be on defining priorities. At the end of each Aim, ask for advice if needed. Your goal is not to educate your Committee or to get them to understand your point of view, but rather to expose potential flaws in your logic, feasibility, experimental approaches, or time-frame. The end of your presentation should present a clearly defined time-frame for completion of your Aims. This will be extremely premature at your first meeting, but it is good practice and provides a starting point as you progress through your Thesis Research.

Typical questions that you might hope to resolve based on your Advisory Committee include:

1) Is this Aim feasible based on my preliminary data, or is it too risky?
2) Is there an alternative approach I can use that I have not considered?
3) What is needed before this study could be submitted for publication?
4) What is the minimal preliminary data I should obtain before deciding whether to continue or abandon an Aim?
5) Is the effort needed for this approach justified by the significance?
6) Is this a good time to continue on this risky path or should I refocus my efforts?
7) Am I ready to start writing my Dissertation?

You should not pose such questions directly (particularly the last one!), but rather make specific proposals to your Committee and then be prepared to receive feedback and adjust your research plan accordingly. In any case, be aware that your Committee provides ADVICE, and does not direct your research. Your PhD is meant to be an independent journey, the direction of which only you can determine (with special help particularly from your thesis mentor). Advice can be good or bad, which is why it is important to choose members whom you can trust to discuss openly the pros and cons of any given approach.

At the end of the meeting you should have a better idea of how to proceed than when you came into the meeting. If you only experienced head-shakes, than you failed in your obligation to run a successful meeting. During later meetings it is important to firmly establish likely time-lines, for example towards publication of manuscripts or writing the Dissertation. Remember that there is no defined stopping point of a PhD. The research topic you are working on will not be finished upon completion of your PhD. Only you can determine when your Thesis Research is finished, but it is your duty to convince your Advisory Committee that you are correct.
Report of the Thesis Advisory Committee. Reports of all Advisory Committee meetings must be delivered to the Department Office and the Graduate Office immediately following the Committee meeting. The student and the mentor should retain copies of the reports. The Academic Affairs Committee may review the Advisory Committee reports every academic year. If the student is currently supported by a training grant, an additional copy of the report must go to the Training Grant director. The Thesis Advisory Committee Meeting report form is available on the Registrar’s homepage: http://www.aecom.yu.edu/phd/current_students.htm