ADVISORY COMMITTEE GUIDELINES

The Student Advisory Committee

Purpose of the Advisory Committee
The purpose of the Advisory Committee is to provide critical feedback on the research plan, to assess experimental progress, and to advise the student when to write/defend the Thesis Dissertation. (A student who wishes to write and defend their thesis must be in “active student” status.) The Advisory Committee is charged with aiding the student in moving efficiently towards the PhD degree, while at the same time maximizing the significance and impact of the thesis research. Some Advisory Committees may request periodic one to two page progress reports from the student prior to or after the Advisory Committee meeting or may even request several meeting per year.

Frequency of meetings with Advisory Committee
- Starting in the second year and every year thereafter, it is required that each student meet at least once every twelve (12) months with the Advisory Committee.
- Students who have completed four or more years in the program must meet with the Advisory Committee every six months.
- Students may be requested by the Advisory Committee and/or the Academic Affairs Committee to meet with their Advisory Committee more frequently.

Immediately after each Advisory Committee meeting, students must submit to the Graduate Division office the Advisory Committee Summary Report Form.

Students who do not meet their Advisory Committee meeting requirement(s) will be blocked from online registration in the succeeding semester. Release of this registrar’s hold and continuation in the PhD program requires approval of the Associate Dean for Graduate Programs.

Composition of the Advisory Committee
The Student Advisory Committee consists of several (typically two to four) faculty members, in addition to the student’s faculty mentor (and/or co-mentor). The Committee members usually are faculty of the Graduate Division, but in some cases may be from other Departments (including clinical departments) or even outside institutions. At least one member of the Advisory Committee must be a senior faculty member (Associate Professor or Professor), who has successfully mentored one or more graduate students to successful completion of the Thesis.

Students should choose members whom they can trust to provide honest advice and critiques. Ideally, the Advisory Committee should consist of scientists who are able to comment on the student’s Aims and can
suggest if an Aim does not sound feasible or if an approach seems too risky or unlikely to yield significant results. Each member should be capable of providing cogent, timely, and relevant feedback about the student’s project. It is not essential that all members be expert in the field, but it helps to find at least one.

The mentor and student may ask one member of the Advisory Committee to serve as the Chair. This faculty member does not have to be in the same department as the student and mentor. Typically, the mentor is not the Chair.

Students are strongly encouraged to get to know the Advisory Committee members. If the members are truly familiar with the student and their work, the members can provide useful letters of recommendation. The Committee plays an important role in guiding the student through the academic program and must meet with the student at least once each academic year, starting in the second year, and as frequently as needed by the student to obtain direction.

The student in consultation with the mentor may change the composition of the Advisory Committee at any time. The composition of the Advisory Committee is meant to be dynamic and may go through several changes during the time a student progresses to the Dissertation.

A Typical Advisory Committee Meeting

In preparation for the Meeting:

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 thirty to forty-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 six months, rather than one long meeting each year, but this will obviously depend on your needs.

There are three 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, the student should not wait for “good data” before scheduling a meeting. While it is true that the Advisory
Committee will comment on the student’s progress, the student’s goal is not to gain a high mark in this regard, but rather to confirm (or not) the significance of the goals, achieve focus on the approaches, develop consensus on the Aims, and obtain new perspectives, for example, on caveats that might not have been 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.

3) **All members of the Advisory Committee need not be present for the meeting to take place.**
Occasionally, it may be difficult to schedule a time when every one of the Advisory Committee members can attend. The student should still go ahead with the meeting if a majority of the members are present, (e.g. three out of four, etc.).

**What to Expect:***

The student is expected to lead the Advisory Committee Meeting and should, therefore, be well prepared with an agenda and be efficient in the presentation and discussion. The student is expected to take an active (NOT passive) role in the meeting. **Advice to the student:** 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.

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 Advisory Committee 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 where 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 twenty-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 it should be anticipated that most faculty will not need to be presented with very basic background material. Attempt to move as efficiently as possible to the Aims.

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

Typical questions that a student may hope to resolve based on the Advisory Committee include:
- Is this Aim feasible based on my preliminary data, or is it too risky?
- Is there an alternative approach I can use that I have not considered?
- What is needed before this study could be submitted for publication?
- What is the minimal preliminary data I should obtain before deciding whether to continue or abandon an Aim?
- Is the effort needed for this approach justified by the significance?
- Is this a good time to continue on this risky path or should I refocus my efforts?
- Am I ready to start writing my Dissertation?

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

At the end of the meeting the student should have a better idea of how to proceed than when he/she came into the meeting. If the student only experienced head-shakes, then there was failure on the part of the student in the obligation to run a successful meeting.

During later meetings it is important to firmly establish likely timelines, for example, towards publication of manuscripts or writing the Dissertation. Remember that there is no defined stopping point of a PhD. The research topic that is being worked on will not be finished upon completion of the PhD. Only the student can determine when his/her thesis research is finished, but it is the student’s duty to convince the Advisory Committee that he/she is correct.

Immediately after each meeting, the original Student Advisory Committee Summary Report Form must be delivered to the Graduate Division office and a copy to the student’s Departmental office. The Academic Affairs Committee may review the Advisory Committee reports every academic year. The Advisory Committee Summary Report Form is available on the Graduate Division website at www.einstein.yu.edu/phd, under Graduate Division Forms.