

Guidance in the Student / Advisor Relationship

Formation of the Student Advisory Committee

The appointment of the Student Advisory Committee is to take place within three months of the identification of the permanent advisor. For most students, the Committee is to be in place at the beginning of the Fall term of the second year of study. The identification of individuals asked to serve on the Committee is the responsibility of the permanent advisor and not the student. Advisor and student should communicate so that a shared understanding of the basis for the composition of the Committee is understood and appreciated.

Advisory Committee Meetings

The initial meeting of the Advisory Committee should take place shortly after the approved appointment of Committee members. The objectives of this meeting are to familiarize the Committee members with the student and the project on which the student will initiate work, the framework of coursework intended for the student and the intended schedule for the candidacy examinations.

Regular meetings of the Advisory Committee with the student are recommended as a means of monitoring the extent to which timely progress toward degree completion is being achieved. At a minimum the Student Advisory Committee must meet annually; semi-annual meetings are the preferred frequency. Since doctoral students should have their Oral Candidacy examination scheduled no later than the Summer preceding their third year, a Committee meeting should be scheduled during the Spring term of the second year of study at the latest in advance of the examination..

Committee meetings should follow a format that facilitates the presentation by the student explaining the nature of the project undertaken, the strategic framework of the project and its objectives, progress made in meeting the objectives and the identification of the next phase of experimental work to be undertaken.

Committee meetings should conclude with a discussion held (in the absence of the student) regarding the progress being made toward degree completion and the professional maturation of the student. The Advisor should share with the Committee members her/his assessment of the student's performance in the period since the last Committee meeting.

The Advisor has the obligation of creating a written report of the Committee meeting. The report is to be reviewed by the Committee for accuracy and in its final form shared with the student and the Program Director, becoming a component of the student's academic file.

Timely Progress to Degree Completion

The Advisor plays the critical role in the development of the student as a mature, independent scholar. Reflective assessment of the progress made by the student toward this overall objective on a semi-annual basis is recommended as the means of effectively identifying the existence of impediments to such progress. The Programs housed in the School of Medicine have adopted five broad learning objectives for research-based doctoral programs: oral communication, written communication, experimental design, problem solving skills and integrated knowledge of bioscience (a detailed definition of these objectives and scoring rubrics to define the level of achievement are available at http://www.medschool.vcu.edu/graduate/pgmdir_res/index.html). Reports documenting student progress, including the summary of Committee meetings should include information on development in these areas.

On occasion, the anticipated progress toward degree completion will not take place as planned. The Advisor, with the assistance of the Student Advisory Committee, has the difficult responsibility of articulating the lack of progress to the student including the identification of factors which may be impeding the performance. The Advisor is responsible for noting such impediments, documenting their presence, communicating such problems to the Program Director and Department Chair and, most critically, informing the trainee of the existence of the impediments and providing a means by which the trainee can act to remedy performance or behavior that is problematic. It is also appropriate to inform the trainee of the consequences of failing to take the remedial action indicated.

It is imperative that a written record of performance assessment, particularly in cases where deficiencies are noted, be created and placed in the academic file of the student. There should be an indication that the trainee has received and reviewed the information (this is commonly effected by the return of a signed copy of the document by the trainee, indicating that the document has been read and understood).

Poor academic performance may occur as a consequence of personal or behavioral problems for the individual. While the Advisor is not expected to resolve such problems, there is an obligation to counsel the trainee in seeking appropriate assistance. The University offers a spectrum of support services to assist in addressing problem areas.

Advisors are strongly urged to consult with the Program Director and / or Department Chair immediately on identification of a problem area.

Research Performance Grading

All programs have a “Directed Research” course in which trainees enroll each semester. These courses follow an “S/U/F” (Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory/Fail) grading scheme. Once a student has been made aware that adequate progress is not being made, continued failure to remedy performance warrants awarding a grade of Unsatisfactory. Awarding a grade of Unsatisfactory when appropriate unequivocally communicates the existence of a

serious problem to the student, provides a performance record consistent with the trainee's performance and is in itself grounds for dismissal from the program. Awarding a grade of "Satisfactory" when performance is not satisfactory misleads the student and may prolong the period in which adequate progress is not achieved.

A grade of "U" does not contribute to the calculation of the student Grade Point Average (GPA). However, a grade of "F" does result in the incorporation of the number of credit hours for which the student is enrolled into the calculation of the GPA. A grade of "F" is appropriate only in the context of a documented history of inadequate performance and failed remediation by the trainee.

Position of the Advisor

In agreeing to serve of the permanent Advisor or mentor of a student, the faculty member is accepting a primary responsibility in the training of the student, providing guidance and direction so that timely progress to the completion of the degree can be achieved. The Advisor has the responsibility of providing the trainee with, at a minimum, semi-annual written reports of the status of the trainee with respect to progress made to degree completion. As noted above, if problem areas are observed, their existence must be communicated to the student, clearly identifying the concerns along with the actions by the trainee which would remedy the problem and the consequences of a failure to remediate. There must be a record that documents the notice to the trainee. Addressing problems when they arise by written communication, documentation and making the Program Director aware of the problem is vital. When a performance deficiency is noted, the Advisor should immediately communicate with the Program Director and seek counsel before taking action.

The Advisor does NOT have the authority to abrogate his/her role as advisor by precipitously acting to withdraw financial support, "resign" as advisor or "dismiss" the student from her/his laboratory.

Addressing the Lack of Progress

In the general case, a step-wise process as, described below, would be the appropriate course of action to follow in dealing with a trainee whose performance is below expectations.

1. Problem is identified by the Advisor.
 - a. Program Director should be notified and consulted
 - b. Trainee is given written notice of the academic deficiency and provided with a remedial course of action. (For example, individual is not productive and is observed to be absent from the workplace during normal working hours; attendance on a regular schedule is required for a defined period.)
Consequences of failure to address the perceived problem are identified. (For example, failure to address the problem will result in a grade of "U").
2. Trainee fails to demonstrate progress toward remediation

With concurrence of Student Advisory Committee, a grade of “U” in Directed Research is awarded. Prospect of dismissal is communicated in writing and the trainee is placed on formal academic probation

3. Trainee continues unsatisfactory performance after written notice
Advisor and Student Advisory Committee recommend termination of student to the Program Director in writing. Approved recommendation is forwarded to the School of Medicine Office of Graduate Education for approval and transmission to the Graduate School for final approval.