Guidance for Programs and Faculty – School of Medicine Advanced Degree Programs (July 2011)

Periodically the School of Medicine provides statements which reinforce the policies as applied to graduate training to add clarity to these policies, provide guidance with respect to the implementation of policy and remind all parties of their rights and responsibilities. The following is a concise summary of two documents circulated previously. The original form of the documents on which the summary is based are entitled “Operating Principles for Graduate Programs in the VCU School of Medicine” and “Guidance in the Student/Advisor Relationship”; these documents were broadly circulated and have been posted on the School of Medicine web site.

The documentation of the development of the trainee is a key responsibility of the mentor / faculty member. The School and programs provide an assessment framework, define student responsibilities and have communicated the importance of documentation in managing trainee performance.

Mentoring and Managing Graduate Student Trainees

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](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 upon 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 taking place, 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, providing 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.

Position of the Advisor

In agreeing to serve as 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.

Financial Support of PhD. Students -
The financial support of Ph.D. students is a partnership between the School and investigators and their departments.
   a. Institutional support is typically provided for students preceding entry into a phase of training in which research, rather than didactic activities, is the primary activity of the student.
   b. On joining a laboratory, the investigator and his/her department (the department in which the investigator holds her/his primary appointment) assume the responsibility of providing appropriate financial support for Ph.D. students.
   c. Programs and departments should cooperate in the identification of prospective mentors understanding that their ability provide adequate financial support through the completion of the degree is essential. Changes in the mentor for financial reasons is not effective in sustaining strong programs as such action will lengthen the training period with no benefit.