

# THE STUDENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE GUIDELINES

## The Student Advisory Committee (SAC)

### Purpose of the Student Advisory Committee

The purpose of the Student Advisory Committee (SAC) is to provide critical feedback on the research plan, to assess experimental progress, and to advise the student when to write/defend the Thesis. The SAC 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.

The progress of modern science is measured by the quality and quantity of peer-reviewed scientific publications. These publications are frequently used to distinguish between the holders of “minimal” and “competitive” PhD degrees in the postgraduate job market. Because of this, the SAC meeting should focus on the factors that are limiting the student’s progress toward publishing high quality peer-reviewed scientific results.

### Composition of the SAC

The Student Advisory Committee (SAC) is chosen by the student and the mentor and consists of:

- Several faculty members—typically two to four—in addition to the mentor (and/or co-mentor). The committee members may be from any department and, if relevant, may include one member from an outside institution.
- At least one member of the SAC 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.
- One member must be designated as the chair of the SAC, who will serve in this capacity throughout the student’s graduate training. *The mentor or co-mentor must not be the chair of their own student’s SAC.*
- A Postdoctoral Fellow or Instructor may not serve on the Advisory Committee of a graduate student.
- An Associate serving on a Student Advisory Committee must not be from the same lab as the student on whose SAC they serve.

The student should choose members whom he or she can trust to provide honest advice and critiques. Ideally, the SAC should consist of scientists who are able to comment on the student’s goals and can suggest if a goal 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 student, in consultation with the mentor, may change the composition of the SAC at any time. However, barring an unusual circumstance, the chair is to remain the same. The composition of the SAC is meant to be dynamic and may go through several changes during the time a student progresses to the Dissertation.

Each student is strongly encouraged to get to know their SAC members. If the members are truly familiar with the student and their work, they may also be able to provide useful letters of recommendation.

## The Student Advisory Committee Meeting

### Frequency of SAC Meetings

The student is required to meet with their SAC at least once during their second and third years and at least twice (every six months) during the fourth year and thereafter. The student, the mentor, the SAC or the Academic Affairs Committee may require the student to meet with the SAC at more frequent intervals. The span of time between SAC meetings is referred to below as a “project period.”

The student should schedule a SAC meeting when it is due and should not postpone a meeting on the basis of anticipated scientific results. Students who do not meet their SAC 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.

### Scheduling an Advisory Committee Meeting

The following recommendations may be helpful.

#### **Setting a date**

Scheduling a meeting involves finding a time that is a suitable fit with everyone’s schedule. Start to schedule the meeting early – at least one month before the target date. Remember that two meetings per year are called for during the fourth year of the student’s residence in the graduate program and thereafter. To facilitate scheduling, students may elect to take advantage of websites that support online appointment scheduling.

#### **Committee attendance**

Occasionally, it may be difficult to schedule a time when every one of the SAC members can attend. The student should still go ahead with the meeting on schedule if a majority of the committee members are present. It is permissible to have a committee member participate via Skype or other electronic means.

#### **Reserving a room and equipment**

Remember to schedule a conference room for an appropriate length of time. Also remember to schedule the use of any audiovisual equipment that you will need for the meeting.

#### **Reminding the participants**

Remind the Committee members of the time and place of the meeting several days in advance.

### The Student Advisory Committee Progress Report (Progress Report)

It is **required that a student submit a goal-based Progress Report to all members of the Student Advisory Committee at least one week before the meeting.** The length of this report should be one to three (1-3) pages, single-spaced, and may include figures. The Progress Report should allow the SAC to assess the student’s progress toward a set of previously stated goals, to identify barriers to the submission of the student’s next scientific manuscript and to help the student to develop a set of new goals for the next project period.

In the absence of any directives to the contrary issued by the SAC, **the Progress Report should be written in four sections as described below.** It may also include figures to document the student’s scientific progress.

#### **1. Current Goals and Rationales**

The goals and their scientific rationales for the current project period are listed exactly as they were specified

at the previous SAC meeting.

2. **Progress Toward the Current Goals**

For each goal, the student should provide a description of the progress made toward that goal. For goals that have not been met completely, a discussion of the difficulties that arose should be provided. *Members of the SAC will understand that many factors may affect the student's progress toward a goal, including its technical feasibility, the time required to meet alternate goals and the effect of any changes made to the direction of the student's project.*

3. **Additional Progress (optional)**

The student may provide a description of any additional scientific progress made during the current project period. The progress described in this section would ordinarily not be directly associated with a Current Goal but could form the basis of a New Goal.

4. **Proposed New Goals and Rationales**

The student should create a list of several Proposed New Goals to be achieved during the next project period. *These Proposed New Goals should address the question of what barriers must be overcome next for the student to submit a peer-reviewed manuscript for publication.* These proposed goals will be refined through discussion of the Progress Report by the student and the SAC (see below). For each Proposed New Goal a short Rationale (one or two sentences) should be provided to indicate why this Proposed New Goal is scientifically necessary.

The student should retain copies of all Progress Reports. The SAC may ask the student to provide a copy of the Progress Report from the previous project period. In addition, the description of research progress provided in these reports may help the student to write the initial draft of a scientific manuscript or a chapter of the thesis dissertation.

### **A Typical Advisory Committee Meeting**

The emphasis of the Student Advisory Committee meeting should be placed on the student's progress toward a set of previously specified goals, the identification of current difficulties, potential solutions to these difficulties and the specification of a set of new goals for the next project period. Progress toward these goals should bring the student closer to submitting a peer-reviewed manuscript and to completion of the requirements for the PhD degree. The SAC should also be available to support any efforts made by the student to acquire external financial support.

The length of time and the agenda of a Student Advisory Committee meeting will vary, depending on the needs of the student and the members of the SAC. However, a typical SAC meeting is described below.

- **Distribution of Forms**

The student should distribute copies of the Student Advisory Committee Member Report Form to all members of the SAC and a single copy of the Student Advisory Committee Summary Report Form to the chair of the SAC. Both forms are available under the "Student Advisory Committee Summary Report Form" link on the Graduate Division website:

<http://www.einstein.yu.edu/education/phd/current-students/graduate-forms.aspx>.

- **Review of the Student's Progress**

The student is asked to leave the room for the SAC's initial discussion of the student's overall progress toward the PhD degree, the quality of the student's Progress Report and any issues that the mentor wishes to raise. The SAC will then direct the mentor to leave the room to allow the student to discuss progress or issues with members of the SAC.

- **Scientific Background, Results and Plans**

The student then provides a description of any necessary scientific background, experimental results and future plans as part of a PowerPoint presentation. The SAC may decide, particularly after several meetings, that a scientific background review is not necessary or may decide to limit the time devoted to this review. This presentation should include specific references to the current goals and should conclude with the student's proposed new goals for the next project period.

- **Discussion of Scientific Results and Plans**

A discussion by the student and the SAC of the student's scientific results and plans in terms of the current goals and proposed new goals may occur during the PowerPoint presentation or after it has been completed.

- **Specification of New Goals and Rationales**

Toward the end of the SAC meeting, the student and members of the SAC should produce several new goals and rationales for the next project period. These new goals should direct focus toward the barriers that stand in the way of the student's submission of a peer-reviewed scientific publication. The scope of these new goals should be appropriate for the time span of the next project period, if all goes well. The new goals will usually specify experimental work but may also refer to the submission of written work, including a scientific manuscript, the Thesis or an application for extramural funding. The student should provide members of the SAC with a copy of these new goals and rationales soon after the conclusion of the SAC meeting. These new goals will become the current goals of the next project period's Progress Report.

- **SAC Forms**

At the end of the meeting, *after the student and mentor leaves*, the SAC will discuss the items on the Summary Report Form (including the SAC Consensus Opinions section of the form). The chair will complete and sign the Summary Report Form. Each member of the SAC is also to complete the Member Report Form and hand these filled forms to the chair of the SAC.

The student is then responsible for immediately collecting the original SAC Meeting Report Forms (Summary Report and Member Report forms) from their SAC chair and submitting the forms to the Graduate Division office. The student is also to submit copies of these forms to all members of the SAC, the mentor and their departmental office.

## Permission to Write the Thesis Dissertation

The student will ordinarily have discussed with the mentor whether it may soon be appropriate to begin writing the Thesis. However, before doing so, the student must obtain permission from their Student Advisory Committee. Permission to write and defend must be documented on the SAC Summary Report. Although the student may have met the minimum requirements for course work, the Qualifying Exam, and the requirement for the submission of a suitable scientific publication, the SAC need not issue permission to begin writing the Thesis if it believes that the student's overall progress or scientific maturity are insufficient for the defense of the Thesis.

If permission is granted to write and defend and the thesis is not submitted within six months, then another Advisory Committee meeting will be required.