

Protocol and common courtesies for dealing with your dissertation committee

Congratulations – you have reached that point where you are pulling your dissertation committee together and you may be asking yourself “What exactly do I need to do?” So here are some suggestions that will make your committee members happy (and save you a great deal of grief).

From the PHD handbook:

“Once a student has passed the comprehensive exam, he/she will select a dissertation advisory committee of not fewer than 4 members. The committee will be chosen in consultation with the DGS and student’s advisor. The committee must include two members of the Epidemiology faculty other than the mentor and at least one faculty member from Biostatistics. The DGS will serve as an *ex officio* member of the committee if he/she is not an official member of the committee.” Please see your handbook for further information.

1. Selecting your committee:

- Come up with a pool of members to choose from:
 - Talk to current students – who do they recommend or like working with, or who do they find to be a challenge?
 - Consider a mix of established and junior faculty members on your committee. Each is likely to provide different input. Established faculty can have a great deal of experience, but their responsibilities, travel, and existing duties can make it difficult to schedule meetings especially if you have five or six of them. Junior members are probably easier to schedule and to get feedback from more quickly, if needed.
 - Talk with the Program Manager to see if they are qualified to serve on your committee – if not, it will require additional work to get them appointments to do so.
 - Talk with the DGS about your committee selection – they can help steer you in the right direction as well. It is a good idea to get their approval before you formally compose your committee. Your committee membership ideas can be discussed during your Interdepartment Review (IDR).
- Don’t be afraid to ask each person “Is there someone you like to work with on committees?” or better yet – “Here is a list of the people I am thinking about -is there anyone you would rather not work with?” You want to pull together committee members that work well together and have similar styles.
- You may wish to consider a smaller (4) versus larger committee. Not everyone you will work with or get input from needs to be on your committee. You can still ask for their assistance in a non-formal manner and include them as authors on resulting papers. Remember, the more people on your committee, the more challenging it is to find dates for committee meetings and the more challenging it is to find consensus.

2. Working with your committee:

- You are responsible for organizing committee meetings and making sure that things progress. At this point in your career, you should be in charge of moving things along, not your committee.
- Make calendaring tools like doodle.com or whenisgood.net your best friend. Use these programs to determine when committee members are available over the next 6 months. (Try to talk with their assistants to see if there are any standing meetings, etc. that you could exclude right away. Get a general sense of which days/times work best – then send out about 10 dates to see who is available). Don't wait until the last minute. You have to work around your committee, not the other way around.
- Provide your materials/rewrites/proposal to your committee members with plenty of time to review (we are talking weeks ahead for formal meetings). DO NOT expect to give material to your committee the night before and get something in the next day or two. Demonstrate that you value the committee members input and time by being courteous.
- Make sure you give your committee members quality work – this means having someone edit it, check for grammar and spelling errors. There is nothing worse than when a student wants quality feedback, but hasn't bothered to provide quality material. Furthermore, if a committee member suggests changes, don't give it back to them for review without those changes – that just makes everyone angry. If you disagree – discuss it, but just don't ignore it.
- If you can, provide a schedule for your committee so they know what to anticipate and potentially make time for. An example:
 - Aug 1- will provide 1st draft to committee members
 - Aug 28- request that committee feedback be given by this date
 - Sept 21- makes changes return to committee (repeat cycle as needed until committee is satisfied with your proposal)
 - Oct 10- final proposal will be given to committee members
 - Oct 31 – Committee meeting/proposal defense