

## **Guidelines for Thesis Committee meetings in the HGEN Ph.D. Program**

The HGEN program is an interdisciplinary program and many of our faculty serve on thesis committees in multiple Ph.D. programs. Committee procedures, expectations and culture do differ across the Vanderbilt Ph.D. programs. This document provides **guidelines** for how thesis committees operate in the HGEN program. Individual thesis committees may depart from some of these guidelines at the consensus agreement of the student, the primary mentor and the committee chair. The committee cannot depart from certain requirements (detailed below) set by the program, Graduate School, or the University.

The **philosophy** of the HGEN program is that the members of each student's Ph.D. Thesis Committee serve as mentors for the student. The members of the committee should provide specific expertise needed for the student's planned research. If the student requires additional expert guidance as her research program develops, new committee members may be added to the committee to meet those new mentoring needs.

### **Roles of the committee members**

The **Ph.D. student** will:

- (1) Schedule each meeting of her committee at the intervals determined by the committee.
- (2) Notify the program coordinator (Roz Johnson) of the next committee meeting date as soon as the meeting is scheduled.
- (3) Provide her committee members with a short written report roughly 1 week before each committee meeting. The report should describe the student's progress since the previous committee meeting. The content and length of this report should be determined by the student's primary mentor.
- (4) Prepare a presentation of roughly 1 hour duration updating the committee members on her progress.

The student's **primary supervisor** will:

- (1) Review and approve the student's short written report before it is distributed to the other committee members.
- (2) Provide the committee with a short verbal description of the student's progress at the beginning of each committee meeting.
- (3) Review the student's presentation and provide feedback for the first one or two committee meetings to prepare the student for the meetings.

The **Committee chair** will:

- (1) Control the stages of the meetings so that they end on time.
- (2) Take notes on the meeting, particularly noting student accomplishments, challenges currently facing the student, and advice from the committee members.
- (3) Use these notes to draft a summary letter to the student, typically of 1-2 pages length.
- (4) Circulate that draft letter to the other faculty on the committee for revisions. Collate any revisions to write the final version of the committee letter.

- (5) Fill out the SACS accreditation paperwork along with the other committee members at the end of the meeting. The program coordinator will email the link for this online form to the chair before the meeting.
- (6) Upload the final version of the committee letter to another link provided by the program coordinator via email.
- (7) If necessary, the committee chair should act as an impartial mediator in disputes between the student and her primary mentor. If the chair cannot reach an agreement, the program DGS should be brought into the discussion.

The **Committee members** will:

- (1) Read the student's report before each meeting.
- (2) Attend the committee meetings.
- (3) Actively provide feedback in a helpful manner to the student during the meeting.
- (4) Be available to the student for mentoring outside of the committee meetings.

**Alternatives:** Some VU Ph.D. programs require the student to take notes during the thesis committee meeting and have the student draft the committee letter. HGEN prefers that this be done by the committee chair, as we believe that this allows the student to concentrate on the discussion with her committee members and provides a more complete, balanced and professional record of the meeting for the program and the student.

**Requirements:**

- (1) The SACS form and the committee letter must be done completely at each thesis committee meeting and must be returned to the program through the links provided by the program coordinator to the committee chair.
- (2) The HGEN program requires thesis committee meetings roughly every 6 months. Longer periods between committee meetings are only allowed under unusual conditions.

**Format of the thesis committee meeting.**

- (1) The committee chair will start the meeting and will ask the student to leave the room.
- (2) The student's primary mentor will give a short description of the student's progress to the committee. This should include the mentor's judgement of how well the student is doing, and should note both accomplishments and challenges confronting the student. The mentor may prepare the committee to provide advice in certain areas where the advisor judges that the student could use additional mentoring. The committee members should discuss the primary mentor's report and ask questions of the mentor. This section should last 10-30 minutes depending on need.
- (3) The student will return to the room and will give her presentation to the committee members. Active discussion by committee members is expected during the presentation. This should last about 45-60 minutes.
- (4) The student will leave the room and the committee members will discuss her progress. Specific advice to the student should be discussed for inclusion in the committee letter. Whenever possible the committee members should reach consensus on advice to the student. If there are any conflicting points where the committee members cannot reach consensus, then both sides

of the conflict should be represented in the committee letter. This period should take 20-30 minutes.

- (5) The committee will fill out the online SACS form assessing the student's progress in multiple areas. The form will be filled in and signed by the chair, but assessments should be made by consensus of the committee members. This takes about 5 minutes.
- (6) The student will return to the room and the committee chair and primary mentor will briefly summarize the main points of the committee discussion and will let the student know that a more detailed letter will follow in a few days. Other committee members may stay for this session as they wish.

**Frequency of committee meetings:** In the HGEN program we typically hold thesis committee meetings twice a year. Under certain circumstances the committee may decide that they need to have the next meeting after only 3 months. Typically, this occurs when the student is struggling with a problem and the committee wants to see the student's progress through that problem quickly, to avoid delay. The requested time to the next committee meeting is marked on the SACS forms and should be included in the committee letter to the student so that she can schedule the next meeting.

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