

Department of Microbiology & Immunology Ph.D. Thesis Committee Policies

Nomenclature Note

Strictly speaking, the UNC Graduate School uses “thesis” to refer to M.S. students and “dissertation” to refer to Ph.D. students. For simplicity, we use the terms interchangeably for Ph.D. students.

Thesis Committee Selection

Students must choose their thesis committee and chair by the first day of the fall semester of their first year in the department (i.e., start of second year for Ph.D.-only students and start of first year for M.D./Ph.D. students).

Oral Preliminary Exam Committee

The committee that administers the oral preliminary exam overlaps extensively with the thesis committee, but has differences to account for the conflict of interest that the research advisor(s) has in the outcome of the exam. The details are explained in the Guidelines for the Oral Preliminary Exam. At the start of the fall semester of the second year in the department (i.e., start of third year for Ph.D.-only students and start of second year for M.D./Ph.D. students), the Prelim Exam Advisor will provide detailed instructions about forming the oral preliminary exam committee and scheduling the oral exam/project approval meeting.

Thesis Committee Composition

UNC Graduate School Policies

- Minimum of five members.
- Majority must be from the degree-granting department.
- Research advisor must be from the degree-granting department unless approved by The Graduate School.

Department of Microbiology & Immunology Policies

- At least three members of the committee other than the research advisor must have faculty appointments in our department. This means the committee will have at least four departmental faculty members except in the rare cases of students earning a Microbiology & Immunology degree in non-departmental labs.
- Committee members must be an Assistant, Associate, or full Professor. Instructors, Lecturers, etc. are not eligible.
- Research track faculty can serve on thesis committees.
- If a joint student has co-mentors from different labs, then only three more committee members are needed.
- If two faculty members from the same lab (e.g. a tenure track and a research track) are on the committee, then four additional members are required to ensure diversity of opinion.

- In rare instances, and with approval of the Director of Graduate Studies, the research advisor can be outside our department.

Thesis Committee Chair

UNC Graduate School Policies

- Thesis committee chair and research advisor can be the same or different people.
- Thesis committee chair must be from the degree-granting department unless approved by Graduate School.

Department of Microbiology & Immunology Policies

- Thesis committee chair must be a department faculty member.
- Research track faculty can chair thesis committee.
- Thesis committee chair must be a different person than the research advisor.
- Thesis committee chair cannot be from the same lab as the research advisor.
- Thesis committee chair cannot be the spouse or "significant other" of the research advisor; however such individuals are allowed to serve on the thesis committee.
- The student will choose the thesis committee chair in consultation with the research advisor. In order to enhance the independence of the chair, it is suggested that the chair not be a close collaborator of the research advisor.

Duties of Thesis Committee Chair

UNC Graduate School Policies

- Chair oversees committee meetings and associated documentation.

Department of Microbiology & Immunology Policies

- The first thesis committee meeting is also the oral preliminary exam, which is led by the Common Reviewer. The Committee Chair leads the thesis project approval portion of the first committee meeting. The Committee Chair leads all other thesis committee meetings, including final private defense.
- The Chair opens each thesis committee meeting by asking the student to leave the room and asking the research advisor to briefly describe for the committee (i) their perception of the student's progress toward their degree, and (ii) any problems or challenges that may benefit from the advice or intervention of the committee.
- When the student returns, the Chair asks the advisor (and their spouse/partner if a committee member) to leave the room and asks the student to briefly describe for the committee (i) any concerns they may have concerning their advisor, and (ii) any problems or challenges that may benefit from the advice or intervention of the committee.
- Chair ensures that in addition to discussion and advice concerning research plans and progress, each committee meeting also includes discussion and advice with regard to publication and career plans and progress.
- Following each committee meeting, the Chair fills out the departmental form documenting actions taken at the meeting. This includes writing a brief summary of comments and recommendation made by the committee for the student. The Chair discusses their summary with the student and then both parties sign to confirm understanding and agreement.

- Chair manages committee discussion regarding whether or not student has met the minimum publication requirement, and submits final form verifying completion of requirement to Student Services Specialist and Director of Graduate Studies.
- Chair has the responsibility to postpone or cancel the private defense if there are concerns that the dissertation is not satisfactory.
- Chair has the responsibility to ensure that the final version of the dissertation is satisfactory prior to submission to the Graduate School.
- In the unlikely event of a dispute between the student and the research advisor, the Chair acts as an advocate for the student and the Director of Graduate Studies acts as an impartial mediator.

Meeting Frequency

Students must meet with their thesis committee at least once per year beginning in their second year in the department (i.e. third year for Ph.D.-only students and second year for M.D./Ph.D. students). The committee can require more frequent meetings.

Faculty Attendance at Thesis Committee Meetings

Graduate School Milestones

For Graduate School milestones (oral preliminary examination, thesis project approval, final private defense), all committee members must participate in the entire meeting. In person attendance is strongly preferred, but participation by video is allowed if mutually agreeable to the student and other committee members.

Regular Thesis Committee Meetings

If a good faith effort fails to identify a time at which all thesis committee members can meet, then it is permissible to hold a meeting at which one or more thesis committee members are absent, because it is generally more important to meet than to have everyone present. However, the following restrictions apply:

- The thesis committee Chair, who may be called upon to serve as an advocate for the student, must attend.
- Because a purpose of the meeting is to guide the student toward meeting MCRO expectations and requirements, at least three committee members in attendance must have faculty appointments in the Department of Microbiology & Immunology.
- Because a purpose of the meeting is to provide outside perspective on the student's research, at least three committee members in attendance must be independent of the advisor (i.e. not spouse/partner and not a member of the advisor's lab).

When in doubt, consult with the Director of Graduate Studies.

Progress Reports

Students will provide their committee with a progress report at least one week prior to each meeting following approval of the thesis topic. The document will consist of a Specific Aims page followed by a description of progress to date organized by Aim. The

progress report should include any changes in Aims, a summary of key results, and plans for future experiments. The report should also communicate the student's vision for how results could be organized into publications, and the current status of progress toward publications.

Food at Thesis Committee Meetings

Students are not permitted to supply food for any of their committee meetings, including the oral preliminary examination and the final private defense.