Summary of Biology PhD Program Assessment Committee Meeting and Recommendations – 2019

Area of Assessment: Annual Committee Meeting

The CUNY Graduate Center Biology PhD Program requires doctoral students to meet annually with their thesis committee, which includes the student’s thesis advisor. During the annual committee meeting, the student reviews their major research and career accomplishments in the past year. The committee advises the student on their research plans for the coming year, reviews a timeline for completing the research and thesis, and provides any recommendations to progress the student towards completing the thesis. At the conclusion of the annual meeting, the students and committee are required to complete a “Report of Advisory Committee Meeting” form and submit this to The CUNY Graduate Center. The annual committee meeting supports several learning outcomes including the (1) ability to design an approach to address a major unresolved research problem; (2) organize, format, and present data effectively in written and oral form; (3) interact effectively and collegially with others in the field and conform to the fundamentals of ethical research conduct; (4) speak effectively in both formal and informal settings about science and their own research; and (5) write clearly and effectively about their research. Because of this, the Assessment Committee recommends that the annual committee meeting be added as an assessment in the Biology Assessment 2018 spreadsheet (points 4, 6, 7, 10, and 11).

The Assessment Committee (Dr. Allyson Friedman, Dr. Nathalia Holtzman, Dr. Paul Forlano, Dr. Maral Tajerian, Dr. Bao Vuong, Jenna Dorey, and Nathan Morris) reviewed data and documentation including representative annual committee reports, dates of committee meetings, data on student progress, leaves of absence, and time to degree. The data suggest that the annual committee meeting, when used well, is a good tool to support student learning outcomes. Nevertheless, use of and preparation for the annual committee meeting was seen to be uneven, leading to several suggestions for improvement.

The structure of the annual committee meeting and the leadership of the committee is nebulously defined. To allow the student an opportunity to discuss concerns about the thesis advisor with the committee, the Assessment Committee recommends that the thesis advisor leave the room for the first few minutes of the meeting. Subsequently, the student should leave the room to provide the thesis advisor an opportunity to discuss concerns about the student with the committee. The Assessment Committee recommends that a check box is included on the “Report of Advisory Committee Meeting” form to ensure that these discussions have occurred. To minimize conflicts of interest between the thesis advisor and the student, the Assessment Committee recommends that the chair of the committee is not the thesis advisor. The student should work with the thesis advisor to select committee members and the committee members should select the chair. These changes should be required for all new students and recommended for current students.

The current “Report of Advisory Committee Meeting” form does not succinctly capture the accomplishments of the student to date, does not address responsible conduct in research, and is not readily accessible for the committee and student. To that end, the Assessment Committee recommends that the following changes are made to the form:

1. Modify the form to exclude the empty white space between each numbered section to allow the student and thesis advisor freedom to address each point in a summary to be prepared before the committee meeting and circulated to the committee one week in advance.
2. Attach an NSF or NIH curriculum vitae (CV) and eliminate #2 to consolidate the summary of the student’s work to date with their future grant or job applications. The CV should include professional development, conferences attended, posters presented, and publications.

3. Revise #4 to “Include an updated timeline for completing and writing thesis” to ensure that the student and thesis advisor have discussed project goals

4. Eliminate the 2nd year form to streamline the process of an annual meeting for all students that have completed their first year of the doctoral program

5. Add a statement verifying that ethical issues have been addressed (e.g. animal use, IRB, permits or collection authorizations) to emphasize the importance of responsible conduct in research

6. To summarize more concisely the results of the annual meeting, modify answers of “We rate the student’s progress” to
   a. Meets expectations
   b. Minor concerns
   c. Major concerns
   d. Fails to meet expectations

The guidelines and expectations for completing the annual committee meeting are undefined. The Assessment Committee recommends that guidelines for the annual committee meeting are available to students who have completed their first year in the doctoral program. These guidelines should include information regarding what the student needs to prepare or complete in advance of the meeting (e.g. oral presentation and written documents). The guidelines and “Report of Advisory Committee Meeting” form should be made readily available on the Graduate Center Biology PhD Program website. The completed forms should be made available to the committee one week in advance of the scheduled annual meeting.

Although the “Report of Advisory Committee Meeting” form assesses the student’s research and progress towards completing the thesis, the form does not evaluate the mentorship of the thesis advisor. To address this deficiency, the Assessment Committee recommends that a new form (mentor evaluation) is created to address concerns such as (1) the availability of the thesis advisor and (2) whether the thesis advisor has discussed the research project, opportunities to apply for grants, and professional development with the student.

The Assessment Committee seeks additional clarification on the following:

1. If a student does not meet the expectations at one or more of the annual committee meetings, is there a probation system for the students?
2. What qualifications must an individual meet in order to serve on a student’s annual committee? For example, what advanced degree is required (MS, MD, PhD, etc.)? Is the individual required to maintain a tenured or tenure track line? Should the committee member be research active?

In response to this assessment, the Biology Executive Committee will consider the motions in the attached “Recommendations of the Biology Assessment Committee”. In addition, the learning outcomes spreadsheet will be updated accordingly.