

Information for Advanced (3rd Year and Above) Immunology Graduate Students

1. Guide to Thesis Committees (updated January 2007)

The Thesis Committee Meeting is an excellent opportunity for a student and his/her advisor to obtain the advice and perspective of other Johns Hopkins faculty. The major purpose of the committee is to assist in the establishment and pursuit of research goals that will eventually lead to a Ph.D. thesis.

Program Policy: Beginning in the Third Year of training, each graduate student must have an annual Thesis Committee meeting. Each student must have at least one committee meeting per year, but may have more if desired. At each meeting the student and committee will fill out the attached Thesis Advisory Committee Report and submit it for documentation to the Immunology Program Office.

The Committee should include the student's advisor and 3-4 other Hopkins faculty. One member should be outside, i.e. not a member, of the Immunology Graduate Program.

Third Year Students: A student's first Thesis Committee meeting must occur by January 1 of the Third Year of training. (Current third year students have until May 2007 to have the first meeting). In advance of this first meeting, students must prepare a written research proposal in the general form of a research grant. Guidelines for this proposal are attached. It is a good idea to update this research proposal for your subsequent meetings and redistribute it to your committee members, but this is not mandatory.

Presentations: At each Thesis Committee Meeting, the student should present her/his research work, roughly following the format of the written proposal. The discussion can be and is often open-ended in nature. The student should be prepared to discuss:

- a) the Background and Significance of the project(s)
- b) the specific goals of the research (Specific Aims)
- c) the work accomplished to date, including pertinent experiments that "did not work"
- d) future short term and long term plans

The Thesis Committee meeting is not a second Oral Exam. Many students feel inhibited to schedule Thesis Committee meetings because they are concerned that they have "no data" to present or may not have a well-planned course of research and will be judged harshly. This concern may be particularly felt for the first meeting. Please be reassured that Thesis Committee members are not there to judge the student, they are simply there to help guide a student's research efforts as part of a team that includes the student and the student's advisor. The common goal of all present is to enhance the research experience and guide experiments toward thesis completion and graduation. A student does not need to have a body of data to present at the Thesis Committee meeting. Especially for the first meeting, even a collection of ideas is enough to facilitate the discussion and propagate advice. The meeting is a fantastic opportunity to pick the brains of smart, experienced, and expert faculty. Many thesis projects have been enhanced by Committee meetings --- the associated exchange of ideas has often led to important discoveries and earlier graduation.

The Committee is empowered to collegially reach a consensus as to when the thesis research is complete and when the thesis should be written and publicly presented (see below).

Enforcement of the policy: If a student fails to have an annual meeting then his/her lab of origin will not be allowed to accept Immunology rotation students or new Immunology graduate students for the pursuit of Ph.D. thesis study, until the requirements of this policy have been met.

Guidelines for Preparing the Research Proposal (updated January 2007)

The proposal should be single-spaced and 5 to 10 pages long, including figures. References are not included in the page limit. Please distribute your proposal to committee members at least one week in advance of the meeting.

Your proposal should include the following four sections. The descriptions of each section are meant just as a suggestive guide to give you an idea of what can be covered in each section. Remember, the proposal and the Thesis Committee Meeting are meant to help you with your research, the proposal will not be graded, and there are no absolute requirements for the written document. Try to describe your experimental goals, rationale and approach as best as you can, but do not be concerned about following every aspect of the suggested section guidelines. Feel free to ask your advisor or other faculty members for help if you have questions.

1. Specific Aims (What are my discrete goals?)

List the broad, long-term objectives and goals of the specific research proposed, e.g., to test a stated hypothesis, create a novel design, solve a specific problem, challenge an existing paradigm, address a critical barrier to progress in the field, or develop new technology. Most proposals will have two or three specific aims. For example, in one student's proposal, each aim could be a separate step in a series of steps that define the whole project. In another student's proposal, each aim could pertain to an individual separate project if several projects are being proposed at a preliminary stage. Again, feel free to ask your advisor or other faculty for guidance. The length of this section is typically one paragraph to one page.

2. Background and Significance (Why should anyone care?)

Briefly sketch the background leading to the present application, critically evaluate existing knowledge, and specifically identify the gaps that the project is intended to fill. State concisely the importance and relevance of the research described in this application by relating the Specific Aims to the field as a whole. If the aims of the application are achieved, state how scientific knowledge will be advanced. The length of this section is typically one to three pages.

3. Preliminary Data (What experiments have I done so far?)

If you happen to have preliminary data (note data may be minimal for the first meeting), use this section to present it in the context of the goals stated in the Specific Aims. It is just as valuable to describe the experiments that did not work as to describe the ones that did work, as long as they pertain to your Specific Aims. The length of this section is variable.

4. Research Design (What experiments do I plan to do, how will I do them, and how will I interpret the possible results?)

Describe the research design conceptual framework, procedures, and analyses to be used to accomplish the specific aims of the project. Include general descriptions of how the data will be collected, analyzed, and interpreted. Discuss the potential difficulties and limitations of the proposed procedures and alternative approaches to achieve the aims. As part of this section, provide a tentative sequence or timetable for the project. The length of this section is variable.

2. Elective Requirements:

All Immunology graduate students must receive a grade of B (or higher) in four elective courses. Two of these courses must be Immunology courses. Students can choose electives from the course offering in the Schools of Medicine, Public Health and Arts and Sciences. The program director will approve of the electives by signing the course registration form.

3. Thesis and Thesis Seminar:

Upon completion of the thesis research, each student must then prepare a formal written thesis, based on guidelines provide by the Graduate Board of the University. Two readers must find the written thesis acceptable: the thesis advisor and another member of the Thesis Advisory Committee. Students must also present a formal public seminar on the research. The program office will schedule the final thesis seminar. This is the final requirement for the PhD degree. All University guidelines for thesis preparation and final graduation must be met. Detailed information is available in the Program Office.

4. Program Participation

All students are expected to continually participate in the program activities and this is a vital aspect of the training program. This includes attendance at Immunology Seminars, research forums and the annual retreat.