Meetings for advisory committees, candidacy exams and final defenses: Students in many programs meet with their graduate advisory committees to propose their planned studies, to be examined for candidacy, to provide research updates, and defend their thesis/dissertation.

Participation and Frequency of Meetings: Typically, the student and all members of their graduate advisory committee assemble in the same room for these meetings. The advisor must be in the scheduled room in all cases. Under extenuating circumstances, an individual committee member may participate via teleconference, although this is clearly not best practice.

For committee meetings during which students provide research updates, the advisor will decide whether the meeting can proceed if one or more committee members cannot participate. Students are expected to meet with their graduate advisory committees to provide research updates at least once each calendar year, with twice each year being best practice.

For thesis/dissertation proposals, candidacy and defense meetings, a student may, under significant, extenuating circumstances and with the unanimous prior approval of their graduate advisor committee and program director, present and defend their work via video conference. The student is responsible for organizing all aspects of the video conference in this case. If a single committee member cannot participate, the meeting can occur if approved by the graduate program director. If two or more members cannot participate, the meeting must be rescheduled.

Outcomes: For thesis/dissertation proposal, candidacy and defense meetings, each committee member must vote to pass or fail the student the day of the meeting. A student passes the exam if there is no more than one vote to fail the exam. The student fails the exam if two or more committee members vote to fail the student. Students may be allowed to retake an exam per the guidelines of their program and with approval of the SOM Graduate Programs Committee.

A committee member’s vote to pass a student indicates that the student demonstrated mastery of the proposed or completed studies in the thesis/dissertation project, that all major studies and analyses have been planned or completed, that all major anticipated or real outcomes will be or are sufficient, that all major planned or real interpretations will be or are valid, and that the scope of the work is appropriate for the degree level and research area of the trainee. Although a student that has passed their final thesis/dissertation defense can be required to perform additional, focused studies or analyses on existing data, the committee agrees—by virtue of indicating that the student passed the defense—that any scientifically valid result from these additional studies or analyses will be acceptable and, therefore, that the student will not be expected to obtain a particular research result that leads to a specific interpretation.

A student that has passed their final defense can be expected to revise, substantially in some cases, their thesis/dissertation before receiving final approval from their advisory committee. The student and the committee should identify a reasonable time-line for the revisions and work collaboratively and as expeditiously as possible to finalize the thesis/dissertation in all cases.

Adapted in part from the VCU Bulletin. Students should see the VCU Bulletin for details.

Approved by the School of Medicine Graduate Programs Committee: pending