

Student Guidelines for Dissertation Proposals in the Neuroscience Graduate Program

The overall goal of the dissertation proposal and proposal defense is to describe a series of studies that, if successfully accomplished and communicated, would lead to the doctoral degree. The intent of this process is to facilitate the formulation of a doctoral research project appropriate for the discipline of neuroscience by using the combined expertise of the doctoral dissertation committee and to assist the student and the mentor in writing a competitive predoctoral fellowship application. This is not an exam.

Approval of the proposal resides with the student's Dissertation Studies Committee, which consists of a minimum of four University of Vermont faculty members, all regular members of the Graduate Faculty. One member is the student's Dissertation Advisor. At least two Graduate Faculty members must be from the Neuroscience Graduate Program and at least one Graduate Faculty member must be from outside the Dissertation Advisor's home department. Prior to the Dissertation Defense, the Dissertation Studies Committee Chair will be a committee member from outside the Dissertation Advisor's home department.

Process:

The timing of the dissertation proposal is late spring of the third year of training (6th semester), following successful completion of the qualifying exam in the fall of the third year (5th semester). The dissertation studies committee should be constituted within 2 months following successful completion of the qualifying exam. While development of the dissertation proposal relies on collaborative discussion with the dissertation advisor, the dissertation committee can provide valuable insight early in the process.

The formal dissertation research proposal will be in the format of an NIH predoctoral NRSA application. The dissertation proposal must include the title, abstract and specific aims pages, and obey the structural and formatting directions of the agency. With approval of the Chair of the NGP Curriculum and Tracking Committee, another agency's predoctoral application may be used.

The dissertation proposal must be delivered to the student's Dissertation Studies Committee at least two weeks prior to the date of an oral presentation (seminar) and defense of the proposal. The proposal will also be delivered electronically to the NGP office and the program assistant will post a link to the proposal on the NGP website and inform the NGP faculty that the electronic copy is available for review and send out an announcement of the proposal seminar.

Two weeks after submission of the proposal to the NGP office and Dissertation Studies Committee, an oral presentation of the proposal to the Neuroscience community is delivered as a seminar in the home department of the student's dissertation advisor. On the day of the presentation, the Dissertation Studies Committee will attend the seminar and meet with the student for up to two hours afterwards to discuss and offer constructive criticisms of the proposal.

The Dissertation Studies Committee will approve the proposal or ask for modifications, which must be completed and approved within two months. Approval of the proposal will be submitted by the Chair of the Dissertation Studies Committee to the NGP Curriculum and Tracking Committee Chair and placed in the student's file. Submission of the proposal to the NIH or other funding agencies is strongly encouraged.

Assessment:

Three possible outcomes can be assigned by majority vote of the Dissertation Studies Committee at the proposal defense.

- Approve – the proposal describes a series of studies that, if successfully accomplished and communicated, would lead to the doctoral degree. The proposal is well-written, requiring no change.
- Conditionally approve - with the addition of recommended changes, the proposal describes a series of studies that, if successfully accomplished and communicated, would lead to the doctoral degree. The record of proposal defense must indicate exactly what the student must do to move from “conditionally approve” to “approve”. The student has one month to make the changes. When acceptable, the Chair of the Dissertation Studies Committee will provide a revised record of proposal defense to the NGP Curriculum and Tracking Committee Chair.
- Serious reservations - the proposal describes a series of studies that are fatally flawed, too risky, too descriptive or not related to neuroscience. The student must work together with the mentor to revise and add new aims. The newly written proposal must then be presented to the committee within 2 months.

The research proposal will serve as a “roadmap” for the student and their mentor as the doctoral research program proceeds. It is recognized that research is an evolutionary process and that it is likely some of the proposed studies would change over the course of the student’s work. Substantial changes require a memo from the student’s Dissertation Studies Committee indicating their approval, which will be addressed to the Chair of NGP Curriculum and Tracking Committee, and placed in the student’s file.