

# Harvard Program in Neuroscience

## A Brief Guide of the Rights and Responsibilities of Dissertation Advisors

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Now that you've accepted a PiN student as a rotation student or for their dissertation work, what's next?

- **Rotations:** Rotations are generally 8 to 12 weeks long. The start date is determined by you and your student, but generally students do rotations in the fall (Sep-Dec), the winter (Jan – Mar), the spring (Apr-June), or summer (June-Aug). The purpose of the rotation is not to produce data; it's to allow the student and the lab to get to know each other, to determine if the student is a good fit for the lab, and if the lab is a good fit for the student. You must complete a Rotation Evaluation form at the end of the rotation, and you should plan on conducting an exit interview with the student. Please be honest about whether or not they have an offer to join the lab, and if they don't have an offer, why you've reached that decision. If the student rotates in your lab in fall, winter or spring, you must notify them by **June 1** at the latest to let them know if they have an offer to join. If you offer the student a position in the lab, please do not expect them to decide immediately, as most want time to consider. If you have offered a student a spot, please keep that available until you know the student has decided to accept the offer, or to go elsewhere.
- **PQE:** PiN students are required to complete their Preliminary Qualifying Exam by March 31 of their second year (G2). You will be given an outline of the requirements and procedures of the PQE after your student has formally joined your lab. The PQE is a proposal based on the thesis work planned. Therefore, **you can and should discuss the project in depth with your student.** You can and should plan to discuss who should be part of the committee, read the proposal and listen to the presentation. **You can be present as a silent participant at the PQE.**
- **DAC meetings:** Once your student has passed the PQE, s/he is required to form a Dissertation Advisory Committee ("DAC") and to have meetings no less frequently than every 9 months, and possibly more frequently (per the discretion of the DAC Chair). You and the student do not have the authority to extend the deadline for the DAC meeting, and not having enough data is not a reason for postponing a meeting. Extensions may be granted only by the DAC Chair or by the Directors of PiN, but in no event can the extension cause the meeting to take place later than 9 months after the previous meeting.
- **Dissertation Defense:** You may have heard the phrase "getting your box checked." When the DAC determines that a student has complete enough work for a dissertation, they sign a Final DAC Report that has a box with a caption "Student May Begin Writing Dissertation." PiN's policy is that students must schedule their defenses within 6 months of getting their boxes checked, but the defense itself may take place later than the 6-month deadline.
- **Advising.** PiN students are assigned to a member of the Student Advisory Committee when they matriculate. The SAC advisor helps the students choose rotations, choose a thesis lab, prepare for the PQE (administratively), and generally guides the student through his or her enrollment. SAC advisors are not scientific advisors; they may not serve on their advisee's DAC or exam committees. SAC advisors meet with their students three times in the first year, twice in the second year, and at least once every year from the third year through defense.
- **Electives:** PiN students are required to complete a minimum of four quarters of elective courses (equivalent to two full-semester courses). Students are required to complete only two quarters by the end of the G2 year, and therefore it is the expectation that many students will continue to take coursework beyond the G2 year. The electives requirement was designed in recognition of the fact that

students can benefit from coursework taken throughout graduate school, as their dissertation project and scientific interests mature and/or go into new directions. We ask that you be accommodating to students as they fulfill their elective requirement and that you are supportive when students identify coursework beyond the stated requirement that would be in their interest to complete.

- **PiN policy towards TA'ing and other out-of-lab activities:** Harvard and PiN strongly encourages its students to pursue professional development opportunities beyond laboratory work throughout their enrollment. Harvard policy allows students to use up to 20% of their time on career activities outside of lab work. This includes serving as a teaching assistant (TA) in Harvard courses. PiN does not have a formal teaching requirement for graduate students; however, **we require that PIs allow students who wish to TA to do so.** There is never one “good” or “bad” time in a student’s project to engage in professional development, so we ask that you allow students flexibility to engage in these activities that are critical to their career training.
- **Vacation Policy:** Specific vacation arrangements are made between you and your students and should be explicitly stated. Please note that the NIH guidelines suggest two weeks annual vacation plus University holidays. Students should not be expected to work seven days a week, and weekend days should *not* be counted as the annual allotted vacation time.
- **Scientific presentations, meetings and publications:** It is important that students be given the opportunity to present their work. We ask that you make certain your PiN students regularly present their data at local events such as lab meetings, departmental seminars, etc. In addition, it is important to enable your students to attend and present at national meetings. Students have available some money to support travel. While PiN does not require students to publish in order to defend, we expect most students will publish at least one paper.
- **Mental Health.** Graduate students may run into a variety of mental health issues that might affect their progress, including depression, anxiety, insomnia, etc. Harvard has a number of resources available to help students who face a wide variety of stressful situations. We ask that you reach out to PiN if you see that your PiN student is struggling. We will help them find the right resources at Harvard.
- **Individual Development Plan (IDP).** In accordance with NIH guidelines, PiN requires students to complete an IDP every year. The IDP is designed to help students to start thinking about career choices early in graduate school, and to become aware of their strengths and weaknesses as scientists. PiN does not ask the student to discuss the IDP with his/her thesis advisor; rather, the student’s SAC advisor goes through the IDP with the student each summer.
- **Professional Conduct of Faculty Members:** Harvard University is committed to maintaining an environment free from abusive and/or intimidating behavior, defined as: harmful mistreatment by words or actions that humiliate, degrade, demean, intimidate, and/or threaten an individual or group. **PIs are expected to display professional conduct and civil behavior with all colleagues, and especially in their interactions with graduate students and other trainees.** Behavior that violates the University’s professional conduct policy may include, but is not limited to:
  - **Abusive expression (including spoken, written, recorded, visual, digital, or nonverbal) directed at another person in the workplace, such as derogatory remarks or epithets that are outside the range of commonly accepted expressions of disagreement, disapproval, or critique in an academic culture and professional setting that respects free expression**
  - **Unwarranted physical contact or intimidating gestures**
  - **Conspicuous and unwarranted exclusion or isolation having the effect of harming another person’s reputation in the workplace and hindering another person’s work**
  - **Sabotaging or threatening to sabotage another person’s work or career advancement**

- Abuse of authority, such as using inappropriate threats or retaliation in the exercise of authority, supervision, or guidance, or impeding or attempting to impede another person from exercising rights under any of Harvard's policies or procedures

Additional information on policies and guidelines can be found at <https://hms.harvard.edu/departments/ombuds-office/policies-guidelines> (HMS affiliates) and through your home institutions.

- **Miscellaneous issues:** If you run into problems with your student, please reach out to us for support. Problems can be anything from inappropriate behavior in the lab, not showing up regularly for work, failing to make adequate progress ... you'll know it when you see it. If you suspect that your student is suffering from serious depression or anxiety, please reach out to us. If you find yourself in conflict with your student, please ask us to get involved; it can often defuse tension and help resolution of a conflict if a third party can mediate between advisor and student. We're here to help our faculty as well as our students!