

McGill Biology Graduate Student Supervisory Committee (SC) Information

Each student's Supervisory Committee (SC) is appointed by the Graduate Training Committee (GTC) and chaired by the student's thesis supervisor. It meets regularly to evaluate the student's progress and to provide expert advice and feedback.

Purpose of the Supervisory Committee

The role of the SC is to help monitor the progress of the student's education and research. While the student bears the primary responsibility for carrying the research project forward, and the supervisor is responsible for day-to-day oversight and evaluation of the work, providing suggestions and constructive criticism, and generally teaching an approach to research, the SC provides support, advice and guidance. The additional perspective provided by the faculty members of the SC, who have expertise in areas related to the thesis topic, can be helpful to both student and supervisor.

The SC also represents an extension of the Graduate Training Committee (GTC), and thus is charged with upholding departmental standards, requirements and procedures and thus ensuring similar treatment of all students. In addition, the SC is responsible for fielding various administrative requests regarding the student's program, such as transfer from the M.Sc. to the Ph.D. program, undertaking an internship at another institution, or receiving course credit. Given its familiarity with the student and his/her program, the SC is in an ideal position to review such requests and make recommendations to the GTC.

Setting up the Supervisory Committee

The SC should be established before the end of the student's first term, and consists of the student's supervisor, who chairs the committee, plus two or more other members. The Chair of the GTC is a member ex-officio. Members are typically selected by the supervisor, in collaboration with the student, and the prospective SC members. The SC usually consists of professors from the Biology department, but faculty members from other McGill departments, or with outside affiliations, may also be appropriate in some cases. If the supervisor is an Associate Member of the Biology Department, at least one member of the SC must be a full-time member of the Biology Department.

After the student and supervisor have selected prospective SC members, the student should do the following:

- ☐ Contact each prospective member to ask if he/she would be willing to serve on the SC.
- ☐ Download and complete the Supervisory Committee Nomination Form (from the Student Forms page of this website), which asks for a working thesis title, the SC member names and contact information, and a brief justification for their membership on the SC.
- ☐ Submit the completed form to the Graduate Student Affairs Coordinator
- ☐ Schedule your first SC meeting (see below). A two hour slot is standard.

Scheduling Supervisory Committee meetings

The Department encourages students to speak individually to their SC members as soon as possible about the direction of their research, and the first official meeting of the SC for a new student must take place no later than 6 months after enrollment. Subsequently, the SC must meet once a year, at minimum, to review and evaluate progress made by the student in research and course work.

Students should schedule their meetings well in advance of the deadlines to ensure the availability of all SC members. In general, it is recommended that the SC meet during the academic year, as many professors are away during the summer months. In case of scheduling problems, contact the Graduate Coordinator. Note that the responsibility for scheduling the SC meetings and respecting all deadlines lies with the student, not the supervisor, the other SC members, or the GTC.

Annual Supervisory Committee Meetings

At the first meeting the SC will evaluate the student's educational background and select courses required for the degree. M.Sc. candidates should present the SC with a well thought-out research proposal at this first meeting.

In preparation for each SC meeting, the student should complete page 1 of the Progress Tracking form, and prepare a written SC Report that is a summary of his/her research progress since the previous meeting as well as the work proposed for the coming year. These should be provided to the committee one week before each meeting. The SC Report is typically 10-12 pages of text (abstract, introduction, progress, proposed work) accompanied by relevant figures, tables, reference list and a proposed timeline for the coming year. A point form version of the progress summary can be included in the PROGRESS box on the Progress Tracking Form, or attached to the form. At the student's first SC meeting, it is understood that the student's report to the Committee will be more of a research proposal than a laboratory/field progress report. For help with course selection at their first meeting, the student may wish to provide the SC with a curriculum vitae and transcripts in addition to the research proposal.

The annual SC Reports serve a number of important purposes. In addition to allowing the SC members to evaluate the student's progress, preliminary data, and future research plans, the SC Reports will become part of the written record of the student's progress through the program. Importantly, preparation of the SC Reports provide a valuable opportunity to develop scientific writing skills. For this reason, the SC Reports should consist entirely of the student's own written work. Finally, most students find that preparing for their SC meeting helps them organize their thoughts and to move their research forward.

At the SC meeting, the student typically begins with a short oral presentation of his/her work (with slides; based on their SC Report), which is then followed by a discussion with the committee members. In some cases, the SC members may prefer to ask questions and initiate discussion during the course of the presentation, rather than waiting until the end. In rare cases, it may be felt that the written summary sufficiently describes the student's progress and the SC will proceed directly to discussion without need for oral presentation. In all cases, after the discussion has concluded, the student is asked to leave the room while the SC discusses the students' performance and completes the Progress Tracking Form.

Although SC meetings usually follow the above format, the precise format of the SC meeting is not fixed, in order to reflect the individual structure and needs of each student's graduate program. In advance of

the meeting, the student should determine, from discussions with his/her supervisor and SC members, what format is mutually acceptable.

Evaluation of Progress

Regardless of the meeting's format, the student and SC members should be prepared to discuss the research progress critically. The SC meeting is not a test of general knowledge. However, questions concerning the validity of the approach, technical problems, significance of the results, directions to be taken in the future, appropriateness of the project for the degree being sought, and courses to be taken should all be considered. The student's progress is evaluated, and is rated as "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory". The committee provides an explanation of the evaluation and offers comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the student's progress.

Requisite knowledge is often developed through coursework, which may be commented on in the SC evaluation box of the Progress Tracking Form. However, unsatisfactory progress in coursework alone cannot lead to an unsatisfactory progress report because a separate Failure Policy governs coursework. A first overall unsatisfactory report must lead to a follow-up progress tracking meeting, not sooner than 4 months after the first report and not later than 6 months after the first report. Failure to meet overall objectives on two Progress Tracking Reports (not necessarily successive) constitutes unsatisfactory progress towards the degree and, if recommended by the academic unit (Biology), the student will be withdrawn from the University. The student may ask a member of the GTC to attend the follow-up meeting after an unsatisfactory progress report.

Whatever the outcome of the meeting, all members of the SC must sign the appropriate report form, plus any addendum describing conditions, to indicate that they support the decision. The SC must also indicate on the report form, whether they grant approval for the student to transfer to the Ph.D. program or to give his/her Ph.D. seminar. The student signs both the form and any addendum to indicate that he or she has read the contents.

For each SC meeting the student should:

- ☐ Distribute a written SC Report to all SC members at least one week before the SC meeting. This report is a summary of his/her research progress since the previous meeting as well as the work proposed for the coming year (see above for more details).
- ☐ Distribute Page 1 of the Progress Tracking Report with Objectives and Progress boxes completed to all SC members at least one week before the SC meeting.
- ☐ Print the Graduate Student Research Progress Tracking Report with the name, ID section, Objectives, and Progress completed (from the Student Forms page of this website), and bring a hard copy to your SC meeting.
- ☐ At the end of the meeting ensure that your supervisor completes the form and that you and all SC members sign it.
- ☐ Submit an electronic copy of the completed Progress Tracking Report form as well as the SC Report (and any extra attachments) to the Graduate Coordinator in either Word or PDF format. Copies must be also be retained by the student and the supervisor.

Other Functions of the Supervisory Committee

A number of situations may arise in a student's career in which the consultative process of the SC may be helpful. Most members of the Biology Department will be willing to assist students in dealing with problems arising in their research. The first line of approach to resolving such problems, however, should be the members of the student's SC.

- i. Students who have entered the graduate program at the M.Sc.1 level may wish to consider switching to a Ph.D. program. This should be a joint decision by the student and the supervisor. The GTC must approve the proposed switch, but the first step in seeking such a change in program is to consult with the SC. The SC, in turn, makes the recommendation to the GTC on behalf of the student.
- ii. No one faculty member can be expected to have mastered every research technique nor be equally familiar with all advances in the literature. New or alternative approaches may emerge after discussion with SC members.
- iii. The most important function of the SC is to provide both the student and supervisor with some necessary perspective on the student's progress. Has the student or supervisor chosen a problem which is intrinsically too difficult or risky? Has the student put him/herself out on a limb where failure of a single approach means the end of the project? Is there a difference of opinion between the student and supervisor as to whether the student already has enough data for a thesis?
- iv. Members of the SC are expected to provide constructive criticism of at least one draft of the M.Sc. or Ph.D. thesis.
- v. The student should also view the SC as a resource for dealing with problems resulting from a less than ideal personal relationship with the supervisor. Such problems, while rare, do arise and it is understood that a student may require either a sympathetic forum or protection from arbitrary action on the part of the supervisor.