



Policy on Conflict of Interest and Undue Influence for Thesis Committees

Student committees provide advice and critical feedback about a student's progress on their thesis research as well as their overall development as a biomedical researcher. Committees also serve as the examiners for Comprehensive and Thesis exams. Faculty members of the committee must be without any conflicts of interests or other bias that would interfere in providing assessment, candid feedback and advice about the student's progress, and to act in the best interest of the student's PhD training. In addition, it is important to preserve the integrity of the practice of confidential discussions between the committee and student, in the absence of their mentor, and to ensure fair and unbiased examinations.

The current Graduate School policy is insufficient in that it is limited to Thesis and Comprehensive examination committees and does not address potential conflicts of interest or undue influence involving the student.

The following ORE policy will apply to all meetings and all members of current and future Thesis or pre-comps committees, including examinations.

“To ensure independent evaluation of students' progress and examinations, and provision of impartial advice and guidance, no member of the committee should have undue influence over another member of the committee or the student. Undue influence could include, but is not limited to, direct employment (e.g. a postdoc employed by a faculty member), familial, domestic or amorous relationships, financial relationships or significant scientific collaboration (e.g joint funding). Any potential conflicts must be disclosed by committee members to the student, the committee and ORE and a plan to mitigate them approved by the Program Director and ORE Assistant Dean for Student Affairs. Familial, domestic or amorous relationships, perceived undue influence or other potential conflicts of interest, involving a prospective committee member and the Thesis Advisor(s), Committee Chair and/or Student, may prohibit that prospective member from serving on and/or being a voting member of said committee. If necessary, the Program Director and ORE Assistant Dean for Student Affairs will review and adjudicate potential conflicts.”

Guidelines:

The policy requires that potential conflicts of interest or undue influence be disclosed to all committee members and the student. This will allow an informed decision to be made as to whether that faculty member should remain on the committee and if so what steps should be taken to preserve the integrity of the practice of confidential discussions between the committee and student, in the absence of their mentor, and to ensure fair and unbiased examinations. These steps might include a member needing to step out with the PI during the meeting to allow the student to have a confidential discussion with their committee or perhaps becoming a non-voting member of the committee.

Relationships between committee members and the student or PI may mean that a faculty member should not serve as the committee chair, but would not necessarily disqualify them from serving on the committee.