

**School of Marine Science**  
**Virginia Institute of Marine Science**

**Roles and Responsibilities of M.S./Ph.D. Students, Advisors, and Committees**  
**– A Guidance Document**

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The culminating experience of the School of Marine Science (SMS) M.S. and Ph.D. programs is the completion of a thesis or dissertation supervised by an advisory committee. This committee also oversees all aspects of a student's academic and research activities during their degree program, including coursework, research, prospectus development, and attainment of degree program milestones. This document outlines roles and responsibilities of students, advisors, and committee members as they pertain to thesis and dissertation committees. Information on committee composition and instructions for selecting a committee are found elsewhere ([http://www.vims.edu/education/graduate/student\\_handbook/handbook\\_milestones/committee\\_research\\_topic/index.php](http://www.vims.edu/education/graduate/student_handbook/handbook_milestones/committee_research_topic/index.php)), as is information on the role of exam moderators (<http://www.vims.edu/education/graduate/moderators/moderatorguidelines.pdf>).

**Students**

Students are **ultimately responsible for their academic performance, timely completion of milestones**, design and execution of their research project, and completion of a thesis or dissertation. The student's responsibilities relating to their advisor and advisory committee include:

- Work with the advisor to identify committee members, identify suitable coursework, develop a project, write a research prospectus, perform the research, and produce a thesis/dissertation.
- Ensure timely communication and regular meetings with the advisor to facilitate these activities.
- Ensure timely communication and regular meetings with committee members to receive their input into the research, prospectus, thesis/dissertation, and manuscripts for publication. It is recommended that students meet at least annually with their committees.
- Recognize that many steps in a graduate program (e.g., preparation of the prospectus and thesis/dissertation) are iterative processes between the student, advisor, and committee members. Students are expected to provide materials for review in a timely manner, be responsive to feedback received, and understand that advisors and committee members have many demands on their time.

- Be familiar with the SMS Graduate Catalogue, Student Handbook, degree program requirements, and timetable for milestone completion, including submission of required forms.
- Produce original work, be aware of and follow professional standards of conduct, and adhere to the W&M Honor Code (<https://www.wm.edu/offices/deanofstudents/services/communityvalues/honorcodeandcouncils/honorcode/index.php>).
- Ensure that all work meets established standards for the degree and field of study.

## **Advisors**

Advisors are ultimately responsible for mentoring their students through all aspects of their graduate programs and for ensuring the quality of degrees granted by the SMS. The advisor's responsibilities relating to the student and their advisory committee include:

- Work with the student to identify committee members, select appropriate coursework, develop a research prospectus, supervise the research, and supervise production of the thesis/dissertation and associated manuscripts for publication.
- Remain available for regular meetings and communication with the student, and provide timely responses to student inquiries.
- Provide timely feedback on written materials.
- Chair all committee meetings with the exception of the qualifying exam and defense, and ensure the student maintains timely communication and regular meetings with the advisory committee.
- Coordinate the comprehensive exam (Ph.D. only) by soliciting questions from all committee members, collating and administering the exam, relaying answers back to the committee members for grading, and submitting the form upon completion.
- Ensure the prospectus, thesis/dissertation, and manuscripts are acceptable prior to distribution to the committee. Advise the student on qualifying exam and defense protocols, and ensure the student is prepared for both events.
- Take notes at the qualifying exam and defense, discuss required revisions with the student after these events, and ensure that revisions are satisfactorily performed.
- Ensure the prospectus, thesis/dissertation, and resulting manuscripts are accurate and produced according to professional standards of conduct. Ensure the student's research is conducted according to professional standards of conduct.
- Be familiar with the SMS Graduate Catalogue and degree program requirements, and be able to advise the student on these requirements.
- Respect the power differential between students and advisors.

## Committee Members

Committee members are responsible for providing guidance to students related to their coursework, research project, prospectus, and thesis/dissertation, and for ensuring the quality of degrees granted by the SMS. Committee members' responsibilities include:

- Provide advice on appropriate coursework and the student's research, and provide feedback on the research prospectus, thesis/dissertation, and associated manuscripts for publication.
- Participate in the student's pre-qualifying interview, comprehensive exam (Ph.D. only), qualifying exam, and defense. Additional information is available at:
  - Pre-Qualifying Interview:  
[http://www.vims.edu/education/graduate/student\\_handbook/handbook\\_milestones/prequal/index.php](http://www.vims.edu/education/graduate/student_handbook/handbook_milestones/prequal/index.php)
  - Comprehensive Exam (Ph.D. only):  
[http://www.vims.edu/education/graduate/student\\_handbook/handbook\\_milestones/comprehensive\\_exam/index.php](http://www.vims.edu/education/graduate/student_handbook/handbook_milestones/comprehensive_exam/index.php)
  - Qualifying Exam:  
[http://www.vims.edu/education/graduate/student\\_handbook/handbook\\_milestones/qualifying\\_prospectus\\_defense/index.php](http://www.vims.edu/education/graduate/student_handbook/handbook_milestones/qualifying_prospectus_defense/index.php)
  - Defense:  
[http://www.vims.edu/education/graduate/student\\_handbook/handbook\\_milestones/seminar\\_defense/index.php](http://www.vims.edu/education/graduate/student_handbook/handbook_milestones/seminar_defense/index.php)
- Remain available for regular meetings and/or communication with the student, and provide timely responses to student inquiries.
- Provide timely feedback on written materials.
- Respect the power differential between students and committee members.