MASTERS PROGRAMS

Advanced graduate study leading to the Master of Science degree is offered in the departments of Anatomy and Neurobiology, Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, Biostatistics, Human and Molecular Genetics, Microbiology and Immunology, Pharmacology and Toxicology, and Physiology and Biophysics. The Department of Family Medicine and Population Health, through the Division of Epidemiology, offers the Master of Public Health degree; the Department of Human and Molecular Population Health, through the Division of Epidemiology, offers the Master of Science degree in genetic counseling; and the Department of Family Medicine and Microbiology and Immunology, Pharmacology and Toxicology, and Molecular Biology, Biostatistics, Human and Molecular Genetics, offered in the departments of Anatomy and Neurobiology, Biochemistry and Molecular Biology.

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General requirements for graduate degrees

1. All full-time graduate students are expected to register for a minimum of five credit hours for the fall and spring semesters and six credit hours for the summer session. This requirement includes research. As an example, when students are registered for 10 credits in formal courses, they are expected to undertake five credits of research under the direction of their adviser or any approved faculty member. Research courses shall be graded as S (satisfactory), U (unsatisfactory) or F (fail). Registration for one credit hour is permitted only with prior permission.

2. Students are required to remain in good academic standing through the course of their degree program. Unsatisfactory student performance includes:
   a. The assignment of a grade of U, D or F in any course
   b. Failure to maintain a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.5
   c. Failure to pass the written or oral comprehensive examination
   d. Failure to pass the final examination

   A student whose performance is unsatisfactory must obtain the approval of the MCV Campus graduate committee to gain permission for continuing in the graduate program. The committee elicits the recommendation of the department/program (as represented by the director of graduate studies of the appropriate program) and, as appropriate, the student’s adviser in making a determination. Unsatisfactory performance also constitutes grounds for the termination of financial assistance to the student.

3. Students may not take the comprehensive examination for the Ph.D. degree if their overall GPA is less than 2.5 or if the GPA for courses within the major department is below 3.0. Students may not take the final oral examination for the M.S. or Ph.D. degree if their overall GPA is below 3.0. The examining body for the administration of the comprehensive examinations and the final examination is the student advisory committee. For the oral comprehensive examination for Ph.D. students and the final examinations for M.S. students, the body is supplemented by the addition of a representative of the MCV Campus graduate committee who chairs the examining body. The representative must be a member of the graduate faculty and is appointed by the chair of the MCV Campus graduate committee. The representative holds the responsibility for compliance with protocols appropriate to the examination, including the equitable treatment of the candidate.

4. Copies of the thesis/dissertation consistent with university standards shall be provided to the members of the student’s advisory committee three weeks or more before the date of the defense of the thesis/dissertation. Following acceptance of the thesis/dissertation defense schedule by the committee, the student must submit a copy of the thesis/dissertation and a request for scheduling of the final examination to the chair of the MCV Campus graduate committee a minimum of 10 working days in advance of the examination date. After passing the final examination, it shall be the responsibility of the candidate to present to the dean’s office the approved original thesis/dissertation plus the minimum required number of copies (three for M.S., four for Ph.D.) in final form suitable for binding. In consultation with the office staff, the candidate shall be responsible for the binding and the processing of the thesis through VCU Libraries and for the payment of all charges for these services.

5. A degree is granted only after all requirements have been fulfilled, including payment of all fees to the university, and after submission of the copies of the thesis for binding.

6. VCU currently requires registration for a defined credit hour level during both the didactic and research phases of advanced degree training. For programs requiring the preparation of a thesis or dissertation, there is therefore no obligatory linkage between the accumulation of credit hours and an expectation that a degree be awarded.

As a guide to monitoring the timely completion of the degree within the present enrollment framework, the accumulation of 80 credit hours for a M.S. degree and 180 credit hours for a Ph.D. degree can be taken as a reasonable measure. These credit hour totals refer to degree programs requiring the preparation of a thesis or dissertation. Unless explicitly stated, the figures cited above apply to Master of Science and Doctor of Philosophy programs offered by the School of Medicine.

Change in academic program

A student in good standing who is nearing the completion of their degree program may wish to be considered for admission to a more advanced degree administered by the School of Medicine. On more rare occasions, a student may wish to leave (withdraw) from the program in which he/she is currently enrolled and join another program at the same academic level in the School of Medicine.

In all cases the student seeking the change shall submit a hard-copy version of the VCU Application for Graduate School to the Office of Graduate Education in the School of Medicine. The one-page application must be accompanied by a letter written by the student providing the rationale for the change and the program into which the student is seeking admission. The Office of Graduate Education will review the application and the record of the student and then alert the department to the interest of the student if deemed appropriate. Students who are not making satisfactory academic progress (i.e. a student who is not in good academic standing) in a given program would not be considered candidates for a program change. In the absence of prior approval from the Office of the Dean, neither an “application” by a student directly to a program nor the “acceptance” of a student by a program will be valid. Neither students nor programs may initiate admission to a program in the School of Medicine in the absence of the approval by the Office of Graduate Education acting in consultation with the MCV Campus graduate committee.

The above applies to all changes in program (e.g. certificate level to master’s, master’s to Ph.D., program change at the same degree level).

The student adviser and advisory committee

Students receive guidance and counsel from the director of graduate programs for the appropriate program prior to appointment of
the permanent adviser. The permanent adviser holds the primary responsibility for monitoring the development of the student in the program and providing the appropriate guidance and counsel essential to the scholarly development of the student.

An advisory committee, appointed shortly after the permanent adviser is appointed, serves as both an examining and consultative body, functioning to assist the development of the student. Committee members hold a special responsibility as a source of counsel for each student.

To fulfill these objectives, committee membership must avoid the existence or appearance of conflict of interest.

A conflict of interest is a set of circumstances that increases a risk that the judgment or actions regarding a primary interest will be or may appear to be unduly influenced by a secondary interest. In the case of service as a member of a student advisory committee, the primary interest is the independent evaluation of the performance of the student, the counsel provided to the student and adviser in the planning and implementation of the scholarly project, and the counsel provided to student and adviser to ensure satisfactory academic progress and an appropriate relationship between adviser and student. Secondary interests include personal or professional relationships with the adviser which could compromise or be seen to compromise the fulfillment of the primary interest of the individual as a member of the student advisory committee.

An individual having a formal personal relationship with the adviser can provide the appearance of a conflict of interest compromising the wholly independent participation of the individual as a committee member. Similarly, the presence of multiple members of a laboratory "team," accentuated in cases where there is employer-employee relationship of the "team" members, can raise concerns with respect to a potential conflict of interest. In addition, a committee composed largely of members of a single research operation replicates the counsel already available in group meetings and is not fully consistent with the purpose and objectives of committee appointments.

The advisory committee architecture exists for multiple reasons. The guidelines for committee composition are intended to provide a balance between expertise in a disciplinary area coupled with an interdisciplinary perspective to enrich the contributions of the committee to the evolution of the scholarly work to the benefit of student and adviser. The committee provides the framework for the "inter-rater reliability" of the evaluation of the student performance and development in achieving the degree of scholarly independence consistent with the awarding of the degree. The independence of the "raters" in establishing a collective judgment with respect to student performance is central to the quality of the system and the perception of the evaluation process as equitable and not capricious.

For the above reasons the faculty of the School of Medicine shall avoid the proposed appointment to a student advisory committee individuals who have a personal relationship with the adviser or are members of the laboratory/research group of the adviser.

1. Each student shall have an adviser and an advisory committee.
2. Appointment of the adviser
   a. The initial adviser will be the director of the graduate program or his/her designee prior to appointment of the permanent adviser.
   b. A permanent adviser shall be appointed from the graduate faculty by the chair of the MCV Campus graduate committee upon recommendation of the chair of the student's major department.

Appointment should be made no later than the beginning of the fall semester following matriculation. A change in the permanent adviser may be made by the chair of the MCV Campus graduate committee upon recommendation of the chair of the major department.

3. Duties of the adviser
   a. The adviser shall, with the student's advisory committee, have responsibility for guiding the student's academic program.
   b. The adviser shall develop a plan for the student's didactic program with the student.
   c. The adviser shall, on the basis of the proposed didactic and scholarly program for the student, identify members of the faculty to comprise the student's advisory committee and elicit their agreement to serve, the adviser serving as the chair of the committee.
   d. The adviser shall supervise the student's research work and thesis preparation and be one of the examiners of the thesis (M.S.).
   e. At the close of the spring semester, the adviser shall submit to the program director or the chair of the MCV Campus graduate committee a report covering the progress of the student. Copies of the report should be provided to the student and the membership of the student advisory committee by the adviser.

4. The student's advisory committee
   a. The student's advisory committee shall be appointed no later than the end of the fall semester of the second year after matriculation by the chair of the MCV Campus graduate committee, upon recommendation of the student's adviser, review by the graduate program director and recommendation of the chair of the department of the permanent adviser. Appointment of the student advisory committee must be done within three months of the appointment of the permanent adviser and prior to the administration of comprehensive (or final) examinations. The composition of the advisory committee shall be such that significant areas of the student's scholarly program are represented in the expertise of the faculty members.
      i. The committee for the M.S. candidate shall consist of a minimum of three members as follows: the student's adviser (who serves as chair of the committee); one other member of the graduate faculty of the department/program in which the student is enrolled; and one other member of the graduate faculty from a department other than the one in which the student is enrolled.
      ii. A faculty member who is not a member of the graduate faculty may be appointed to a student advisory committee if approved by the MCV Campus graduate committee. Appointment is made by the dean of the Graduate School.
   b. Duties of the student's advisory committee:
      i. The advisory committee functions as an advisory body to ensure that timely progress toward degree completion is being achieved, as an examining body participating as appropriate for the intended degree in written qualifying examinations and conducting the oral qualifying examination and final examination, and as a consultative body to provide scholarly counsel.
      ii. The student's advisory committee shall work with the student's adviser in guiding the student's graduate program and shall meet at least annually. It is strongly recommended that the advisory committee meet with the student prior to
administration of the comprehensive examination(s) by the committee.

iii. The student’s advisory committee shall recommend and approve a degree program (including foreign language if applicable) for the student as soon as it is practical. The proposed program should be filed with the chair of the MCV Campus graduate committee no later than the third semester of study.

iv. The student’s advisory committee shall conduct the oral comprehensive and final examination.

Master of Science

1. A minimum of 24 semester course hours is required, exclusive of research credits. In practice, it is found that two years of study are usually necessary to complete the requirements. A time limit of five calendar years, beginning at the time of first registration, is placed on work to be credited toward the Master of Science degree. Generally a maximum of one-third of the hours required for a master’s degree may be transferred from another VCU program or outside institution and applied toward the degree upon recommendation of the student’s director of graduate programs with the concurrence by the chair of the MCV Campus graduate committee.

2. Each student must conduct an original investigation under the supervision of the permanent adviser, prepare a thesis reporting the results of this research and analyze its significance in relation to existing scientific knowledge. This study is reported in a thesis prepared in acceptable form and style.

3. The body of experimental work to be incorporated into the thesis is subject to the approval of the student advisory committee members. The advisory committee should, therefore, be formally consulted as the research project nears completion to ensure that there is agreement with respect to the material deemed necessary and sufficient for incorporation into the thesis. Such consultation will normally occur in the form of a meeting of the advisory committee with the student. The faculty adviser has a responsibility to advise the student when the meeting of the advisory committee for this purpose should take place.

4. The thesis is prepared in an acceptable form and style with the counsel of the faculty adviser. The faculty adviser determines when the thesis document can serve as the basis for the final oral examination (or thesis defense). With the approval of the faculty adviser, the final oral examination by the advisory committee is scheduled and the thesis document is distributed to the advisory committee. Distribution of the thesis document to the advisory committee should take place at least 10 working days in advance of the final oral examination. The Office of Graduate Education is to be informed of the scheduling of the final oral examination 10 working days in advance of the scheduled date. The Office of Graduate Education then identifies a representative of the MCV Campus graduate committee to chair the examination, and provides an announcement of the final oral examination, which includes the name and department of the candidate together with the title of the thesis and the day, place and time of the final oral examination.

5. The final oral examination is conducted by the student advisory committee at the designated time and place and is open to the faculty. A representative of the MCV Campus graduate committee serves as the chair of the examination committee and is a voting member of the examination committee. The subject matter of the examination includes the subject matter of course work as well as the content of the thesis. A favorable vote of the advisory committee with no more than one negative vote is required to indicate that the candidate has passed the final oral examination. All members of the examination committee must vote. The outcome of the final oral examination is reported to the Office of Graduate Education. If the outcome is negative, the final oral examination may be retaken with the approval of the MCV Campus graduate committee. Advance approval is requested in writing by the department on behalf of the candidate.

6. The student advisory committee approves the thesis document as acceptable after the final oral examination has been successfully completed. Approval of the thesis as acceptable is indicated by the signature of all members of the advisory committee on the signature page of the thesis. Approval of the thesis by the advisory committee must be unanimous. A thesis is not required for completion of the Master of Genetic Counseling program. In lieu of the thesis, students in this program are required to successfully pass comprehensive oral and written examinations.

Master of Public Health

The M.P.H. degree is a generalist program that allows students to focus on research or public health practice through course electives. A minimum of four semesters of full-time study (45 credit hours) is necessary to complete the degree requirements. All M.P.H. students are required to conduct a scientific investigation on a topic relevant to human and public health. The research project is conducted under the guidance of a faculty adviser and a preceptor with expertise in the topic area. The student must prepare a report of the research and give an oral presentation to the department.

Termination of enrollment

The university reserves the right to terminate the enrollment of any student for unlawful, disorderly or immoral conduct or for persistent failure to fulfill the purposes for which he or she was matriculated.

A student enrolled in a graduate program under the supervision of the MCV Campus graduate committee may be dismissed from the school in which he is enrolled for failure to meet academic requirements prescribed by his school or failure to exhibit the attitudes and skills deemed necessary to function within his chosen scientific discipline.

Any action by a graduate student in a program under the supervision of the MCV Campus graduate committee considered to be unprofessional conduct shall constitute cause for disciplinary action.

Unprofessional conduct includes, but is not limited to:

1. Fraud or deceit in gaining admission to the university, i.e., false or obviously misleading representations on the admission application
2. An act that violates the established legal standards regarding conduct of one person toward society (i.e., stealing, lying, cheating and slander)
3. Conviction of a felony involving moral turpitude
4. Plagiarism or other scientific misconduct