

# UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

## Office of Academic Affairs

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To: Academic Deans and Directors, Academic Department Heads and Program Directors, Graduate Council, Graduate Faculty Mentors, Registrar  
From: David Jones, Vice President for Academic Affairs  
Subject: Formation of Graduate Committees  
Date: 26 June 2015  
Copied to: President McGinity, Sara Axelson, Bill Gern, Alyson Hagy, Tami Benham Deal, Lane Buchanan

**General considerations:** Since the elimination of the Graduate School in 2009, many of the operations of that office were assigned to a variety of offices across campus. The Admissions Office has maintained application processes and electronically retains admission records for graduate applicants. Admissions can now more efficiently communicate with departments and potential faculty mentors regarding applications to graduate degree programs. The Registrar now reviews the Graduate Program of Study coursework and transfer hours: (<http://www.uwyo.edu/uwgrad/enrolled-students/develop-program.html>).

**Existing guidance** on committee formation was provided previously by the Office of Academic Affairs: [http://www.uwyo.edu/uwgrad/files/docs/grad\\_faculty\\_elimination\\_09.pdf](http://www.uwyo.edu/uwgrad/files/docs/grad_faculty_elimination_09.pdf). Currently, once graduate students are accepted and enrolled, the Registrar reviews the coursework identified in the Program of Study form. For interdisciplinary programs, graduate committee formation is examined by Academic Affairs. The formation of all other graduate committees was reported to the Registrar, but has not been approved by the Registrar or Academic Affairs since 2009.

The intent of this document is to a) clarify the procedural guidelines for formation of graduate committees, b) foster the standardization of committee formation across all academic units, c) ensure that committee service is recorded within the Office of Academic Affairs, and d) answer commonly asked questions related to committee service roles, exceptions, and changing faculty employment scenarios.

**What will change:** To standardize the committee creation process, **Academic Affairs will now approve all new graduate committees formed after July 1, 2015 and any changes to existing graduate committees.** Committee assignment forms should be submitted directly to Academic Affairs, Office of Graduate Education and will be forwarded to the Registrar by Academic Affairs after approval. Committees within interdisciplinary programs are currently being reviewed by Academic Affairs and their process remains unchanged. Academic Affairs will consider all new committees and will reviews any

changes to existing committees (form at: <http://www.uwyo.edu/uwgrad/enrolled-students/forms/index.html>). To be clear, only the process for reviewing committee membership has changed. **The guidelines are not new, but are instead, a reiteration of current policies and practices for committee formation.** Additional clarification is provided in response to common questions received by Academic Affairs.

### Guidelines

1. All **tenured and tenure-track UW faculty** members are eligible for graduate committee service.
2. **Outside Committee Members:** *Outside* committee members are UW faculty whose academic homes are in academic units outside of those of the student's degree program. For example, students in the Department of Ecosystem Science and Management who obtain a degree in Soils may consider faculty in Entomology (*another degree-granting academic unit* even though within the same department) as *outside* members. In the case of interdisciplinary programs (e.g. PiE), a student's faculty come from a variety of academic units. In this case, the student's outside member is selected from faculty whose academic home differs from the home department of the Committee Chair. The intent of the *outside* committee member is to serve as the reviewer of academic rigor and fairness to the student during their graduate program (both scholastically challenging and realistically achievable).
3. **External Committee Members:** *External* committee members are non-UW faculty who serve on the committee to facilitate the research and whose expertise is helpful to the study and the student. To include external committee members, the approval requires case-by-case submission of the committee assignment form along with 1) the curriculum vitae of the external member and 2) a statement by the committee chair describing the external member's potential contributions to the research. ***Inclusion of non-UW faculty does not reduce the number of UW faculty required on the committee; nor does inclusion of an external committee member eliminate the need for an outside committee member.*** *Adjunct faculty (those who hold approval for Adjunct status), non-UW employees can be approved as external members.* The role of external member is to provide input on the student's research. An external committee member is a faculty member at a peer institution or an individual holding professional expertise that will contribute to the committee and the student's research. Such an appointment pertains exclusively to work on the committee and assumes that the external member would be able to participate fully in the essential components of the degree-granting process.
4. **Other considerations in membership:** As stated in the 2009 memo from Academic Affairs, current guidance intends that "faculty members assigned to such service are prepared for it, and for guarding against conflict of interest, nepotism, inappropriate personal relationships and other pitfalls." Occasionally nepotism and personal relationships (such as spousal and domestic partner issues) have altered the graduate student process at UW. To insure the most transparent and honorably configured committee, spouses and domestic partners should not serve as the essential members (i.e. required chair, internal or outside member roles) on each

other's committees. **No faculty should serve on the graduate committee of their spouse or domestic partner.** In the interest of maintaining credible external perceptions of academic rigor and transparency and to avoid the potential for personal conflicts, committees should not contain members whose personal relationships can appear to compromise the rigor of the student's graduate process or to unfairly bias the voting potential of the committee. **Spousal and domestic partners may serve on committees as additional committee members** (e.g. an added member who serves beyond the required faculty membership).

5. **New UW Committee Members:** New UW faculty members who have not yet participated in the committee of a UW graduate student, should be mentored through the UW process **irrespective of their former experience and roles at other institutions or their years of expertise in research.** All graduate programs should provide new faculty with a documented mentoring program for direction of graduate students (e.g. handbook, assigned senior mentor etc). Although new UW faculty may have directed graduate students at other universities, the nature of UW's graduate process is somewhat unique (i.e. we lack a graduate school or graduate faculty designation for our faculty and the process enlists several university offices). It is essential that first time UW graduate faculty receive clearly documented guidance so that the graduate student process is clear and effective.
6. **Commonly asked questions related to committee membership:** Committee formation is explained in more detail in the links provided above and all faculty are encouraged to visit the links. Below are answers to commonly asked questions relative to graduate committees, some which are not addressed elsewhere.

- **Can exceptions be made in forming graduate committees?**

Academic Affairs (in consultation with academic leadership) retains the authority to override guidance on graduate committee membership. Exceptions to this guidance can be granted for a variety of reasons (for stronger research outcomes or in cases in which academic standards are strengthened). For example, non-tenure-track UW academic employees with terminal degrees in relevant disciplines or special expertise may serve on committees following case-by-case approval. To initiate exception requests the responsible program director or department head should forward the nomination of the potential committee member, including the CV and a brief explanation of the nominee's expertise to the college dean and the Office of Academic Affairs. Supporting documents should clarify the reasons that an exception is warranted and identify any safeguards set in place to ensure scholastic rigor. Such exceptions are considered by Academic Affairs on a case-by-case basis for each committee formed. College deans and Academic Affairs retain the authority to override decisions about graduate committee membership in the hopefully rare cases in which academic standards appear to be weak or where personal matters threaten the integrity of the scholarly experience.

- **Can a faculty member who is leaving UW remain on graduate committees?**

In general, all graduate students in pursuit of UW degrees must be guided by a full committee of UW faculty members. **Departing faculty may have a continued role on a graduate committee as external members.** When the departing faculty member is chairing a graduate committee, the Department Head should appoint another UW faculty member to chair the committee, so that the graduate process continues smoothly for the student. This appointment should follow consultation with the graduate student and the existing committee members to obtain effective UW faculty membership and is *reported to Academic Affairs via the Committee Assignment/Change form (link above)*. Whenever feasible, the departing faculty member should remain on the committee to continue to guide the student with consent of UW committee members and the student. Faculty leaving UW who served as committee members should also be replaced by UW faculty, but may also continue to serve as external members after consultation with the student and Department Head. In essence, the committee should be composed of the appropriate UW faculty members at all times, protecting appropriate rigor and fairness in obtaining the UW degree.

- **“I am an outside member on a graduate committee. What should I do if I believe there is a problem with the committee? (i.e. poor academic rigor or lack of fairness to the student) ”**

In any case where committee performance is compromised, the degree-granting academic unit is the first level of reporting. Any committee member who believes the committee is not sufficiently rigorous (or conversely, does not exhibit fairness to the student) should begin consultation with the committee chair and the Department Head within the academic unit. If in the judgment of the committee member, such discussion does not resolve the issue, the reporting committee member may decide to bring their concerns to the division head or Dean. Concerned faculty members may, at their own discretion, choose to report directly to Academic Affairs, only after appropriate steps have been pursued within the academic unit so that there is opportunity for issue resolution within the academic unit. Graduate students who feel they are not given fair consideration within an academic unit should meet with the Dean to express concerns. Academic Affairs can become involved at the request of the Department Head, Dean, or in direct consultation with a graduate student.

- **“I’m leaving UW but my student is almost done; can we leave the committee as is?”**

In unusual cases where the student is near completion, and the committee chair plans to leave the university, a committee change may not be needed (i.e. a committee chair leaving in May when the defense is scheduled before

the end of the summer session). This particular *exception* is determined by Academic Affairs on a case-by-case basis following the procedures for an exception described above. Exception requests require both a written request from the faculty, in consultation with the graduate student and a letter of support from the Department Head. The request should be submitted in the semester prior to the intended defense date. In this case, the documents must articulate how the needs of the student will continue to be met without undue cost or added difficulty for the student.

- **“I’m retiring. Can I still direct graduate students?”**

**Emeritus faculty**, having been tenured and awarded emeritus status at UW, retain their designation as UW faculty and their eligibility to serve on graduate committees. Board retired faculty can serve as external members after retirement.

- **“Why do I need to provide a hard copy with original signatures when I form my committee?”**

The circulation of hardcopy the committee assignment form ensures that the student has personally visited with each committee member in order to obtain signatures. However, Academic Affairs and the Registrar are collaborating to allow submission of electronic versions of the forms. Please anticipate that the Committee Assignment/Change form will be separated from the Program of Study form. Program of Study forms will require that a committee has been formed.