Program in Neuroscience – Duties as a PQE Examiner

As a PQE Examiner for a student in the Program in Neuroscience, you have three basic duties:

1. Approve the specific aims. Before the student begins writing a detailed proposal, s/he is instructed to e-mail you a one-page summary of the specific aims for your approval. Your role is to provide general feedback on the scope of the project and suitability of the aims. If the aims are wildly ambitious—more on the scale of an R01 than a thesis project—it is important that you indicate this and provide the student with an idea of which aim(s) might be eliminated and which most profitably pursued. If you happen to know that one or more of the aims have recently been, or are about to be, published by another lab, now would be an appropriate time to let the student know this. Your feedback need not be detailed. If the aims seem reasonable to you, a terse response of "approved" would be appropriate and allow the student to begin writing the remainder of the proposal. Rapid turn-around is appreciated.

2. Read the written proposal. This is a detailed description of the project (maximum 13 pages). The format is similar to the current NIH F32 format, except that we request a more detailed Background section. Preliminary data are NOT required, though they may be included. You should receive the full proposal at least 7 days before the date of the oral exam. If the student misses this deadline, it would be appropriate for you to tell them that this is unprofessional, and you may request that they postpone the exam.

3. Administer the oral exam. The exam generally lasts about two hours and will be attended by you, two other examiners, the student and the student's advisor. The student has been instructed to prepare a 25-minute presentation summarizing the project, and you are free to interrupt with questions at any point. While the main focus of the exam is the research proposal, the student is also expected to demonstrate substantial knowledge in the field of the proposal and in related areas of neuroscience. For example, if the proposal was aimed at understanding the information transfer along the pathway from retina to visual cortex in the adult rodent, it would be fair game for you to ask the student to describe what is known about the development of this pathway. The goals of the exam are to determine (1) if the student is prepared to undertake this project, and (2) to make the student and advisor aware of areas where improvement is needed. If you feel that the student has substantial deficiencies in his/her knowledge, intellectual approach, written proposal, or ability to communicate, then the outcome of the exam should be a “Special Committee Review”.

Subsequent commitment: none. In most cases, the PQE examiners continue on as the Dissertation Advisory Committee (DAC) by mutual consent, but you are not obligated to do so. By the same token, the student is free to choose other faculty to serve on the DAC.