



## Composing a Thesis Research Committee

Dear Labby,

I passed my PhD qualifying exam and am now putting together my thesis research advisory committee. I thought this would be straightforward but have run into a problem: The head of my lab insists on defining its composition. She says it must include her husband, who is an independent faculty member and chair of the department, as well as an assistant professor they recruited three years ago. The problem is that all three of them work in close collaboration, are co-PIs on grants, and co-authors on all their publications. Having them be my committee would make it feel like a lab meeting, whereas I was hoping to get some different perspectives.

All three are experts on the focus of my thesis research (signal transduction pathways in the endometrium). However, I really wanted my committee to have one or two members who have a broader view and might be more skeptical about my ideas. My lab head has resisted this, vetoing several faculty members I have suggested on the grounds that they are either “unqualified” or are her “enemies.” There is a requirement for three members beside the lab head so we are currently still negotiating for who the fourth member is going to be. Since no one else seems to be willing to advise me, I thought that maybe Labby could help. I feel really kind of trapped.

—Uncommitted

Dear Uncommitted,

If your mentor has “enemies” among the faculty (whether scientific or personal), it is reasonable for her to wish them not on your committee. Enemies though may be a warning sign about how she is perceived by colleagues, or how she perceives her colleagues. As to the three members she is insisting on (herself, her husband, and the assistant professor), Labby congratulates you on your instinct that this is too narrowly cast, for it certainly is. In fact, in wishing for more breadth and perhaps more rigor on your committee, you are already displaying scientific maturity.

Of course, there is the issue of how hard you want to push in terms of risking possible retribution. Your mentor already knows you are of strong mind on this but Labby hopes that your disagreement has not yet become an unpleasantness (as our British colleagues would say). It is likely that neither of you want it to be. And if you wish to continue in this lab, the circumstances do not lend themselves to changing the three members already on your committee. So keep engaging your lab head on a mutually acceptable fourth member.

Have you asked her for ideas? Have you voiced objections to suggestions she has already made, objections that point to your desire for greater committee skepticism? Have you expressed other rationales? What are the compositions of committees for other students working in your PI’s lab, her husband’s, or that of the assistant professor? Does there seem to be a consistent xenophobia at play in composing their other students’ committees? Or has this issue arisen for the first time, with your committee? (If the latter case, then why?) Sharing your reasoning and pondering these questions may help you decide how to proceed.

It should be possible to solve this by continued, respectful dialog. If not, contacting the Dean of your graduate school would likely not be worthwhile. Such interventions would probably cast a pall over your committee and even your thesis progress in the lab. Frankly, if continued dialogue with your lab head doesn’t lead to a mutually agreeable solution, this might mean that successfully pursuing your research in this lab and with this group might be problematic.

Try to maintain a positive outlook and be optimistic. But be true to the fine instincts you are already displaying. If you can’t agree on a committee, this may be indicative of larger problems. And you may need to seek another lab. Labby senses that any good lab would be very lucky to have you. ■

—Labby

*Direct your questions to [labby@ascb.org](mailto:labby@ascb.org). Authors of questions chosen for publication may indicate whether or not they wish to be identified. Submissions may be edited for space and style.*