

## MA Program Thesis Guidelines

There are a number of options available to MA students for meeting the thesis requirement. Most students complete a traditional empirical research study, for which they collect and analyze data, for their thesis project. However, for some students, one or more of the alternatives to the traditional empirical study may be more fitting and more helpful to them in furthering their career goals. In such cases, the student has a number of alternatives available to him or her. These alternatives include research focused options such as the analysis of secondary data or a meta-analysis of published empirical studies. These alternatives are described below in some detail so that the expectations for each are clear from the outset. While these descriptions have been created to help provide guidance and standards for each type of project, it will be up to the student's advisor and committee to determine whether the project is of sufficient quality and substance to be the equivalent of a more traditional thesis project. These alternatives will be equally stringent and will require the same level of work and commitment to complete. Further, a thesis project, regardless of type, shall be a scholarly document that enhances existing empirical or clinical science. It should be noted that not all thesis advisors will be open to serving as a mentor for all options listed below, therefore, a student interested in doing an alternative type of thesis must ensure their advisor is capable of and willing to mentor that type of project.

The following are options available to MA students to meet the thesis requirement:

(1) Original empirical study

This type of project entails the student working closely with his or her thesis advisor to formulate original research questions and hypotheses and to design a study that will evaluate and test these questions. Original data will be collected and analyzed and IRB approval will be necessary prior to beginning this stage of the thesis project. A written manuscript will result and will be in the format of the traditional APA research-style manuscript that includes sections for an introduction (a review of relevant literature and introduction to the present study), methods (participants, materials and procedures of the study), results (outcome of the data analysis) and discussion (an analysis of the meaning of the results and what these results mean for the field as well as limitations to the study conducted). A committee of three faculty members (the advisor plus two others) is required and will meet at least twice throughout the duration of the project: once after a written thesis proposal (introduction, methods and proposed analyses) is prepared and again after the final thesis manuscript is complete. During these meetings the student is expected to present his or her project to the committee and answer any questions regarding the project prior to the committee determining whether the project is ready to move on to data collection in the case of the proposal meeting or whether the project meets approval for completion in the case of the final thesis. While this type of project may entail a more lengthy process than some other alternatives, it is highly recommended for those who plan to continue on to traditional research-based Ph.D. programs.

(2) Analysis of archival or existing dataset

This type of project is identical to the original empirical study except in the collection of data. For an archival analysis, the student analyzes data that has previously been collected, typically through a study done by the mentor. It is a requirement for this type of project that the research questions to be answered in the thesis project be original and not previously tested or analyzed in other studies using this data. Even though this type of project does not involve the collection of new or original data, IRB approval is still required prior to initiating the analyses of the existing data. The remainder of the procedures for this type of project are the same as described above for the original empirical thesis project.

(3) Meta-analysis

A meta-analysis is a statistical reanalysis of previously published studies on a related topic. The idea is to combine, and in some cases contrast, the results of prior studies in order to detect overall patterns of findings regarding a particular topic. For this type of thesis project, the student would identify a topic that has been sufficiently studied so that there are numerous research studies available on the topic. As this type of project involves advanced statistical knowledge, the student would work closely with a mentor who has knowledge of meta-analysis techniques. Completion of the project would include, but would not be limited to, a thorough literature review to identify appropriate studies for inclusion and exclusion from the analyses, preparation of a literature review that culminates in an explanation of the reasoning behind the reanalysis, presentation of the statistical methods used and results found, and a discussion of the results that places the findings in context with the relevant literature.

The student conducting a meta-analysis for a thesis project will have a thesis committee of three faculty members (the advisor and two others) and the procedures for approval will be the same as those described above for the empirical thesis project. A written proposal (including the articles that will be included in the meta-analysis) will be prepared and approved through a committee meeting before the actual analyses will be conducted. A second committee meeting will take place upon completion of the final manuscript. The final written meta-analysis will follow guidelines set forth by APA that specifically pertain to this type of project. (see Meta-Analysis Reporting Standards; APA Manual, Appendix).

(4) Program Evaluation

Students may elect to conduct a program evaluation as their thesis project. A program evaluation generally entails collecting data to determine the effectiveness of a particular program, policy or project. For this type of thesis project, the student must have access to such

a program and must either be able to carry out the data collection necessary for such an evaluation or must be privy to already existing data that can be used to evaluate a program. An example of such a project would be an evaluation of an existing psycho-educational program designed to reduce bullying among 5<sup>th</sup> graders. To conduct a program evaluation, one must be able to conduct some sort of pre- and post-evaluation of the participants in the program. In this case, data might be collected on the knowledge level of participants before and after the program as well as the number of bullying incidents taking place for the some set time period prior to the initiation of the program and then again for that period of time after the completion of the program in order to determine the effectiveness of the intervention. This is but one example. An acceptable thesis project taking this approach can be of any type of relevant program, provided there is access to the participants before and after, or there is access to existing pre/post data that could be analyzed to determine program effectiveness.

The procedures for this type of thesis project would be identical to that of a traditional empirical thesis if new data will be collected or to that of an analysis of archival data if the data to be analyzed already exists. Regardless of whether new or existing data will be analyzed, the student will form a three person committee (mentor & two others) and will prepare a proposal document that includes: a literature review that describes the intent and empirical support behind the program to be evaluated, a detailed description of the program itself, a description of the methods to be used when collecting and/or analyzing the data to be obtained, and a description of the statistical analyses that will be conducted to determine the program's effectiveness. A meeting will be held to ensure the proposal and plans for the program evaluation are adequate. IRB approval will be necessary prior to the collection or analysis of any data. A final thesis document will include the same sections and formatting as are used in the traditional thesis project and must be approved via a formal thesis committee meeting that is held after the formal document has been completed.