



# FITCHBURG STATE UNIVERSITY

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## HONORS PROGRAM

### **Guidelines for the Fitchburg State University Honors Thesis**

#### **Purpose of the Honors Thesis**

The Honors Thesis serves three main objectives: 1) to provide you with opportunities to pursue an individually tailored area of study; 2) to provide you with a capstone experience which draws upon your previous studies in their major; and 3) to provide you with an opportunity to pursue in-depth research and/or carry through a substantive project to an appropriate point of closure.

Your Honors Thesis will provide you with the chance to work closely with a member of the Fitchburg State faculty to expand and explore the skills and knowledge you have gained over the course of your four years at the University. This experience will allow you to differentiate yourself from other students who merely completed coursework towards graduation and will be valuable in presenting yourself to prospective employers or graduate schools.

It is not required that you write your thesis in your major; however, most students do conduct work that relates to their field.

## **Types of Thesis Projects**

Most theses are academic work, often resembling a scaled-down master's thesis. It should be obvious, though, that a thesis is not just another research paper. In addition to being more substantial, a thesis will thoroughly investigate the previous research on a topic, and, most importantly, it will also include your own insights and contributions to the topic, emanating from your critical engagement in the process.

Other theses take a "creative" approach, resulting in a less traditional product. Students in film, music, new media, fine art, theatre, dance, or creative writing might find this more in line with their interests and aptitudes. Other theses might center on a new periodical, an invention, or something we might not even be able to imagine. In all of these cases, we ask for an artist's statement, a 15-page written piece accompanying the thesis that contextualizes the work, describes each stage of the creative process, and describes its scholarly content.

All theses need to be contextualized. A science thesis consists not just of the results of an experiment; it includes how and why the experiment was conducted as it was, what research the experiment built upon, and its importance. A history thesis is not just an analysis of historical events or trends; it provides a context and framework for the analysis. In the same way, an artist's statement, in whatever format, provides a contextualization for a creative work. This statement should serve to explain your creative work to an audience outside of your field.

## **Collaborative Theses**

The Honors Program is open to exploring options for joint thesis work by groups of Honors Students. The Honors Program accepts proposals for collaborative theses under the following conditions: if there is a strong rationale for the thesis to be collaborative; the students have the same thesis advisor; and it is clearly indicated, in writing and from the outset, who is responsible for what part(s) of the work.

## **Length of the Thesis Project**

The length of your thesis project depends on many variables, including your major or area of concentration, the particular topic your thesis addresses, and the way in which you present your completed project. In the humanities and social sciences, theses often are between 50 and 100 pages; in engineering, the sciences, and mathematics, they are often shorter (30 - 40 pages). The explanatory paper written by a student doing a "creative" or other "non-standard" thesis may be shorter, perhaps 10 - 15 pages, though a creative fiction thesis might exceed 100 or 200 pages.

## **Choosing Your Topic/Advisor**

Perhaps you are certain as to the topic and the focus of your thesis. In this scenario your next step is to find an advisor. Topic in hand, you might informally chat with professors

with whom you have had good experiences in the past. One of them might be a good candidate, or they might be able to direct you to others for whom the topic might be more appropriate. This may take some time, but you will be learning in the process. Don't be afraid to knock on doors.

Alternatively, perhaps you have a particular professor in mind that you always thought would be a perfect thesis advisor. Your next step is to see if the professor has ideas that might excite your interest. If your first choice doesn't work out, there will certainly be other faculty members who have piqued your interest. Keep an open mind; enjoy your talks with these scholars.

In both cases, you will make a better impression if you first do a little research (departmental web pages are excellent for this) to learn about the faculty member's scholarly interests. Indeed, look up some recent papers they have written and read them - the faculty member will be flattered and you will have a better idea of what they do .

Your Thesis Advisor must be a faculty member at Fitchburg State University. Your choice of advisor should be based on the scholarly expertise of the potential advisor as well as the ability of the two of you to communicate and collaborate on your endeavor. The relationship must be one of mutual respect: as you rely on your advisor for support and encouragement, you must demonstrate a serious and scholarly commitment to work. Often students find that they are most comfortable working with advisors with whom they've already taken classes. This is also more comfortable for the advisor who has a sense of the student before embarking on the thesis. While this may require you to be somewhat flexible in choice of topic, it may turn out best for both you and your advisor. On the other hand, if you took a class with a professor and loved the experience but the project you have in mind is not related to this professor's area or is not the type of project that this faculty member believes is worth developing, this professor would not be a good choice for you. It is important for you both to share a vision of what the final product will be and that you come to an agreement about how that final product could be achieved. Regardless of any prior relationship, it is crucial that both you and your advisor have a clear understanding of the expectations for your roles in the project.

### **Registration for Thesis**

Registering for thesis occurs during or in the weeks following the Registration Period prior to the semester you will begin thesis work. You will need to complete a Honors Thesis Registration form that requires you to include an abstract of the proposed project. This form will need to be signed by you, your Supervisor for the Project (your Thesis Advisor), and the Coordinator of the Honors Program. Once the semester begins, you should be meeting with your Thesis Advisor on a regular basis (typically weekly or biweekly).

In addition to the choice of a Thesis Advisor, you will be asked to choose a Second Reader for your project once the semester has begun. This person does not necessarily

need to be a faculty member at Fitchburg State University, but should have knowledge of your thesis area.

### **Expectations of Thesis Students**

The Honors Thesis is a six-credit project that is typically divided into two semesters of work: Honors Thesis/Project I(3 credits) and Honors Thesis/Project II (3 credits). The workload rule for Honors Thesis/Project I and II is expected to conform to the Carnegie Rule of 45 hours of work per credit earned (approximately 9 hours per week for 135 hours per semester; 270 hours for the project total).

Most students begin their theses at the start of their senior years, however some students, due to internship, student teaching, or other obligations, opt to begin theses in the spring of their junior years. In rare cases, a student opts to complete the full thesis in a single semester. The difficulty with single semester theses is that there is much less opportunity for reflection on the project as one works and there is not time to change topics if one is unhappy with the direction of the work.

In addition to the research and creation of your project, you are expected to present on your work multiple times during the thesis process:

- At the end of the first semester of your thesis work, you present your research prospectus/report at a group meeting. Presentations are typically 15-20 minutes, with time available for questions following your presentation. The basic audience consists of your Thesis Advisor, Second Reader, and the Coordinator of the Honors Program, but all Fitchburg State faculty, students, and staff, as well your friends and family members, are invited to attend.
- You will submit an abstract to and present at the Fitchburg State University Undergraduate Research Conference held in the spring.
- You will submit an abstract to and present at the Statewide Undergraduate Research Conference that is typically held at UMass-Amherst in the spring.
- At the end of the second semester of thesis, you present your completed research project at another group meeting that mirrors the meeting you had for your Honors Thesis Research prospectus/report.
- For this final presentation, you should be prepared to give a presentation of your work, as well as an analysis of your method and approach.

### **Additional Requirements**

Most Honors theses don't require any special permissions. However, if **your thesis** involves human subjects, animal care, or hazardous materials, you must receive clearance from the appropriate committee or authority, such as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or a similar committee. You should discuss this process with your advisor; often, they will have experience in securing the proper form of authorization.

### **Responsibilities of Your Advisor**

It is essential that you understand the responsibilities of the thesis advisor, and equally important that you communicate these responsibilities to a prospective advisor. Occasionally, it will cause the faculty member to rethink the advisability of taking on the position. Remember that YOU are responsible for the timely and successful completion of your thesis. It is this independence and commitment that separates thesis work from normal coursework. That said, the thesis advisor agrees to: work with you to refine and focus your interests into a suitable thesis project; provide, for each semester of thesis work, a clear set of expectations for the thesis project, addressing benchmarks, length, assessment, and other aspects germane to work in the particular discipline; help identify an appropriate second reader; be prepared to meet with the student regularly (weekly or at least biweekly); inform the Coordinator of the Honors Program if there appears to be indications that the thesis project is not on track for completion; read and comment on drafts of the thesis as it develops; grade you in both the HON 4990 (Thesis/Project I) and HON 4991 (Thesis/Project II) courses; and participate in end of the semester thesis research report and defense meetings.

### **Grading of Thesis Work**

As experienced teachers and researchers, faculty members are accustomed to the process of working independently, but this process is a new and frequently difficult one for students, and should be regarded as one of the accomplishments of the thesis project. (Along the same lines, faculty may unconsciously underestimate how much help they give students in a regular course by the course's very nature and direction-its careful sequence of readings, assignments, and lectures. Honors Thesis students face the task of creating their course-for which only partial models may exist-in conjunction with their Thesis Advisor and Second Reader.)

Grading for the project is then holistic. A thesis advisor will consider the following in determining grades: the student's selection of a significant subject/project to pursue; the manner in which the student pursued his/her research and dealt with obstacles or new situations (which may range from equipment failure to new experiences such as writing a 50-plus-page paper or creative piece or conducting interviews and satisfying an IRB review panel); the skills and knowledge the student gained from the project; and the final paper/creative piece and presentations.

Please note that the standard for the Honors Thesis is "appropriate point of closure," rather than "point of conclusion." The Honors Thesis is an **undergraduate** capstone experience and is not intended to be a mini-masters thesis in undergraduate guise. Please keep in mind that masters candidates write their theses after completing a number of courses on the masters level; our undergraduate students are conducting their research without the experience of this level of extended study.

Nor should the goal of the Honors Thesis be regarded as production of a publishable paper in the field. Although some students do in fact produce work that is publishable, this is not a requirement for successful completion of the honors thesis. (Most masters

theses and many dissertations are never published or published only after extensive revision and further work). It is, however, appropriate to expect that the final paper for the project be presented in the established format for publication in the field.

### **Standards for Thesis**

In addition to serving as the Capstone Experience for Honors students in our program, the Thesis project allows the program to assess the extent to which students are achieving the goals of the program. As such, all theses are evaluated to determine the extent to which they meet the following standards identified by the program:

- **Quality of Sources:** Thesis incorporates and makes significant use of rich sources. The thesis may refer to some general sources, but it makes very significant use of high-quality sources written for the field or subject of the thesis.
- **Quality of Research:** Theses demonstrates in-depth research in the subject matter of the thesis.
- **Quality of Written Communication:** Thesis displays mastery of writing and shall avoid significant errors in writing and grammar. The thesis uses appropriate vocabulary. The thesis makes use of a clear and logical plan of organization. The thesis uses accurate and complete citations.
- **Quality of Oral Communication:** In presenting the thesis, the student displays fluidity and confidence as a speaker. The student maintains effective eye contact with the audience. The student clearly explains the main argument of the thesis, and demonstrates a mastery of the relevant evidence and cites examples. If the student uses note cards or power points slides, the student does not simply read these aloud word-for-word.
- **Initiative:** The student displays initiative in developing and working on the thesis. The student helped to develop a vision for the project and followed through on fulfilling that vision.
- **Creativity:** The student left their own imprint on the thesis. The student went beyond simply reciting facts to advance their own conclusions or develop their own materials.

Some standards, based on the nature of the thesis projects, will not apply in every case. The assessment of these projects is not related to a student's grade; it is meant entirely for program evaluation.

### **Writing the Thesis**

Writing a thesis requires planning wisely and the commitment of sufficient time. As a three-credit course each semester, you should be devoting on the order of 9 hours per

week (including meetings, research, etc.) to your thesis. Realize that you will have to do several revision/iterations with your advisor - no one writes a thesis in one draft. You should discuss the proper "audience" for your project with your advisor. Some advisors have strong feelings about this, and you should follow their recommendations unless you have compelling reasons not to. Generally, thesis projects shouldn't be written for experts in the field nor should they be written for complete novices. Much of the format of the thesis is up to you, in consultation with your advisor. Disciplines have specific formats for research writing and for documenting sources.

## **Resources**

### *Writing Tutors*

Individual Writing tutoring, a service of the Tutor Center, is available for all students at Fitchburg State University.

### *Honors Program Funds*

The Honors Program may have funds available for basic office supplies and copying. Please speak to the Honors Coordinator if you have funding needs.

This handbook uses some language from the Thesis Handbook of the University of Maine. Permission was given for use of this material.