GUIDE FOR HONORS THESIS ADVISORS AND THESIS COMMITTEE MEMBERS

2017-2018
I. What is an Honors Thesis? How does it differ from a Master’s Thesis?

The majority of Honors 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, not even a very, very long research paper. In addition to being more substantial, a thesis will thoroughly investigate the previous research on a topic, and it will also include your advisee’s own contributions to the topic, an outgrowth of their critical engagement in the process.

Other theses take a “creative” (of course, all theses are creative!) approach and may result in a less traditional product. Students in art, music, new media, theatre, dance, and creative writing might find this more in line with their interests and aptitudes. Yet other theses involve, to a great extent, a product which might be a disciplinary conference, a new periodical, an invention, or something we might not even be able to imagine; the options are almost endless! In all of these cases, we ask that your advisee provide a written statement which contextualizes the work and describes its scholarly content. You will need to sign and approve this form after your advisee completes it before they can submit it to the Honors College.

The thesis process as well as the acceptance of a particular project is decentralized. We understand that the people best able to determine an appropriate thesis topic are our colleagues in those disciplines. If you feel someone else may be a better thesis advisor or have suggestions for possible thesis committee members which would fit well with the topic, please share these with your advisee.

Unlike the student you may know whether two faculty members tend to not get along and may be able to guide your advisee away from any potential awkwardness by pointing this out. We strongly advise our thesis students to always consult with you, as their advisor, before asking individuals to serve on their thesis committees.

In many cases the student will be using the thesis instead of completing a capstone in their major academic discipline. If this is the case, please keep this in mind when considering topics the student suggests and how easily departmental approval for those topics may be obtained.
II. As a thesis advisor, I am agreeing to:

- work with the student to refine and focus the student’s interests into a suitable thesis project;
- provide clear expectations for the thesis/project, addressing length, assessment, and other aspects germane to scholarship in the particular discipline;
- help identify appropriate thesis committee members;
- convene a meeting, no later than three weeks into the semester in which the student will defend, with the thesis committee to address the expectations for the thesis;
- be prepared to meet with the student regularly (at least biweekly, but we encourage weekly meetings) throughout the duration of the project;
- read and comment on drafts of the thesis as it develops;
- chair the student’s thesis & reading list defense;
- chair the thesis committee’s deliberation on the level of honors to be awarded;
- grade the student in HON498 and HON499; and
- participate in the year-end Honors Celebration if possible.

Remember: Your ADVISEE is responsible for the timely and successful completion of their thesis. It is this independence and commitment that separates thesis work from normal coursework.

III. In addition to the thesis, what else is the student required to produce?

The student will also complete an annotated reading list of books and, sometimes, a few movies and paintings. The annotation may take either a traditional annotative system or a narrative structure. The importance is its annotation, rather than its format. This is one of the key areas where the Honors Thesis process differs from the master’s thesis process. As described by one former Honors College Associate, “[the] reading list should draw a picture of [your advisee] as an undergraduate.”

As a general rule reading lists should not be filled with classics and things meant to impress thesis committee members. If your advisee does this, please suggest they refer to their Thesis Handbook for more detailed instructions on completing a reading list.
IV. Instructions to the Jury

Preface
Charged by the Honors Council to develop guiding principles to assist Honors College thesis committees in their deliberations following a thesis defense, the following “Instructions to the Jury” were written in Spring 2004. The Honors Council unanimously endorsed these principles and instructed them to be disseminated to thesis committees beginning with the 2004-05 academic year.

The Honors College recognizes both the autonomy of thesis committees formed under its auspices and the subjective nature of any evaluation process. The intent of the principles described here is to aid each committee as it endeavors to fulfill its role in coming to an appropriate Honors decision based upon commonly held values within the discipline, the Honors College, and the University.

Instructions to the Jury
Or, Things to Think About at the End of a Thesis Defense

The Evidence
The decision on the level (No Honors, Honors, High Honors, and Highest Honors) to be awarded to the Honors candidate should include assessments of the following components:

1. The thesis or project
2. The presentation of the thesis/project
3. The discussion with the committee of the thesis/project
4. The reading list
5. The discussion with the committee of the reading list

Without question, the actual thesis work or project should carry the most weight, as it is the physical evidence presented by the candidate to represent the entirety of the thesis experience. However, each of the other facets is crucial to a successful final Honors exercise, and the components may reinforce or explicate each other. For example, the student’s command of the material occasionally becomes more evident through the presentation and discussion at the defense than it was in the written project.

Moreover, as the mission of the Honors College is to both broaden and deepen the student’s education, a reading list and subsequent discussion that speak to the breadth of the candidate’s undergraduate experience is of paramount importance. A fundamental goal of Honors education is for students to think seriously about a wide range of subjects and ideas and to speak cogently about them.
The Evaluation
The evaluation of the thesis/project should include assessment of originality of thought evidenced in the process and the product, independence and self-direction of the student, creativity, command of the material and the subject, understanding of the importance and context of the work, appropriateness of the methodologies employed, and written and oral expression. Individual thesis work may involve other significant facets as well, related to the discipline or particular project.

Evaluation of the reading list and discussion should focus on breadth of ideas and works, clear expression of the influence of the texts on the student and her/his education, ability to make connections among the texts and to other areas of discourse, depth of analysis, and ability to engage in thoughtful dialogue.

The Deliberation
Determining the Honors level is often challenging. Thesis committees are charged with rewarding the thesis students for their hard work and commitment while ensuring the continuing integrity of the individual decisions. Disciplinary differences preclude standardization of specifics indicating Honors levels; the intent of having a broadly based thesis committee, with experience both in the discipline and in Honors education, is to provide a basis for deliberations that will yield an appropriate result.

There are four possible outcomes: No Honors, Honors, High Honors, and Highest Honors. A student who completes the project, as laid out by the advisor and student, in a competent and complete manner is awarded (at least) Honors. The Honors College encourages advisors to be honest with Honors students if this seems to be an unlikely conclusion, understanding that the student may still elect to bring the thesis to the full committee. A decision of No Honors does not necessarily mean that the student has not fulfilled the capstone requirement. This is a departmental decision, usually depending on the advisor’s assessment of the work completed.

High Honors and Highest Honors are awarded to students who perform, in all or most of the facets discussed above, at an unusual or outstanding level; all components should play a role in this assessment. A student whose work is unusually strong in all the components will often receive High Honors as will one whose work is outstanding in a few of them.

Highest Honors should be reserved for the small percentage of Honors students whose work is exceptional, indicated by an outstanding performance in all of the components. Various benchmarks are occasionally used, e.g. favorable comparison to Master’s work in the discipline, publishable research, a mastery of subject and context far exceeding all expectations coupled with exceptional presentation of both thesis and reading list.

The committee may determine that a level of Honors will be granted only after the candidate completes specific revisions (more extensive than are typically required for final submission of a thesis) or additions. They may assign evaluation of this additional work to the thesis advisor, or they may ask that they see the final version either individually or as a group.
N.B. It is customary for committees to try to reach consensus during their deliberations. To this end, members of the committee may first sequentially express their analyses of the thesis defense. Due to the primacy of the advisor’s position, both in terms of working with the student and, typically, expertise in the subject area, we recommend that the advisor presents her/his comments after the other members of the committee have done so. We recognize that often the advisor can provide important insight to set the thesis work in context within the discipline or sub-discipline. After these initial expressions, it is common for deliberations to continue in an informal manner working toward the final decision. However, there if the committee believes a vote is the best way to determine the outcome, that is acceptable.

V. Contacting the Honors College

If you have any questions, please contact the Honors College staff, and we will do our best to help!

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