

Fresno State MPA Thesis Information & Suggestions

Thesis Project

The Thesis Project fulfills the requirement for a culminating experience in MPA masters programs. The thesis project is a student-driven, individual research study under the supervision of a Faculty Chair. Students who opt to write a thesis often choose to do so because they are interested in pursuing a research-based career in the public or non-profit sector or as a member of the academy. This handout describes the thesis project and its requirements, and provides students with some insight into the independent research endeavor.

What is a Thesis?

A thesis is the written product of a systematic study of a significant problem. It identifies the problem, states the major assumptions, explains the significance of the undertaking, sets forth the sources for and the methods of gathering information, analyzes the data, and offers a conclusion or recommendation. The finished product showcases originality, critical and independent thinking, appropriate organization, language, and format, high level of writing competency, and thorough documentation.

The goal of the thesis process is to develop independent, original, empirical scholarship under the guidance of a faculty committee. Thesis scholarship must be original research and should include theoretical and empirical contributions. A thesis is an independent, single-student effort to create original research. The thesis is a good option for students who have a strong interest in a specific research question that they would like to pursue in great depth. Meetings with faculty are on an occasional, as needed basis rather than part of a regularly scheduled class. Students who are self-motivated, organized, good at keeping themselves on a schedule, and able to meet deadlines without reminders tend to be successful and graduate on time when selecting the thesis option for degree completion.

Other aspects of the thesis process students may consider are cost and time. First, the thesis may come with additional costs that are not applicable to the Comprehensive Exam. For example, costs of conducting research (e.g., travel, participant incentives, etc.) and formatting the thesis for publication are incurred by students. While there are some possible funds or scholarships to defray these costs, these are the student's responsibility. The second consideration is time. As mentioned, the thesis is an independent research effort meaning that there is no prescribed time to completion. Thesis research can be delayed for many reasons, including challenges obtaining data, meeting IRB requirements (if applicable, see below), revisions required by the Faculty Chair and committee members, and other things.

For some students, this is the first time they are completing a project outside of the normal class schedule which can be hard to adjust to. It's important to have transparent conversations with your Faculty Chair about the process. Theses average around 75-100 pages and often involve human subjects research or analyzing original datasets. A thesis typically contains the following major sections, divided into chapters:

Introduction/Background, Literature Review, Methods, Findings/Results (sometimes more than

one chapter), Discussion/Conclusion, References, Appendices. Theses conform to scholarly standards in terms of formatting and referencing.

In the MPA programs, we typically follow American Psychological Association (APA) 7th Edition formatting guidance. Some MPA students have had the opportunity to present their thesis research at academic conferences, publish versions of their thesis research in academic journals (often with assistance from faculty), and expand their thesis research while enrolled in PhD programs.

Requirements

The formal requirements for a thesis project are set by the College of Graduate Studies. Some of these requirements include: Thesis Committee Formation: The thesis committee is composed of at least three full-time faculty members. At least two of the members, including the committee chair, must hold permanent faculty appointments, or be an approved emeritus faculty including faculty in the Faculty Early Retirement Program. The first two committee members must be faculty from the degree program in which the thesis is written. The third committee member can be a faculty member from a degree program other than the program in which the thesis is written.

Students should begin with identifying a Committee Chair. The Chair should be someone who has related expertise to the proposed topic of interest or study methodology, and/or be someone the student feels they can work well with. Students should approach faculty who may serve as their Chair for an initial conversation to discuss the project and possible collaboration. Students should also think about who might serve as the 2nd and 3rd members of their committee. Students can consult with their Chair and then approach the prospective 2nd and 3rd members with their thesis idea and request to serve on their committee. Students should discuss the outreach process with their Chair for more specific guidance.

Thesis Committee Roles:

- Chair (within program): The Thesis Chair will guide the thesis project and set the parameters for completion of the research study in conversation with the student. The Chair should provide guidance and support on developing the research question fully, identifying and solidifying research design and data, completing IRB approvals, reviewing and providing feedback on thesis drafts, and approving the move forward to present the thesis to the committee for review and approval.
- 2nd Member (within program): The second member of the committee, who is a faculty member within the program, should be selected for their topical and/or methodological expertise and is available to provide guidance on specific aspects of the research project as identified by the student and their Chair. The second member will read the thesis in full once provided by the Thesis Chair and offer feedback to the student, revisions for approval, and confirmation of completion.
- 3rd Member (inside or outside program): The third member of the committee, should be selected for their topical and/or methodological expertise and can offer insight and perspective from another discipline. The third member may provide guidance on specific aspects of the research project as identified by the student and their Chair. The third member

will read the thesis in full once provided by the Thesis Chair and offer feedback to the student, revisions for approval, and confirmation of completion.

These role descriptions serve as general guidance. You should have an in-depth conversation with the Faculty Chair to establish the roles and responsibilities of the members of the committee, and the process by which you communicate these roles and responsibilities to committee members.

Communicating with your Thesis Committee: This may be the most important information in this policy guide for thesis students. Communicating with your Faculty Chair and Committee Members is the key to a smoother thesis study and process. Faculty will agree to work with you when you demonstrate professionalism, responsiveness, and focus in your work. Once you've identified your Faculty Chair, establish the parameters around communication. What are the best modalities (in-person, email, etc.)? How often should you communicate? How quickly should you expect a response from your Chair? How do they advise you to communicate with your other committee members? What is the timeline they see as appropriate and will agree to? The student drives this communication, but these are among the questions you want to have answers to.

Required Forms:

The student must obtain the following [forms](#) from the Division of Graduate Affairs:

- Register Intent
- Electronic Approval
- Submit Document

- In addition, they must complete the Advance to Candidacy [Form](#)

These forms must be signed by all committee members and the graduate adviser. The Division of Graduate Affairs will then review the composition of the student's committee, verifying that it meets university requirements. Submission deadlines and other administrative information are available through Graduate Studies.

Enrolling in a course for Thesis Hours:

Students must enroll in 3 units of Course MPA 299 Thesis, for which the Division of Graduate Affairs will award a grade of CR. Some students may need to enroll in an additional 3 units of MPA 299C Thesis Extension during a subsequent semester to finish their thesis. Consult with the Program Coordinator and/or Thesis Chair for guidance. The MPA program may also recommend completing an independent study prior to registering for thesis credits. Talk with your thesis chair or the Graduate Director about this.

Timelines and Key Deadlines

There are numerous important timelines and deadlines thesis students must consider. Be sure to consult with the Graduate Coordinator and Division of Graduate Studies for up-to-date milestones/deadlines.

Suggested Timeline for Thesis

One of the most important things students can do to successfully complete the thesis is develop a timeline for progressing through the project. One strategy is to identify the final

deadlines for submitting the thesis and work backwards considering all of the other demands or commitments you have (and that your committee members have!). For a May graduation, the thesis completion date is typically the third week of March/first week of April. Below is a suggested timeline for completing the thesis:



First Year/ Year Prior to Graduation if Part Time Student

- Fall and Spring semesters: When possible, use class assignments as an opportunity to review literature and explore topics related to your thesis interest and narrow your thesis question.
- Spring semester: Begin identifying your thesis committee chair (and possible members). Discuss your topic area with your faculty advisor. Begin building a literature review for your thesis. Begin drafting a sample methods section based on your methods courses (MPA 201).

- End of Spring semester: Work to form your thesis committee and finalize your thesis topic. Ideal date to draft a brief (1-3 page) thesis proposal.
 - If you plan to collect human subjects data for your thesis, end of Spring semester/beginning of summer also is the latest advised date for submitting an IRB proposal for review.
- Summer: Collection of any data for inclusion in thesis (after IRB approval). Begin data analysis.

Second/Final Year if Part Time Student

- Fall: Conclusion of data analysis and beginning of writing thesis analysis sections.
- Winter break: Finalize a solid first draft of your thesis. Send it to your Chair.
- Late-January: Suggested date to send thesis to full thesis committee, after receiving permission and approval from your thesis chair (giving committee members 2 weeks for review and feedback). You should expect substantial feedback from all committee members and will need time to incorporate this feedback into your thesis.
- Second week of March: Suggested sign off date from thesis chair and committee members
- Last week of March/First Week of April of Spring graduating: Final deadline to submit thesis to the Graduate Studies Office.

This timeline is suggested and reflects common experiences, but does not necessarily contain buffer time for challenges that arise such as multiple IRB reviews or revisions from committee members, delays in collecting or analyzing data, and life circumstances. The earlier you can begin, the better! It is never too early to begin conversations with Faculty advisors about doing the thesis!

IRB Approval

Students who plan to collect original data with human subjects (people) or use confidential or identifiable data, you will need to obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. You can find more information about Fresno State's Human Research Protection Program [here](#).

Students should consult with their Faculty Chair about whether they need to complete this process, and if so, how to approach it. If students do need to submit their project to the IRB, they will need to obtain [CITI certification](#).

When submitting the application and research instruments (if any) for IRB review, the project will be considered for one of three types of review:

- Exempt/Less than minimal risk: Studies that pose minimal risk AND meets certain criteria.
 - Minimal Risk: Studies that according to 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110: Involve no greater than minimal risk AND fit into one (or more) of nine specific expedited review categories.
 - At Risk: Studies posing greater than minimal risk studies OR studies that are minimal risk, but do not fit in an expedited review category (such as those with vulnerable populations).
- The IRB may also determine that the study is not subject to review for a variety of reasons (such as the work falling under the evaluation research standards). More information can be found [here](#).

IRB review can take multiple iterations, where researchers provide revisions and rationale to the IRB Analysts or Committee to determine if your project meets ethical research standards. Be sure to check your [Kuali](#) account regularly for updates. Once approved, students will be able to

begin research activities. The thesis committee chair may ask students to include a copy of the IRB approval letter as an Appendix in the final thesis project.

ProQuest Publishing

An important component of the thesis process is publishing. The Fresno State library partners with ProQuest Publishing to move your final, approved thesis project to formal publication.

Formatting guidelines are set by Proquest Publishing and Graduate Studies. As students begin their thesis preparation, they should download and review the thesis formatting guide and the thesis [template](#). More information on the thesis requirements can be found [here](#).

Once students submit the completed thesis to ProQuest, they will have to pay the \$75 submission fee and then the project will undergo review. Publishing staff will return the thesis with any errors that need to be corrected. They will offer for students to resubmit the thesis and pay an additional fee or hire a copy editor to complete the revisions for a separate fee. Students should familiarize themselves with these fees and options as they begin the thesis process.

FAQs

Will doing a thesis make me a better candidate for acceptance into a PhD program?

Maybe, but not necessarily. Doctoral programs range in the types of scholarship and research experience they may emphasize for prospective student applicants. To get a better understanding of this dynamic in your specific discipline, discuss with your Graduate Program Coordinator and Thesis Committee Chair.

What happens if my faculty advisor/committee member leaves the university during my thesis process?

If your Faculty Chair or one of your committee members leaves the university during your research, reach out to the Graduate Coordinator of your program to help you identify a new person to take on the oversight of your project. Don't let something like this stop you from working on your thesis! You can still write and research while the committee issues are being sorted out.

I am planning to be done in time for May graduation. What happens if my thesis is not approved by the deadline?

If the thesis is not approved, the process for completion would be the same as if you hadn't completed the thesis by the deadline. You will enroll in additional thesis units.