

MAIS PROJECT OR THESIS

The 36 credit MAIS Program (Individualized Studies track) is concluded with a final **3 to 6 credit project** (MAIS 798) or **6 credit thesis** (MAIS 799). Since the project or thesis is the culminating work in the interdisciplinary degree, it should draw upon all of the course work and disciplines studied by the individual student. Besides reflecting the student's mastery of subject matter from course work taken throughout the interdisciplinary program, the project or thesis must also demonstrate the student's ability to analyze data, independence of thought, and intellectual maturity. In addition, the project or thesis should demonstrate originality and creativity, and should be written in correct and fluent prose.

The *project* and a *thesis* will not involve the same type of work. A major difference between a *project* and *thesis* is the applied nature of a project and the more theoretical nature of the thesis. The *project* is often an implementation of an idea or theory, whereas the *thesis* is original research designed to test a theory. Please refer to the following sections on **Projects** and **Theses** for more specific distinctions, information, and guidelines.

Registration for MAIS 798 (project) or MAIS 799 (thesis) is by Individualized Section form that is obtained from the MAIS Program office **only after** the following requirements have been met:

- The student has completed 27 credits towards the MAIS degree.
- The Project or Thesis Proposal is reviewed and approved by the student's Project or Thesis Committee (see guidelines below).
- The Committee-Approved Project or Thesis Proposal is reviewed and approved by the MAIS Executive Committee.

Proposals are submitted during the semester preceding registration for 798 or 799.

Project or Thesis Committee

The student is responsible for the development of the *project or thesis committee*. The faculty advisor usually serves as the committee's chair. One other member of the committee must be a GMU full time, tenure line, faculty member. The third member may also be a GMU faculty member, or may be someone from outside the university with expertise in the topic of the thesis or project, and at least a Master's degree. If the student chooses to do a participatory project (internship), the third member should be the supervisor from the internship site. Ideally, the committee should be interdisciplinary, with each committee member representing a different department or discipline. The committee will jointly decide whether or not to meet in person, or to communicate only by phone, e-mail, etc. It is also up to the committee whether or not to require a meeting of the student with the entire committee prior to the beginning of the project or an oral defense of the project or thesis when it is complete. Students should provide committee members with contact information (phone numbers, e-mail addresses, etc.) and any modifications of the original time line, as necessary. Regular communication with each member of the committee throughout the project or thesis is advised.

Projects and Theses – General Guidelines

Projects and theses are graded S (Satisfactory) or NC (No Credit). The advisor may grant an IP (In Progress) grade if the project or thesis is not completed within one semester.

GMU graduate policy requires all students enrolled in MAIS 798/799 to maintain *continuous enrollment* in at least one credit (MAIS 798/799) per semester while working on a project or thesis. Continuous enrollment does not apply to the summer session unless the student anticipates graduating in that session.

Theses must meet university standards for formatting and submission to the Special Collections & Archives section of the GMU Library. A collection of completed MAIS theses may be found at the GMU Fenwick Library. (Students should contact the Special Collections and Archives section of the GMU Library for more information about thesis formatting and submission.)

Project submission to the GMU Special Collections & Archives is optional, but, if submitted, the project is required to meet university standards for theses. All final projects must be submitted to the MAIS office with a cover sheet containing original signatures of the student's three committee members.

The University's policy on research activities requires that all projects or theses using human or animal subjects must be reviewed. Guidelines for approval of research using human subjects are available from GMU's Office of Sponsored Programs.

Checklist for Planning your Project or Thesis
(Prior to 798/799 Registration)

PROPOSALS must be submitted to the MAIS Executive during the semester preceding desired registration for MAIS 798/799. Please contact the MAIS office for the deadline.

- When you are developing your contract with a faculty advisor, discuss your ideas for a project or thesis as well as the best choice of courses in research methodology.
- About the time you have completed 24 credits, discuss your refined ideas for a project or thesis with your advisor.
- Consult with your advisor about whom you should ask to serve on your project or thesis committee. Begin talking about your ideas with potential committee members.
- Start working on your written ***Proposal***, (guidelines follow). **Please note:** A collection of project/thesis proposals submitted by MAIS students is available in the MAIS Program office for review by students and faculty members.
- With input from your advisor, decide whether your idea represents work that warrants a three to six credit project or a thesis (always six credits).
- If applicable, be sure to review and follow the university's Human Subjects Review Board guidelines. Allow enough time for determination by the HSRB representative to advise you of exemption or required review by the full board.
- Confirm, with each member of committee, the feasibility of your tentative time line for completion of the project or thesis. Make adjustments for the times they are unavailable. Include consideration of deadlines for graduation applications, changes of grade, etc.
- Give your committee members plenty of time to review drafts of your proposal and your project or thesis. Most faculty members need about two weeks for review and feedback.
- Bring the approved proposal to the MAIS Program office by the deadline specified: **usually a month before the start of fall semester classes** (for fall projects or theses), **two weeks before the end of fall semester classes** (for spring projects or theses).

PROJECTS

The *project*, though based on research and pertinent literature, is an applied effort that may be tailored to the student's career or future career aspirations. There is great flexibility. As examples, the project may be a research paper, an original artwork, a video program, fieldwork, an internship, a participatory project, a survey, the design of a course, a draft of legislation, preparation of a business plan, etc. A *participatory project* entails on-going experiential learning on the part of the student, and is similar to an Internship or Practicum (specific guidelines for Participatory Projects follow). All projects must reflect work that warrants 3 to 6 semester hours of credit.

As *projects* may take a wide variety of forms and cover a diversity of subjects, there is no standard method of formatting a project proposal, for conducting the work, presenting the outcome, or carrying out assessment.

- For detailed instructions, please consult the GMU – Library Archives website located at: <http://www.gmu.edu/library/specialcollections/dtwebguide.htm>

*Note: MAIS Projects are **not required** to adhere to Thesis formatting guidelines contained in the above referenced website, **unless** the student elects to deposit their final Project in the library. Therefore, some of the guidelines listed there will not apply to your MAIS Project. Projects deposited in the library **must conform** to all Library-Thesis formatting requirements.*

Project Proposals

During the semester preceding registration for MAIS 798, a student prepares a written proposal (minimum 5 to 10 pages). Discussion of ideas with each committee member prior to writing the proposal will help clarify the approach. The required course in research methodology, or the equivalent, will help determine the method(s) for accomplishing the work that integrates the entire interdisciplinary graduate educational curriculum.

A student revises the proposal until it is approved by the three-person Project/Thesis Committee. The approved proposal, with all committee members' signatures, is then submitted to the MAIS Program Office and reviewed by members of the MAIS Executive Committee, who may suggest additional revisions. ***Project Proposals must have MAIS Executive Committee approval before a student can register for MAIS 798.***

In some cases the outcome of a project is a less rigorous form of thesis, and in this case the student should follow the rubric that covers theses. When the project does not follow conventional thesis style, the proposal should fulfill the following objectives:

- Describe what the project will entail with some indication of the phasing of the work.
- Demonstrate the value of the project.
- Offer a context of existing work in the area, or in the case of such activities as an internship, the links with other courses being pursued.
- Explain the role of the faculty advisor and committee members in monitoring and assessing the work.
- Outline the nature and presentation of the final output.
- Indicate the criteria upon which the work should be assessed and evaluated.
- Provide justification for the number of seminar credit hours (3 to 6) sought.

Participatory Projects

A **participatory project** entails on-going experiential learning on the part of the student, and is similar to an Internship or Practicum. The student's faculty adviser will be the person primarily responsible for the evaluation of the educational experience. One of the other committee members for the project should be an on-site supervisor at the location where the participatory project is to take place. The faculty adviser should ensure that someone at the site can validate the nature of the student's experience and the amount of time spent at the site should such questions arise. If the second or third committee member is not at the site, they must be willing to evaluate the learning experience primarily from a written record describing and analyzing the experience.

It is recommended that the participatory project summary paper take the following form:

- A log or journal of the experience cataloging the dates and hours spent at the site, the nature and extent of duties performed or activities observed, and a brief commentary on each day or session.
- A critical evaluation of the experience and an assessment of its impact on the educational growth of the student. The critical evaluation should include connections between theory and practice; that is, a student must relate the experience to the literature previously reviewed.

A visit by the faculty adviser or one of the readers to observe the student at the site is recommended, but not required. Written or telephone contact between the faculty adviser and a designated on-site supervisor should be made periodically during the time the experiential learning is taking place. It is the student's responsibility to facilitate this process by providing the adviser, site supervisor, and third committee member with addresses, phone numbers, and schedule of convenient calling times. The faculty adviser may also require the student to participate with the committee members, including the on-site supervisor, in an oral review-discussion of the entire learning experience

All requirements and methods of evaluation to be used in determination of the grade for the participatory project should be summarized in the written project proposal and agreed on by the student and the committee members prior to the start of the project.

A participatory project undertaken by the student who is already employed at the site where the experiential learning is to take place may be proposed only if the experiential learning can be shown to be a special project beyond the ordinary duties normally required of the student as an employee. Students who wish to analyze relationships between theory and practice in the field in which they already work without engaging in a special project do not fall under the guidelines for a participatory project. If routine work duties are used as the basis for experiential learning, the required 160 hours of the participatory project may not include any on-the-job time and thus more closely follows guidelines for traditional research endeavors.

THESES

A **thesis** is original, independent research presented in the form of a scholarly document that has the potential to be published in a professional journal. A thesis is an unbiased examination of a research hypothesis followed by data collection and analysis, presentation of results, and specific recommendations for future study. Completion of a thesis involves planning and execution of an appropriate research design for the purpose of advancing the knowledge of a specific topic. The thesis will include a complete bibliography and documentation of source material within the text. A thesis is focused on issues of significance to the field(s) of interest chosen by the student.

Academic research involves posing a question or hypothesis and using appropriate methodology to prove or disprove the proposed hypothesis. Faculty advisors will draw upon their own experiences in advising discipline-based masters students to provide direction and guidance to interdisciplinary masters students. Therefore the process and nature of the research will vary for each interdisciplinary student. Students are urged to examine completed graduate theses on file at the Fenwick Library prior to choosing the thesis option.

Planning for Thesis Research By Professor Stephen Fuller, School of Public Policy

Many research projects fail to achieve their objectives because they were not based on a carefully constructed research plan. Preparing this research plan, which takes the form of a thesis proposal, is a critical step in the process of doing any academic thesis. One of the benefits of the research plan is that it defines the magnitude of the effort required to complete the project. Also, the feasibility of the project will be tested in the process of developing this plan. Additionally, this process forces the researcher to answer two fundamental questions: is the topic researchable (and manageable) within the available time frame and does the researcher have the required methodological and analytical skills and knowledge to undertake the project?

The research plan should include the basic information to enable the thesis to succeed. All master's level theses are designed to answer one or more research questions or test one or more hypotheses, no matter what discipline are the basis of the work. It is important to define the research question or hypotheses, no matter what disciplines are the bases of the work. It is important to define the research question or hypothesis narrowly enough so that it is clear what is included in the research and what is not, and when the research will be complete. Avoid compound questions. One approach to defining the question that has proven successful is to frame an overall or primary question to be addressed or answered by the proposed research, and then to identify subsidiary questions that define the boundaries of the topic and whose separate answers combine to provide the basis for answering the overall research question.

The research plan then can be structured around these subsidiary research questions. For each question, the research plan should identify the data or information required to a responsive answer. Then, the sources of these data and information requirements need to be identified; where will this information be found? And, how will this information be collected? Is it in the library and requires only the careful preparation of note cards or is primary data collection through personal interviews or a survey?

Once the data are collected, how will they be analyzed or evaluated to develop a defensible response to the research question? Will quantitative or qualitative methods be used? This is a critical element of the research plan as the researcher is forced to think through the process of moving from a hypothesis or research question to a conclusion supported by facts and deductive reasoning. In answering the question--what analytical method will be used?--the researcher also must confront his or her analytical abilities and the need for additional preparation. This is the time to determine whether the deficiencies can be remedied. Finally, it is important to anticipate the results of the proposed research. What are the expected outcomes or research findings? These will provide a point of reference for assessing the contribution of the research.

A well thought out research plan does not guarantee a successful result, but it can greatly reduce the possibility of failure. The preparation of a research plan should resolve the hard methodological questions that could interfere with the project's satisfactory conclusion. In the process of preparing the plan, the project scope is defined, data sources are identified, the analytical procedures are formulated, and the bibliography is prepared. With this as preparation, there should be no major surprises in undertaking this research.

Thesis Proposal

Writing a detailed *thesis proposal* is the key to successful and timely completion of work. A discussion of ideas with each committee member prior to writing the proposal will help clarify the approach to be taken. The course in research methodology, or the equivalent, will help determine the method(s) for accomplishing the work that integrates the entire interdisciplinary graduate educational curriculum.

During the semester preceding registration for MAIS 799, a student prepares a written proposal (minimum 5-10 pages). The proposal is revised until approved by the student's three-person thesis committee. The approved proposal, with all committee members' signatures, is then submitted to the MAIS Program office and reviewed by members of the MAIS Executive Committee, who may require additional revisions. **Theses proposals must have MAIS Executive Committee approval before a student can register for MAIS 799.**

- All theses must conform to GMU Library formatting requirements. In addition to the following guidelines, please consult the GMU – Library Archives website located at: <http://www.gmu.edu/library/specialcollections/dtwebguide.htm>

The thesis proposal should include the following:

1. A detailed description of the research problem or hypothesis to be addressed in a thesis, including an explanation of the appropriate methodology to be used.
2. A substantial, preliminary literature review of the current and past research related to the chosen topic, and the additional sources to be examined and presented in the final thesis.
3. A detailed explanation of the reasons for choosing the topic and how it relates to the student's interdisciplinary education.
4. A time line for completion of the thesis *that has been coordinated with the committee members, prior to the proposal submission.*

The Thesis
By Professor Mark Jacobs, Sociology and Cultural Studies

A **thesis** represents an original analysis of **primary evidence** that explores a **research problem** and its associated subproblems, as informed by **traditions** of scholarly inquiry. A research problem is something that scholars genuinely do not know; although it is often motivated by practical concerns, it is only indirectly translatable into purely practical terms. It may take the form of a puzzle, paradox, tension, contradiction, discrepancy, or anomaly, as well as a problem. Primary evidence is evidence that other scholars have not already interpreted for the student. Scholarly traditions—which exist in competition with each other—prescribe fundamental presuppositions about sets of core concepts, as well as proper **methods** and **objects of inquiry**.

Presentation of the thesis must be cogently **argued** and completely **framed**. Arguments are chains of **claims** and subclaims that address the research problem and its subproblems. Claims must be supported by **warranted evidence** and **qualified** so as not to overreach that evidence. Presentations are framed by their introductions, conclusions, and the point-sentences of the various sections. If the central claims, concepts, and themes that appear in each of the point-sentences do not align with those that appear in the introduction and conclusion, the presentation is not properly framed. Introductions and/or conclusions must articulate the **significance** of research problems by demonstrating how they disrupt readers' presuppositions; the deeper the disruption, the more significant the research. Introductions must at least foreshadow the major claims and subclaims; conclusions must summarize those claims and indicate their broader significance to research tradition(s).

Students should realize that inquiry and presentation are distinct processes. Inquiry is a circuitous, recursive, and serendipitous process of discovery that leads to reformulation of research problems. Formulations of research problems are always provisional, then, until the process of inquiry is complete. The student cannot write a proper introduction before discovering the final formulation of the central research problem at the very completion of the inquiry. (For similar reasons, the process of literature review is never complete until the inquiry is concluded, and satisfactory literature reviews can never result from simple mechanical searches.) First drafts of theses are intended primarily to facilitate the process of inquiry. The task of presentation is to engage the reader's attention and to communicate the author's claims in the most effective and efficient manner. It requires the author to "think like a reader" rather than merely to rehearse the course of the inquiry. Although theses must identify methods of gathering and analyzing evidence, methodological discussions should not overwhelm the engaging and efficient communication of conclusions; "blow-by-blow" accounts of methods are to be avoided altogether, and minute methodological detail should be presented in footnotes and/or appendices. Thorough revisions of theses are always required to accomplish those goals of presentation.

Theses are evaluated according to the significance of their research problems, the cogency of their arguments, and their completeness of presentation.