Guidelines for URSP 764 Thesis

Master of Urban and Regional Planning Program
L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs
Virginia Commonwealth University

1. WHAT IS A THESIS?

The master’s thesis is a unique learning experience in graduate education. It should not be confused with a term paper or other project assignment that the student may have undertaken in a course or even as a practicing professional. The thesis is intended to demonstrate the ability of students to make independent use of their training, research skills, and creative abilities. It is an individual project in which the student selects a topic that merits additional research, becomes well versed in the literature and research pertaining to that topic, devises and executes an appropriate research design to advance knowledge regarding that topic or problem, applies analytical skills to develop valid responses to the selected thesis questions, and interprets the implications of research findings for the field of urban and regional planning. The student is responsible for defining, organizing, conducting, and presenting the research.

The learning objectives to be served by the thesis are numerous. Among those that the MURP Program believes to be particularly important are:

1. to develop specific and specialized knowledge in a subject area that extends a student’s field of concentration and educational exposure beyond prescribed coursework;

2. to enhance the student’s research capabilities;

3. to improve writing and presentation skills and to develop individual, creative, analytical, and interpretive skills.

The thesis is not an essay expressing one’s opinions about a given subject, nor is it solely a description of some subject or an accounting of an event or process. More importantly, it requires a well-developed methodological approach to collect and examine data, interpret the results of analysis and report the findings. A thesis may contain all of the above ingredients, but its chief characteristic is that it expands knowledge on an important dimension of urban and regional planning. Fundamental to the student’s task is the responsibility to present original and credible evidence or justification to support the conclusions of the thesis. Just as important, however, is the responsibility to address evidence which may call the thesis into question.

A thesis can cover a wide range of subject matter, but the chosen subject area should be one that aligns closely with the researcher’s primary academic and professional interests. The

Revised 11-20-2013
specific thesis topic can approach the subject area in a number of different ways. Often the thesis evaluates a specific planning issue, policy, or approach, to better identify its characteristics, understand its importance, test its effectiveness, or document the lessons learned from its application. Other theses focus on planning methods, and formulate a new or significantly revised analytical or procedural approach to the study of a recognized planning problem. A thesis can also take a historical approach, by documenting events, programs, or experiences in history to identify their significance and meaning in shaping the profession and practice of planning. Finally, while all theses must involve an element of planning theory, some theses focus specifically on the formulation or explication of a theoretical framework for guiding some aspect of planning analysis or process.

In short, a thesis should be an objective, unbiased examination of a research question; all sides of the defined topic should be analyzed based on appropriate evidence.

2. TYPES OF THESES

A thesis is a structured inquiry to research a specific and well-defined question. Theses can be grouped generally into three types. Each type implies somewhat different research requirements and approaches.

An Exploratory Thesis focuses on answering the "what" question. It is conducted to study a phenomenon defined by the research question that has not been studied or existing studies are lacking. An exploratory thesis offers the researcher the opportunity to uncover potential processes and/or factors associated with a phenomenon being studied and make a contribution to advance our understanding of it.

A Descriptive Thesis also focuses on answering the "what" question but in a different way than an exploratory thesis. It describes and summarizes the characteristics, viewpoints, arguments, theories, etc. related to a phenomenon defined by the research question. A descriptive thesis provides a comprehensive and systematic way to synthesize and present factual findings pertaining to the research question.

An Explanatory Thesis focuses on answering the "why" question. It requires empirical evidence to test and identify the relationships, causal or not, among variables related to a phenomenon defined by the research question. An explanatory thesis allows researchers to verify exiting theories and/or develop new ones that will further our knowledge of the inner workings of a phenomenon so that improvements can be made in the future.

In addition, a thesis can also be characterized as longitudinal or cross-sectional when the study takes temporal dimension into consideration. It can also be labeled as quantitative or qualitative depending on the nature of the data being collected and analyzed. It is important to note that there are no clear-cut lines among the above types since a thesis may include a mix of these lines of inquiries.

Revised 11-20-2013
3. THESIS RELATED MURP DEGREE REQUIREMENT

The capstone project requirement for the MURP degree is either a 6-credit URSP 762 Professional Plan or a 6-credit URSP 764 Thesis. Students choosing the thesis option must also complete and pass a 3-credit pre-thesis URSP 797 Directed Research prior to the semester in which s/he registers for thesis credits. Please note that the Professional Plan credits and Thesis credits are not interchangeable and MURP students must complete either a 6-credit Professional Plan or a 6-credit thesis. On the other hand, the 3-credit pre-thesis URSP 797 Directed Research is considered an elective course that will apply to the MURP degree, regardless of which option is pursued.

The prerequisite of URSP 764 is the completion of all core courses required by the MURP degree. Both URSP 797 Directed Research and URSP 764 Thesis require an approved override to register. If approved, the override will be prepared and submitted by the MURP faculty member who supervises the student’s directed research. That faculty member will most likely serve as the student’s thesis committee chair, also called the major professor or thesis advisor.

4. SELECTING A THESIS ADVISOR

The thesis advisor must be a full-time MURP faculty member. S/he plays a critical role in the thesis preparation process. It is the advisor’s responsibility to ensure that the thesis fulfills all MURP and University requirements. The following are important factors for the student to consider when selecting an advisor:

- the advisor’s knowledge of the thesis topic,
- the advisor’s interest in the subject area,
- the student’s ability to work with the advisor, and
- the advisor’s availability.

5. THE DIRECTED RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Selecting a thesis advisor to supervise the directed research and later, the thesis, is an important challenge. Neither the directed research nor the thesis can be completed without a thesis advisor. It is extremely important that the student be well prepared before s/he approaches a potential thesis advisor to supervise the 3-credit directed research. During the development stage of the Directed Research Proposal, students must read several and identify at least one planning-related master’s thesis. This exercise will offer students the opportunity to get familiar with a thesis and how it is structured. This helps students become familiar not only with the format and style of the thesis but also with a systematic way of organizing and presenting ideas, the approach, findings, and implications, which is critical to the development of a successful Directed Research Proposal. Specifically, the student must undertake the following:

Revised 11-20-2013
• Review and identify at least one planning-related thesis that addresses a similar topic to gain insight on the type of thesis and how it was prepared. Submit a written description that explains the approach and structure of the thesis and how it might serve as a rough model for the student (200-400 words).
• Articulate a question (or questions) that the thesis will address and explain why this question(s) warrants study (200-400 words).
• Develop a preliminary bibliography of at least 20 sources.

The Directed Research Proposal shall be due three weeks prior to the start of the semester in which the student wishes to conduct the directed research. This will allow the potential thesis advisor time to review the proposal, communicate with the student about revising it if necessary, and make an informed decision about serving as the thesis advisor. Or, s/he will provide the student further advice and/or guidance as to how to proceed or get in touch with another potential advisor(s).

6. THE 3-CREDIT DIRECTED RESEARCH

Once the Directed Research Proposal is approved, the advisor will prepare and submit an electronic override for the student to register for the pre-thesis Directed Research credits under his/her section. This pre-thesis directed research will provide the students with a structured opportunity to prepare for thesis work. More specifically, thesis students will use the 3-credit directed research to accomplish the following during the "directed research" semester:

• review the relevant literature,
• refine the thesis topic,
• define the scope and methodology of the thesis project,
• develop the thesis proposal,
• establish the thesis committee,
• successfully defend the thesis proposal, and
• prepare and submit the Degree Candidacy Form.

7. THE THESIS PROPOSAL

By the end of the "directed research" semester, a student who intends to write a thesis must complete and submit a thesis proposal for approval by the student’s thesis committee. Students can enroll for thesis credits in the following semester only after the committee has approved the proposal in a formal meeting (also called the thesis proposal defense).

Once the thesis proposal is approved, the student can register for 6 credits of URSP 764 Thesis in one semester to complete his/her thesis project, or phase the thesis project into two semesters by signing up for 3 credits of URSP 764 in each semester. In either case, the arrangement first has to be approved by the thesis committee.
The thesis proposal establishes the line of inquiry for the thesis and includes a step-by-step procedure for undertaking the research. This proposal is, essentially, the first three chapters of the thesis, in draft form. Specifically, the following elements must be included in the proposal:

I. **Introduction**

The introductory section of the proposal defines the topic of research and poses the critical questions to be addressed through the research. This section should be clear and to the point. In addition, the student must give reasons for selecting the topic, discuss the relevance of the topic to urban and regional planning, and elaborate on its significance to the field of planning.

II. **Literature Review**

This section includes a focused discussion of the literature that is most pertinent to the thesis topic. It is important that the student place the topic in the context of previous work as a way to justify the research. The literature review section should highlight the most salient issues covered by the relevant material and avoid a ponderous and extended discussion. The literature review section should be accompanied by a full reference list at the end of the proposal.

III. **Research Methodology**

This section outlines the techniques to be employed in collecting and analyzing data and the rationale for using these techniques. The student should indicate the sources of information for the thesis including both primary and secondary materials, and discuss how the data will be collected. Finally, it is important in this section to explain in some detail how the data will be analyzed, along with the statistical, illustrative, or other techniques to be used for the study and why.

Please note that the thesis proposal must be prepared with a specific citation/reference style approved by the committee. For example, information about the Chicago Style is available at [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html). Other styles including APA, MLA, etc. are available at [http://guides.library.vcu.edu/content.php?pid=110845&sid=835452](http://guides.library.vcu.edu/content.php?pid=110845&sid=835452). In short, no matter which style is adopted, one has to make sure that both the references and in-text citations conform to that chosen style.

8. **THE THESIS COMMITTEE**

The thesis advisor, i.e., the MURP faculty member who supervises the directed research, will help the student identify and approach potential committee members. Well before the end of the "directed research" semester, a thesis committee must be established by the student with the advice and consent of the advisor. In addition to the thesis advisor, the committee shall consist of two additional members. One must be a MURP faculty member while the other must
be a faculty member outside of MURP (this can be a VCU faculty member or one from another university) or a practicing professional with at least a master’s degree. Furthermore, every member of the committee must hold graduate faculty or affiliate graduate faculty appointment. The thesis advisor and at least one other committee member must hold VCU graduate faculty status.

The student must successfully defend his/her thesis proposal in front of the committee by the end of the "directed research" semester; only then will s/he be permitted to register for thesis credits in the following semester. (See specific dates in Section 11 below.)

9. THE DEGREE CANDIDACY FORM

Upon successful defense of the thesis proposal, the thesis advisor shall work with the student to prepare and submit the Degree Candidacy Form to the Wilder School Graduate School Programs Office for processing. This must be completed by the end of the "directed research" semester.

Please visit [http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/bulletins/graduate/?uid=10045&iid=30652](http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/bulletins/graduate/?uid=10045&iid=30652) for more information about Degree Candidacy and to download the Degree Candidacy Form.

10. THESIS DEFENSE AND SUBMISSION

When complete, the thesis shall be presented and defended orally at an open forum to which the general public is invited. Acceptance of the thesis for credit toward the requirements of the Master of Urban and Regional Planning Degree shall be based on the final grade. A grade of “Satisfactory” is required as agreed upon by the thesis advisor and members of the committee.

The VCU Graduate School has established rules and guidelines related to the thesis that the students must follow. These can be found at: [http://www.graduate.vcu.edu/community/thesis.html](http://www.graduate.vcu.edu/community/thesis.html) and [http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/bulletins/graduate/?uid=10045&iid=30077](http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/bulletins/graduate/?uid=10045&iid=30077).

11. REQUIRED PROCESS AND TIME LINE

Students planning to do their thesis projects in the Spring semester should follow dates in blue. Student should follow dates in green if they plan to do their thesis projects in the Fall semester. Please note that registering for credits in the summer for pre-thesis Directed Research or the thesis is not permitted except under very special circumstances. In that case, students must seek committee’s approval before doing so and work with the thesis advisor and committee members to develop a specific time line.

**August 1** or **December 15** -- Deadline to ask a professor to serve as advisor on the pre-thesis Directed Research. Student must undertake the following:
(a) Review and identify at least one planning-related thesis that addresses a similar topic to gain insight on the type of thesis and how it was prepared. Submit a written description that explains the approach and structure of the thesis and how it might serve as a rough model for the student (200-400 words).
(b) Articulate a question (or questions) that the thesis will address and explain why this question(s) warrants study (200-400 words) -- see Section 5 above.
(c) Develop a preliminary bibliography of at least 20 sources.
(d) If approved, ask the advisor to prepare and submit an electronic override for the student to register pre-thesis Directed Research credits under his/her section.
(e) Student will begin working with the advisor to prepare materials to be submitted on September 15 or February 15 (see the next dates below).

**September 15** or **February 15** -- Must provide to advisor:
(a) a complete reference list;
(b) an annotated bibliography with at least 20 sources read to date; each 200 words - focused primarily on the question to be addressed or methods to be used in the thesis.

**October 10** or **March 10** -- Must provide to advisor:
(a) draft introduction chapter of the thesis
(b) draft literature review chapter
(c) draft methodology chapter
(d) names of faculty to be contacted to serve as committee members

**October 20** or **March 20** -- By this date the advisor will complete his/her review and assessment of the Directed Research progress made by the student, and advise the student if s/he should continue with the thesis or seek other options to complete the Directed Research.

**November 15** or **April 15** -- Must provide to advisor and committee members revised introduction, literature review, methodology. Committee provides detailed comments by November 30 or April 30.

**December 1-5** or **May 1-5** -- Must provide to entire committee:
(a) second revision of introduction, literature review, methodology
(b) oral presentation ("defense") of thesis proposal
(c) if work to date is satisfactory, ask the advisor to prepare and submit electronic override for the student to register for thesis credits under his/her section

**December 5** or **May 5** --
(a) submission of the Degree Candidacy Form (see Section 9. above)
(b) application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval or exemption, if appropriate
(c) continue to work with advisor between December 5 - January 15 or May 5 - August 15

**January 15** or **August 15** -- Provide to committee:
(a) final revisions of introduction, literature review, methodology

*Revised 11-20-2013*
(b) progress report on research
Committee provides detailed comments by February 1 or September 1.

February 1-15 or September 1-15 -- Work with advisor and committee members on revisions.

February 15 or September 15 -- Provide all research findings to committee -- all research must be complete by this date. Committee provides detailed comments by March 1 or October 1.

March 1-15 or October 1-15 -- Work with advisor and committee members on revisions.

March 15 or October 15 -- Provide first draft of entire thesis to committee. Committee provides detailed comments by April 1 or November 1.

April 1-15 or November 1-15 -- Work with advisor and committee members on revisions.

April 15 or November 15 -- Send revised thesis to copy editor.

April 25 or November 25 -- Submit revised and edited thesis to committee.

April 25-30 or November 25-30 -- Oral thesis defense. Committee approves or requests changes by April 30 or November 30.

May 3-5 -- For spring thesis students, participation in the annual Plan-Off!!

May 5 or December 5 -- (check the VCU Academic Calendar for actual deadlines)
(a) obtain graduate dean’s approval signature upon completion of graduate thesis
(b) submit thesis to the VCU Digital Archives