Guidelines for Evidence and Inquiry Certificate/Polymathic Scholars
Capstone Thesis Faculty Mentors

Contacts:

Rebecca Wilcox, Ph.D.
Specialist Faculty
College of Natural Sciences Honors Center, PAI 5.60
rebecca.wilcox@austin.utexas.edu

Madison Searle, M.A.
Supplemental Instruction
College of Natural Sciences Honors Center, PAI 5.60
madisonsearle@austin.utexas.edu

The E&I/PS Program

The Evidence and Inquiry certificate program was called TX IP and then University Fellows until Spring of 2013, when the program was moved to the College of Natural Sciences and became a defining feature of a new CNS honors program called Polymathic Scholars. Created in 2006, the E&I certificate gives undergraduates the opportunity to design minors or certificates based on their own questions of interest. With the guidance of faculty and academic consultants, E&I certificate seekers develop their field of study, propose it in writing to a faculty panel, and (if approved) pursue their field’s eighteen-hour curriculum. Since the program began, students have created over 200 fields, ranging from “Biomimicry” and “Public Health in Underdeveloped Countries” to “The Anatomy of Artistry” and “Consciousness Studies.” In their last year at UT, students write a thesis inspired by their E&I field of study. They enroll in the NSC 371 Capstone Thesis Seminar while they research and write the thesis.

The E&I/PS Thesis

The senior thesis is the Capstone to the student’s undergraduate experience in the E&I/Polymathic Scholars programs. It is typically a two-semester research project, typically based on secondary research methods, that results in about 30-40 pages of written work. Students are given a thesis guide, which they are encouraged to share with their faculty mentors. The student is free to select a professor from any department whom they feel will best guide the research and writing on their topic. Faculty mentors may be any level of UT faculty, including adjuncts (provided they have the time needed to supervise the thesis to completion). Frequently, students propose interdisciplinary theses that bring together several areas of interest and represent topics that might not be possible in a departmental honors program. For these interdisciplinary topics, the student is encouraged to find a second reader whose field of expertise complements that of the thesis faculty mentor.

During the first semester, the student formulates ideas for a topic, performs research, and begins to create a bibliography. Most students enroll in the NSC 109 Capstone Preparation Seminar, which helps guide students’ efforts. Students concurrently search for a faculty mentor, who often helps shape the student’s project to make it mutually interesting.

Students must get a faculty mentor by no later than the start of their second semester. They also enroll in the NSC 371 Thesis Seminar and write the thesis. Each student is expected to submit an
outline and partial draft about a month into the semester, and then a first full draft of the thesis about one month prior to the final due date. Near the end of the second semester, students must present their work orally in a forum approved by the NSC 371 instructor. Thesis faculty mentors are strongly encouraged to attend the student’s talk, both to support their students and to evaluate how well they are able to articulate their research.

**Role of the Thesis Faculty Mentor**

The primary responsibility of the faculty mentor is to play an active role in guiding the student towards appropriate sources, methods and approaches to the thesis topic. This includes meeting/emailing with the student regularly, advising him/her on appropriate research directions, providing feedback on written work, and suggesting revisions that can be incorporated into the final version. Students are expected to submit evidence of progress to the mentor by the dates noted in the NSC 371 Thesis Seminar syllabus. For most students, however, it is helpful if the mentor and student agree on what and when the student will turn in before the final draft of the thesis.

In addition to providing thesis guidance, mentors are asked to complete a brief Progress Report form about half-way through the semester the student takes the NSC 371 Thesis Seminar. It is the student’s responsibility to give this form to the supervisor with ample time for him or her to complete and sign it. This form is accompanied by a first draft of the paper. In addition, mentors are asked to recommend a final grade for the student’s thesis and to sign the title page of the completed thesis (see following sections for additional details). The NSC 371 instructor will provide the mentor with a form and due date for the recommended grade.

**Role of the NSC 371 Capstone Thesis Seminar**

This graded seminar gives students a sense of community, a forum for discussing thesis progress, and information and guidance necessary for timely completion of their Capstone thesis project. The instructor also meets individually with each student at least once over the course of the semester—more if the student asks.

**Progress Report**

While writing the thesis and taking NSC/LA 371, the student will ask the faculty mentor to sign a Progress Report about one month prior to the due date for the final thesis, indicating that the student has submitted a rough draft of their work and has been reaching out to the faculty mentor on a regular basis. This form can be filled out in just a few minutes.

**Grades**

A full range of grades, from an A to an F, may be given for a Capstone thesis. An A thesis should be much better than an A term paper, but is not expected to be at the graduate level. The thesis is worth a passing grade (D or better) when both the faculty mentor and the second reader (the NSC 371 Thesis Seminar instructor) agree. If the thesis is found unacceptable or unfinished, the NSC 371 Thesis Seminar instructor may assign an incomplete and allow the student to finish by a date convenient to the faculty mentor. Otherwise, it will be assigned an F. Students are entitled to an opportunity to fail. NOTE: Incompletes are rarely assigned and are only considered appropriate in extenuating, non-academic circumstances.
The final grade in the NSC 371 Thesis Seminar consists of two components: Thesis Product (the grade assigned to the student’s work by the thesis faculty mentor and NSC 371 instructor), and the Thesis Seminar (class meetings, assignments, and deadlines detailed in the Thesis Seminar syllabus). If a student misses multiple meetings and deadlines in the thesis class, his or her final grade in the course will be one letter grade lower than the Thesis Product grade assigned by the thesis faculty mentor and NSC 371 instructor. This is explained further in the NSC 371 Thesis Seminar syllabus. It is the student’s responsibility to tell his or her faculty mentor when a recommended thesis product grade must be received by the NSC 371 instructor.

Because of the diversity of Evidence and Inquiry Certificate/Polymathic Scholars thesis topics and formats, no one set of grading standards can be applied universally. Faculty mentors assess thesis quality based on the standards for their fields, which varies across disciplines. What follows below are the most general guidelines regarding the NSC 371 Thesis Writing Seminar.

- A grade of A (exemplary) on the final thesis should demonstrate thorough research through a familiarity with authoritative sources and methods of the discipline, a well-reasoned analysis of the research methods and sources used, direct application of the research to the argument being made, a cogent conclusion based on the research, and superior written presentation of the thesis argument.
- A grade of B (better than required) should demonstrate all of the above, but may use fewer or less appropriate research sources and methods, and sufficient (rather than superior) written presentation.
- A grade of C (as required but no better) will indicate a basic grasp of the data and appropriate sources, limited application of the research towards the argument being made, and merely acceptable written style.
- A grade of D (barely passable) indicates minimally acceptable research findings in addition to poor analysis and writing standards.
- A grade of F is appropriate where the thesis represents a crudely thrown-together last-minute effort or even evidence of unoriginal work.

The faculty mentor must submit a recommended grade for the final thesis to the NSC 371 Thesis Seminar instructor (rebecca.wilcox@austin.utexas.edu) by the date specified on the front side of the progress report form students give to their faculty mentor about halfway through the second semester of their senior year.

**Student Responsibilities**

The students’ responsibilities include, but are not limited to, maintaining good communication with their supervisors, attending the thesis seminar meetings, submitting drafts to both the supervisor and the seminar instructor on or before the agreed-upon deadlines, obtaining signatures on the progress
report and title page, turning in required forms to the CNS Honors Center office on or before posted deadlines, and giving a talk or poster on their research. Students who do not attend thesis meetings and meet deadlines may have their final grade in the thesis seminar penalized, as noted in the NSC 371 syllabus.