Polymathic Scholars Program/Evidence and Inquiry Certificate

Capstone Thesis Guidelines

2014–2015

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Overview

College honors programs have students accomplish something special outside coursework requirements. The E&I Capstone thesis (usually begun in fall of the fourth year) satisfies this tradition while providing many opportunities for external recognition through publications or prizes. The Capstone thesis also is a welcome addition to applications to professional schools, graduate schools, internships, and professional jobs after graduation. The Capstone thesis satisfies the College honors program requirement for Polymaths. Only rarely does the Capstone thesis satisfy departmental honors thesis requirements as well. Many students elect to do both. Requirements for departmental honors vary by major department, so check with your academic advisor if you’re interested in applying for departmental honors. (Graduating with “Departmental honors” is not the same as graduating with “College honors.” The latter derives from completion of the Polymathic Scholars program.)

Timing

If students plan to complete their Capstone thesis in the fall semester of their last year, they must choose a Capstone thesis topic and a thesis faculty mentor no later than the end of their third year. Students find suitable mentors independently, although Polymathic Scholars staff are always happy to help with the search. The vast majority of students complete the Capstone in the spring semester of their last year. In the fall of students’ fourth year, these students enroll in the NSC 109 Capstone Preparation Seminar, NSC 109. The seminar supports students’ efforts to narrow their topic further, to identify a faculty mentor, and to compose a research prospectus. In the spring of students’ fourth year, they enroll in the NSC 371 Capstone Thesis Seminar, which supports their writing process.

Students will not be permitted to take the required NSC 371 Capstone Thesis Seminar until they have a faculty mentor. They verify that they have a mentor by submitting a Capstone Thesis Registration Form by the end of the fall of their fourth year. The faculty mentor is required to sign this form, indicating his/her role in the thesis process. Students also attach a brief thesis prospectus.

Topic selection. A student’s E&I Capstone thesis should be related in some way to his or her E&I field of study. So, for instance, if one’s field of study is “Business Practices of Humanities Museums,” one would not do an E&I thesis on research he or she has done in a genetics lab since sophomore year. The Capstone thesis should be as unique as the student, but it must also draw upon areas in which he or she has training or experience. We know from experience that one or two semesters isn’t long enough for a student to find and master a new field and write a thesis on it.

Although topics vary widely, every thesis is expected to pose a question and propose an argument to answer it. The argument should be supported with evidence appropriate to the discipline(s) involved with the topic. So, as students begin their thesis, they will know the question they want to ask but not the answer. The thesis is that answer.

Finding a topic takes time. Talking about ideas with friends, professors, and advisors, as well as reading independently and thinking critically, often reveal great ideas. Students also
find it helpful to explore resources at libraries beyond the PCL, such as the Ransom Humanities Research Center, the Texas History Center, the LBJ Library, and the Benson Latin American Collection. The library staff are always happy to help students brainstorm about how their holdings can be used in new and unique ways.

Keep in mind that in general, the thesis (or any information in it) cannot be kept confidential. Each one is apt to be posted on the program website for other students or visitors to read. Beyond that, students are also required to attempt to publish the thesis by submitting it to an approved peer-reviewed publication. Thus, students should write about topics and ideas they are willing to share with others.

**Faculty mentor selection.** Often, students settle on a research topic while finding a faculty mentor for the thesis. To achieve this, many students find it helpful to involve the mentor in the topic narrowing process. That way, the project is apt to be of interest to both individuals. The NSC 109 Capstone Preparation Seminar, which students take in the fall of their fourth year—the semester before they take the NSC 371 Capstone Thesis seminar—will supplement the guidance they get from their mentor.

The faculty mentor typically must be a UT faculty member with an active research program. To find a mentor with expertise relevant to a thesis topic, students need to do some research. For instance, they talk to fellow students and professors with whom they’ve had classes. They also use UT’s Eureka database and departmental webpages. Many of them summarize each faculty member’s research and teaching interests. Many departments also provide links to faculty members’ lab and/or personal academic websites. Conducting Academic Search Complete queries to find faculty members’ research papers is also helpful. Students also Google faculty members to see what the popular press says about them.

Meeting with several possible mentors is important. In introductory emails and meetings, students should show that they are acquainted with, and interested in, a faculty member’s work. They should be prepared to share related interests with them. Students should rest assured that even professors who cannot supervise them are apt to help them think through their research interests and identify leads to follow. There is no need to worry about this process. It’s just important to know that lining up a mentor can take months. So, students should start this process no later than early Fall of the senior year.

**The Faculty mentor’s role.** The mentor is a professor who guides the students’ research, critiques their ideas and writing, and assigns a portion of their grade for the NSC 371 thesis seminar, in consultation with the NSC 371 instructor. Students should meet regularly with their mentor—about every two weeks or fewer—to talk about their progress and discuss work they have submitted between meetings. Recall that the mentor must be someone who will be working on campus when the student is enrolled in NSC 371. The syllabus for this seminar shows what thesis elements must be submitted to the mentor—and when. Many supervisors want to see more evidence of incremental progress than NSC 371 requires. So, students need to be sure they know what their mentor wants to see—and
when. Students are responsible for ensuring that their mentor is aware of the NSC 371 deadlines and that both individuals are clear on each other’s expectations about the thesis topic and the amount and type of contact they will have with each other during the semester.

**Appropriate research methods.** All theses are submitted in writing. All of them should provide evidence-based answers to well-formulated research questions. However, their content, format, writing style, and methods of data collection can differ substantially. Below we lay out different methodologies a student might consider to uncover ideas and evidence related to his or her topic.

*Secondary Research Theses.* Theses based on secondary research are most common. These papers involve the systematic review and synthesis/analysis/interpretation of existing primary sources (e.g., empirical journal articles, white papers), secondary sources (e.g., literature reviews, books), and/or other text-based materials typically gathered from brick and mortar libraries and digital databases. Students pursuing these theses do not collect their own data, for instance, by conducting a survey study or experiment. However, theses based on secondary research do need to contain original ideas. Your own thoughts, backed up by your research, should be front and center in secondary research theses. These thoughts can be structured in any one of a variety of paper formats (e.g., argumentative, analytical, compare and contrast, interpretative).

*Primary Research Theses.* You are unlikely to do a primary research thesis, but you can if you have the time for both data collection and writing. Primary research theses often involve designing and conducting original laboratory, survey, or field research under the particularly attentive guidance of a faculty member and member(s) of his or her research group. That usually takes much longer than one or two semesters to accomplish.

If you want to conduct a primary research thesis project involving humans or animals, you must get University-level approval before you collect any data. Even if you just want to interview fellow students on campus, you must complete and submit documentation and forms for approval from the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). The student’s thesis supervisor must be involved in this process. Students must then wait for IRB to approve their research design and materials before they can begin their research. Approvals can take just a few days or several months, depending on the nature of the project. For more information on this process, refer to this website:

http://www.utexas.edu/research/rsc/humanresearch/.

Or contact them by dropping in, calling, or emailing:
Primary research theses also can involve data from archival records. This is a rich source of data for Polymaths. The Harry Ransom Center is a repository of archival evidence that can take just about any form, from historical photographs and clothing to personal letters and government records. The National Archives in Washington, D.C. is another repository of archival material relevant to a researcher's topic of inquiry. Archival research is typically more complex and time-consuming than secondary research, as it can be extremely challenging to find, organize, and interpret the relevant materials. Archival research is also difficult because much archival data were not originally intended to be used for research, which contrasts with books and journal articles. However, archival research gives one the opportunity to create a truly unique and original paper. You are strongly encouraged to learn more about what archival research entails. You can start here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archival_research

**Thesis Standards.** Different disciplines have different standards. Consider standards of evidence, for example. Numeric data and inferential statistical analyses back up many sociology professors' arguments about the nature of poverty in America. However, archived photographs of the poor—combined with subjective interpretations of their meaning—constitute evidence for many American studies professors. Different disciplines also have different conventions for writing style, style guide usage, formatting, and argumentation. You work with your faculty mentor for the thesis to determine the standards specific to investigating and writing about your topic.

However, every thesis should reflect the general guidelines shown below. Read these before you decide on a topic and a methodology. If the project you intend to do is not apt to satisfy these criteria, ask the NSC 371 Capstone Seminar instructor for approval before you begin work.

**Subject**

The thesis should be a persuasive, evidence- and reason-based paper that answers a question (or set of interrelated questions) related to—or inspired by—your field of study. The questions should be good ones in that they position you well to offer an answer that adds something new to the conversation on your topic. The answer to your question(s) should take the form of an argument—an original argument that is not a rehash of existing published work. Indeed, the paper should not parrot others’ insights, perspectives, or analyses. Nor should it simply summarize a literature in a way that has been done before. Your perspective, your original insights and powers of analysis, should be front and center in your Capstone thesis.
In addition, the thesis should reflect an attempt to draw connections across disciplines to address your question. You do not have to “force” connections among different disciplines. It is important, though, to show that you did due diligence to consider how different disciplines might be brought to bear on your question(s).

Audience

Write this paper for well-educated, intelligent people who are not necessarily experts in your particular topic area.

Methodology

Your thesis should reflect conventions typical of the main disciplines(s) to which your topic connects. You and your faculty mentor should agree on what your methods should be and how to communicate them accurately and effectively. For instance, if you are synthesizing a large, complex literature on a topic, you need to develop and implement clear decision rules for when you include or exclude sources to answer your research question(s). These decisions must be made apparent to your audience so that they know how you arrived at your answer.

Conclusion

The thesis should have a conclusion. That is, your thesis, as a whole, answers a question or a set of interrelated questions based on evidence.

Length

Our guideline is 25-30+ pages (1” margins, 12-point Times New Roman font), excluding cover page, figures, tables, bibliography, and appendices. You and your mentor should agree on whether the length of the thesis must be altered in order to adequately address your research question.

Citations

You must use notes that cite the sources of your information and give credit for ideas and phrases that are not your own. Footnotes, endnotes, and parenthetical notes are all acceptable. Again, talk to your faculty mentor about his or her preferred method of citation/style guide.

References

In addition to your citations, your thesis needs a list of works cited in accordance with a style guide you and your supervisor agree to use. The appropriate number and type of citations depends on your topic and your research question(s). Everyone’s goal should be to conduct a complete, unbiased search for sources.
Format

A thesis should meet the following requirements:

1. Neatly laser-printed (printed on both sides of the page to conserve paper)
2. Numbered pages
3. One-inch margins
4. Follows a manual of style/style guide that is in use in its field (consult your supervisor)
5. Carefully proofed. A thesis with more than a few errors in spelling, grammar, or punctuation will not be accepted.

Thesis Submission. You will write your thesis and take the NSC 371 Capstone Thesis Seminar concurrently. Seminar meetings will help you stay on track with thesis deadlines and requirements. Although the majority of the thesis course consists of independent work and meetings arranged between you and your faculty mentor, mandatory seminar meetings are held as per the NSC 371. The syllabus will provide more information about what you submit—and when. Typically, the thesis is due before the last day of finals in the spring.

You must submit your thesis in a specified format, which will be detailed in the syllabus for NSC 371. Submission of the thesis involves converting the final version into a .pdf and uploading it to the NSC 371 Canvas site. Then, it may be made available through the CNS website. In addition, you must submit hardcopy of the thesis with your supervisor’s signature on it, along with a thesis submission form.