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
madisonsearl@austin.utexas.edu

The E&I Certificate/PS Program Overview

The Evidence and Inquiry certificate program was called Texas Interdisciplinary Plan (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. The E&I certificate gives undergraduates the opportunity to design fields of study 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 final year at UT, students write a thesis inspired by their E&I field of study. They enroll in a thesis preparation course in the fall of their last year and a thesis writing course as they complete their theses in the spring.

The E&I/PS Thesis

The senior thesis is the Capstone to the student’s undergraduate experience in the E&I/Polymathic Scholars program. It is typically a two-semester research project, often 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 at UT whom they feel will best guide the research and writing on their topic. Faculty mentors may be any level of UT faculty, including lecturers (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 fall semester of his or her final year at UT, the student formulates ideas for a topic, performs research, and begins to create a bibliography. Students are expected to
enroll in the NSC 109 or 323\textsuperscript{1} Capstone Preparation Seminar, which helps guide their efforts. Students concurrently search for a faculty mentor, who often helps shape the student’s project so that the topic is compelling and significant to both. Students must secure a faculty mentor by no later than the end of the fall semester of their final year. Students typically submit a Thesis Registration Form, along with a brief prospectus, in December.

In the spring of their final year, students enroll in the NSC 371: Capstone Thesis Seminar and write the thesis. Each student is expected to submit a detailed outline and a partial draft in the first half of 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 semester, students must present their work orally at a forum approved by the NSC 371 instructor (Dr. Rebecca Wilcox). Thesis faculty mentors are strongly encouraged to attend the student’s presentation, 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: Capstone Thesis Seminar syllabus. For most students, however, it is helpful if the mentor and student agree on what the student will submit, and when, before the final draft of the thesis.

In addition to providing thesis guidance, mentors are asked to complete a very brief Progress Report form about half-way through the semester the student takes the NSC 371: Capstone Thesis Seminar. This form can be completed in just a few minutes. It is the student’s responsibility to give the form to the supervisor with ample time for him or her to complete and sign it. This form is accompanied by an initial 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. Grades are typically due during the final exam period.

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

This graded seminar gives students a sense of community, a forum for discussing thesis progress, an opportunity to exchange feedback with peers, 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, and is available for additional help as necessary.

---

\textsuperscript{1} The three-hour thesis preparation seminar will be offered for the first time in the Fall of 2016. The one-hour option will continue to be available for students in the Fall semesters of 2015 and 2016.
Grades
A full range of grades, from an A to an F, may be given for a Capstone thesis. An A thesis should be significantly better and more substantial than an A term paper, but is not expected to demonstrate graduate-level work. 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: Capstone 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 lower than the Thesis Product grade assigned by the thesis faculty mentor and NSC 371 instructor. This is explained further in the 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: Capstone Thesis 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 style.
- 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 instructor (rebecca.wilcox@austin.utexas.edu) by the date specified on the front side of the progress report form. This information should also be provided by the student.

**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 presentation on their research. Students who do not participate in class and meet deadlines may have their final grade in the thesis seminar penalized, as noted in the NSC 371 syllabus.