CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY EAST BAY

Department of Public Affairs and Administration

THESIS GUIDELINES FOR MPA STUDENTS

These guidelines are intended to provide a starting point for thinking about a thesis and for discussion with members of the Department faculty. The questions included are just a place to begin; we encourage you to ask more. Comments about the Guidelines and suggested questions for future additions maybe left in the Department office.

1. What is a thesis?

An MPA Thesis is an exploration of an area of knowledge within the field of Public Administration. You might choose to write a thesis to pursue an answer to a question that you have, seek a solution to something that is puzzling you or to uncover and present information that you want to know about.

2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of writing a thesis rather than taking the Graduate Synthesis (6901) and Comprehensive Exam? Why should I choose one rather than the other?

Some students feel that a thesis is the hallmark of a master's degree. However, this has become a much less common requirement in postgraduate professional education programs (such as for the Master's in Education, City Planning, Social Work and so forth, including Public Administration) where synthesis courses and comprehensive examinations are found with increasing frequency. Other students choose to write a thesis because they have a question in their minds which they want to research, or an intellectual "puzzle" they want to "solve"; and writing a thesis is the way to do this.

Writing a master's thesis is not a prerequisite for doctoral studies.

The advantages of writing a thesis are that you get to spend an extended period of time thinking about your "puzzle" and working closely with a single faculty member, without other intellectual distractions. That is, the majority of the thesis is usually researched and written after other coursework has been completed. Satisfaction comes from working out a "solution" to a particularly knotty intellectual puzzle or question about practice and from writing it up in an elegant, spare fashion. Disadvantages include the lengthy time commitment, the uncertainty of a movable end date (and, hence, graduation date), and the often frustrating requests from one's advisor to rewrite chapters and sections which you thought were in final form.

The advantages of taking 6901 and the comprehensive exam are the pre-defined time within which they take place; one can plan a graduation date with less uncertainty than with a thesis. Also, the course and exam present an intellectual challenge of their own; an attempt to reflect back on 2 or more years of graduate coursework and to weave those issues and concerns together satisfactorily. The disadvantage is the uncertainty about passing a final exam that comes with any course, although this one is a little more so.

3. How do I find a topic?

No one can provide you with a topic. It is important that the thesis focus on an area of knowledge that is of interest to you. It is your interest that will sustain you through the preparation of the thesis. You may get an idea for a thesis from one of the courses you take in the MPA program, or it may be related to the work you are doing, have done in the past, or hope to undertake in a future career move. You may wish to suggest a new

theoretical approach to an issue, to analyze various elements of a problem, or to solve an important agency or policy problem.

4. What kind of research is acceptable in this Department?

We accept a wide variety of methods, both quantitative and qualitative: survey research, statistical analyses of various kinds, interviews (structured and unstructured), participant observation, ethnographic field research, grounded theory, interpretive analyses (e.g. phenomenological, critical, hermeneutic, feminist), historical and library research.

The more immediate question for you to answer is what you want to find out, because that will determine your choice of method.

5. How should I start?

You need to begin by doing two things simultaneously: defining a thesis question, and finding a thesis advisor.

To find an advisor, approach members of the Department's faculty who have some interest, background, and expertise in the area which you want to explore. Discuss your thoughts and invite the professors' comments. You should be aware that professors may decline the opportunity of working with you on a thesis because they have little expertise in your topic area, or because they have an additional time commitment. In the first instance, faculty can usually direct you to colleagues whose interests match yours more closely. Note that your thesis advisor need not be the same professor as your academic program advisor.

When a faculty member agrees to supervise your thesis, he/she will help you shape and refine your thesis question. This is typically done through a series of meetings over some weeks in which he/she will also direct you to read in the general area of your proposed research, in order for your to get a firmer grounding in your chosen topic.

This means that one typically does not begin this process with a refined thesis question. Coming up with a refined question is part of the initial research process.

Once you have a thesis advisor and a general idea of your research question, you need to complete the Appointment of a Thesis Advisor form (see attached sample), which is available in the Department office. On this form you propose a preliminary thesis title and provide an initial statement of your thesis topic. Your thesis advisor needs to sign this form. A copy of this form will go into your student file.

6. Should I do a Departmental Thesis or the University Thesis?

The difference between a Departmental Thesis and a University Thesis is a matter of form rather than substance. You will find the instructions for a University Thesis in the CSUEB Catalog under "Graduate Degrees and Regulations." The requirements are more

detailed than those for a Departmental Thesis and must be followed exactly as they are spelled out in the Catalog.

In years past it has been considered important for a student who intends to pursue a Ph.D. to do a University Thesis, because of its greater procedural formality. This is no longer the case, and the Department does not recommend one or the other, leaving the choice to you in consultation with your thesis advisor.

7. When should I begin thinking about a thesis?

If you're thinking about writing a thesis, don't wait until you've finished your coursework to begin looking for a thesis advisor. A good time to begin speaking with potential thesis advisors is when you're finishing your core courses or beginning an option area.

It is extremely unusual for a thesis to be defined, researched, and written in one quarter. If you build on research done in prior coursework, you may be able to complete the thesis satisfactorily in two quarters. Three to four quarters is a more reasonable estimate of the time involved.

You should also keep in mind that, in general, professors are on three quarter contracts. The Department has a small budget to hire teaching staff on campus during the summer. (Most faculty who don't teach in the summer use those months to prepare new courses for the coming year, revise existing ones, and research or write.) You should plan to discuss this with your thesis advisor in terms of his/her teaching and advising schedule and your intended graduation date.

8. What may I expect of my thesis advisor?

That person will ask you to write a proposal (typically addressing three questions: What is the subject of your thesis? What is its contribution to the field of public administration? What methods will you use?). The proposal may range from 4-5 pages to 10-15 pages in length. You might think of the proposal as a "map" for your thesis; that is, it describes the "terrain" you propose to cover and charts the "path" you will take as you move through the terrain.

This document is unlike most course papers in that it is the subject of negotiation between you and your thesis advisor, as is the thesis as a whole. You might think of the proposal (as well as the thesis) as a work in progress. As such, you may be asked to revise the proposal one or more times until your advisor is satisfied that you have clearly stated a question for research.

This revision process is beneficial for you because it is a way of narrowing the scope of your work to what is do-able for an MPA thesis. That is, the faculty wants to make sure that you are not trying to do too much (this isn't intended to be a doctoral dissertation or a book manuscript, after all) – or too little to qualify as a thesis. Better to find this out <u>before</u> you have begun your field research and your writing, than afterwards.

When you and your advisor have negotiated an acceptable proposal, your advisor will sign it, and this will go into your file. This signature represents the professor's agreement for you to proceed with further research and writing of the thesis. A sample form is attached.

Don't go away then and write your thesis without maintaining ongoing contact with your advisor. Plan to meet with the professor regularly (perhaps every three weeks or so); he/she may suggest meeting times, but don't hesitate to propose a schedule that fits your writing style and your available time. You should take steps to minimize the risk that your work will be found unacceptable after you have written the whole manuscript—which happens often when a student writes a thesis without ongoing consultation with his/her thesis advisor.

9. What goes into a thesis?

In general, a thesis manuscript should include the following parts, in the order listed:

- Title page (sample attached for Departmental Thesis)
- Abstract (1-2 single spaced paragraphs summarizing the thesis argument)
- Acknowledgement page (optional)
- Table of Contents
- Text (including introductory and concluding chapters)
- List of notes (the accepted style in the Department is the APA (American Psychological Association style or other style guides – especially W.G. Campbell and S.V. Ballou, Forms and Style (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, continuously updated)—are available in the bookstore and in the reference section of the library)
- List of references (also following APA style)
- Appendices, such as questionnaires or a list of interview subjects (where appropriate)

Some of these parts have specific formats required for a University Thesis. Consult the CSUEB Catalog for details.

The text of a thesis typically includes the following parts:

- A brief introduction to the subject matter of the thesis; an overview which establishes the purpose or objectives of the thesis.
- A description of the theoretical framework within which your thesis fits (you might think of this as carrying on a conversation with others who have addressed the same subject matter; you should present the basic concepts of the field of thought and their interrelationships, and show how your thinking about the subject fits in; also know as the "literature review")
- A discussion of the research methods you have chosen to help you find the answer to the question you are asking in your thesis (you might also reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of your methods, why they are appropriate to your

research question, problems you encountered in using them in doing the research, etc.; also known as the "methodology section: of your thesis)
- The presentation of your research findings (your "story" of what you did and what you found; although what you did might come under the methodology section)
- A statement of your conclusions which you derive from having done this research, and possibly of recommendations for further action or for further research, discuss discrepancies in your findings, suggest new avenues of inquiry, consider the limitations of your research for generalizing to other research sites)

This list is meant to be suggestive. You will discuss the outline and contents of your thesis with your advisor.

We might make the following observations, however, about writing a thesis. As with course papers, it is often advisable to write the introduction last, because that's when you know what it is that you're going to say. Second, unlike many shorter papers, you typically don't complete the research for a thesis and then write it. As you write chapter 2 or 3, you may discover something which changes your thinking about chapter 4 or 5, requiring you to undertake further research. Or, in writing a concluding chapter, you may discover something that means you need to rethink what you wrote in an earlier chapter. This is a normal part of the research process. Lastly, there comes a time when you just need to stop reading and start writing; and another time when you need to stop writing and say, "This is the best I can do at this time."

There are several books on the market about thesis writing. We encourage you to consult them for further ideas about writing, as well as to discuss your questions with your advisor. You might also consider forming a "thesis writers' group" with other in the Department engaged in this venture. It is a nice way of keeping in touch with classmates, as well as a potential source of ideas and encouragement.

10. How is a thesis graded?

As long as you are making satisfactory progress, as judged by your thesis advisor, you will be given the grade of RP (for Report in Progress) at the end of each quarter, until your thesis is completed and accepted by your advisor. At that point, you will receive a letter grade. The Department requires a grade of B or better to satisfactorily complete the thesis and the requirements for receiving the MPA.

A thesis advisor has the prerogative of terminating the advising relationship with a student writing a thesis if satisfactory progress is not being made. The student then has the option of negotiating with another faculty member and beginning the thesis process or of taking 6901 and the comprehensive exam (providing that the student has not already taken 6901 and the exam and failed one or both).

11. When should I register for the thesis?

The University Catalog allows for registration in either PUAD 6909 (Department Thesis) or PUAD 6910 (University Thesis) any time after you have completed all prior coursework (but note that you need not, and probably should not, wait until then to begin finding an advisor and defining a topic). The Department has no other guidelines for when you should register. One reason for not registering too early is that you have five years to complete your degree program (counting from the quarter of your admission to the program to the quarter of your graduation). The RP grade must be turned into a letter grade within this five year period (although you may appeal for an extension of up to two years to finish the program). In this regard, please note that if you do not register for courses in two consecutive quarters, you should apply for an Educational Leave of Absence, which will "protect" your admission and your status as progressing toward the degree.)

You pay fees for 6909 or 6910 only when you register for the thesis the first time; as of this writing, you do not pay additional fees when continuing into additional quarters. If you are carrying out your thesis research over several quarters without re-registering, are making satisfactory progress, and need library borrowing privileges, speak to your advisor about a letter to arrange borrowing privileges.

12. How many copies of my thesis do I need to give the Department?

The rules for a University Thesis may be found in the CSUEB Catalog and will not be repeated here.

For a Departmental Thesis, two copies are required (one is available for circulation within the Department, the other goes into Departmental archives). Your thesis advisor may also ask for a copy. You may wish to make other copies for your own purposes (to send to your parents, for example, or for a Ph.D. abstract to send with application). It may be useful for you to make several copies of your abstract to send with application materials in the future.

13. When do these copies need to be turned in?

The schedule of deadlines for a University Thesis is published in the University Catalog. The following comments pertain to a Departmental Thesis.

You should not make copies or bind your thesis until your thesis advisor has approved your final manuscript draft. Once your advisor has accepted a final draft (i.e. you are not requested to make any further revisions), you may prepare your final copy and have the copies bound. They need to be delivered to your advisor during finals week in order to have receive a grade for that quarter. Your thesis advisor will need to sign off on your final copies.

14. Are there other requirements I should know about?

Again the following comments pertain to the Departmental Thesis; format and other requirements for the University Thesis may be found in the Catalog.

In keeping with customary practice, theses should be typed double space on a white 8 ½" by 11" non-correctable bond paper without holes. Legible computer print-out is acceptable. You might want to look at a Department thesis to see a sample binding.

There are no other Departmental requirements, but your thesis advisor may require you to do other things to prepare an acceptable thesis.

The Department maintains a collection of completed theses in the storage room which are available for browsing. For access to them, please contact the administrative staff in the office. In addition, the faculty have selected a dozen or so theses which represent "good" work in a variety of methodological approaches. These are kept in the office and the administrative staff would be happy to help you with them.

Department of Public Affairs and Administration

APPOINTMENT OF A THESIS ADVISOR

Student Name: _____ Net ID: _____

I propose to write a University Thesis _____ Departmental Thesis _____

The preliminary title of my proposed thesis is:

_____
_____

My proposed thesis topic is:

_____
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_____

Note to student:

A thesis proposal must be prepared and approved by your advisor before further research and writing on your thesis. Your thesis must receive the approval of your advisor before the final draft is acceptable for final typing and your advisor must complete the "Approval of Thesis Proposal" form for the title page.

I agree to serve as Advisor on this thesis:

Name: _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

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APPROVAL OF THESIS PROPOSAL
FOR THE MASTER OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION DEGREE

Thesis Title

Prepared By

The attached thesis proposal has my approval. The student may now proceed with further research and the writing of the thesis.

Advisor Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____