

Mentoring Undergraduate Thesis Projects

Claudia Lampman, Ph.D.
Professor of Psychology
Workshop on 10/16/2009

Why do I do it?

- Since 1992:
 - I've chaired 21 undergraduate theses
 - I've been on 8 committees
- Mostly 'uncompensated' work
- But, it's highly rewarding professionally
 - 2 out of 3 went on to graduate, medical, or law school
 - 1 in 4 published (I'm a co-author on three articles)
 - 1 in 10 are now Professors
- For me, this is the best work I do
 - It's an opportunity to feel proud of your students' accomplishments and know that you played a role in their success

Why should a student do a thesis?

- ❑ Departmental and/or University Honors
- ❑ Can lead to presentations or publication
- ❑ Looks good to graduate schools
 - Evidence of writing skills, scholarship, research skills
- ❑ Looks good to employers
 - Shows ambition, time-management skills, logical reasoning, clarity of thinking, writing skills, trust of supervisor
- ❑ It's a "high-impact" learning experience

What is an Undergraduate Thesis?

- ❑ A unique opportunity for student success that will set them apart from peers
 - Should involve:
 - ❑ Significant *independent* work
 - ❑ Strong faculty *mentorship*
 - Should demonstrate scholarship:
 - ❑ Advanced *understanding* of an area of specialization
 - ❑ Appropriate *application* of disciplinary tools, techniques, methods
 - ❑ Ability to *present* thesis with competence

Two Models

- Apprenticeship or Partnership Model
 - A project that is part of a faculty member's program of research
 - Designed mostly by you, but carried out semi-independently by student
 - Critical that they write the thesis and present it solo
- Student-Driven Model
 - Student chooses topic, then finds supervisor
 - Chair still plays large role in project design (usually to cut it down to manageable size)

Misconceptions

- A thesis does not need to be:
 - the "perfect" project or study
 - entirely original and groundbreaking
 - publishable or "statistically significant" to be accepted
 - 100s of pages long (average about 30)
- A thesis should be:
 - do-able within time frame
 - something that really interests the student
 - viewed as a learning experience
 - 'trial research'

When should you say yes?

- Have some criteria (helps you say no)
 - Received an 'A' in PSY 420: Conducting Research in Psychology
 - Received an 'A' in at least two of my courses
 - One of these classes had to have a major written project
 - Overall GPA 3.5 or above
 - I know enough about the topic to provide strong mentorship
 - If you don't, then there will be extra work for you

When should you say no?

- When the student
 - Has weak writing ability
 - Has trouble sticking to deadlines
 - Has taken an incomplete or two
 - Requires a lot of hand-holding
 - Can't make lemonade
 - Sees all feedback as criticism
 - Possible personality clash
 - Best predictor of future behavior is past behavior
- If they don't finish, YOU HAVE WASTED YOUR TIME!

The Introductory Meeting

- Ask why they want to do a thesis
- Good reasons:
 - To graduate with honors
 - To get into graduate or professional school
 - They love research
 - They have a topic they really want to study
- Not so good reasons:
 - Because I want to be published
 - Beware of narcissism
 - Because I need upper division credits and there are no other courses I want to take

Set up Realistic Expectations

- According to UAA catalog, a typical 3-credit course requires:
 - 2,250 in-class contact minutes
 - 4,500 minutes outside the classroom
- So, in a 6-credit (year long) thesis:
 - 225 hours of work over two semesters
 - Average of 7.5 hours per week for 30 weeks

Set up Realistic Expectations

- ❑ Talk about deadlines
 - Expect revisions
 - ❑ This is not like a paper for a class where you turn it in and get a grade
 - ❑ I suggest 4-6 weeks before end of semester
- ❑ Talk about grading
 - What does an A require? (Not just completion)
 - See PSY A499 Course Content Guide
 - What is a DF (deferred grade)
 - Can I graduate if it is not done?
- ❑ Talk about process

Set up Realistic Expectations

- ❑ They should not turn in a 'draft' without your OK
 - It should be their **best work**
 - Chair is not your personal editor
 - It takes several hours to read a thesis
 - Don't expect Chair to write/re-write your thesis for you
- ❑ Don't ignore feedback
 - If you don't understand something, ask for clarification
 - A major problem if I ask you to correct it and it comes back unchanged

Timeline: Semester I

- ❑ Conduct literature review
- ❑ Design study and write proposal
 - basically a long introduction and methods section
 - do statistical power analysis
- ❑ Apply to Undergraduate Studies Committee in writing
- ❑ Apply for funding (usually Undergraduate Research Grant)
- ❑ Complete IRB or IACUC training
- ❑ If collecting data off-campus, get letters of support
- ❑ Complete and submit IRB or IACUC proposal, if applicable
 - Expect to wait 2-5 weeks for review
 - Expect revisions

Timeline: Semester II

- ❑ Arrange for a second committee member
- ❑ Collect data
- ❑ Follow department recruitment policy if collecting data from UAA classes
- ❑ Analyze data
- ❑ Write final thesis in APA style (format to UAA thesis specifications)
- ❑ Submit thesis to committee no later than 4 weeks before end of semester
- ❑ Revise and re-submit until acceptable to committee
- ❑ Prepare thesis cover page which needs to be signed by:
- ❑ Bring final copy of thesis to the Library

Tips for Supervision

- Don't do their work for them
 - It is tempting to turn on 'Track Changes' and edit away
 - We often take what is a perfectly acceptable sentence (that sounds like it was written by an undergraduate) and turn it into a perfect sentence (that sounds like it was written by a PhD)
 - Better to tell them what is wrong, but make them fix it
 - Feedback is best delivered in person, so that you can make sure they understand it
 - A meeting now can save a lot of back and forth
 - Goal should be to read minimum # of drafts

Some advice I give my
students

Tips to Students for Thesis Success

- ❑ Make public commitments
- ❑ Look at previous theses
- ❑ If we tell you it's not realistic, we are probably right
- ❑ Hang out around the department a lot, and talk about your research
 - It's good for you, and good for others
- ❑ Ask questions in person
 - Talking about your research stimulates new ideas
 - Less likely to misunderstand
- ❑ You don't have to do stats yourself, but you have to be able to explain it in writing.
 - Expect to have to read some stats books
- ❑ Writing
 - Don't be wedded to your words – if we say cut it, cut it. Don't take it personally.
 - If you don't understand feedback, you need to ask for help. Don't ignore it and hope we will forget

Tips for Literature Reviews

- ❑ Look for review articles or meta-analysis
- ❑ Dissertations are good sources of measures and literature reviews.
- ❑ Read most recent articles first
- ❑ You must have an article in hand to cite it
- ❑ Abstracts often 'overgeneralize' findings; read article

What do I need to Register For?

- PSY 499 Senior Thesis
 - Minimum of 3.0 credits
 - usually a year-long project
 - Many people take PSY 420 in the first semester and pilot their research
 - Grading:
 - Graded A-F, not pass/no pass
 - You must receive a grade of 'A' or 'B' to graduate with departmental honors
 - You will get a 'DF' (deferred) grade if thesis is not yet complete
 - Requires permission of faculty member for registration
 - Recognize the significant commitment of faculty time