

# Department of Psychology and Counseling Experimental Psychology Program

## Procedures For Preparing a Thesis Proposal And Selecting a Master's Committee

It is expected that students will develop a research agenda for their thesis throughout their master's program experiences. As students approach the completion of their course work, they should have formulated some informal plans in one or more research areas with thesis potential. It is anticipated that faculty members will have responded (formally or informally) to questions and queries presented by master's students during their tenure in the M.S. program regarding future areas of research, thereby providing some direction and structure to students as they progress in the program.

By the time students complete 21 hours, it is expected that they will have explored several possible areas of investigation and discussed them with appropriate faculty members (particularly their advisor) and will be prepared to commit to an appropriate domain for their thesis.

### **Concept Paper**

To facilitate communication with faculty members regarding service on master's thesis committees, students will prepare a *concept paper* describing the proposed area of research. Having a conceptual description of the proposed thesis research written for faculty consideration allows faculty to (1) decide if they have an interest in serving on the committee, and/or (2) provide reactions and feedback on the concept presented, whether or not they choose to serve. This is a particularly important step when asking a faculty member to serve as chair of the thesis committee.

A concept paper is a description of the research that the student will develop as a formal proposal for the full committee. Such a description is relatively brief (8-12 pages double-spaced) and provides a dialogue including such sections as:

Introduction (Background)  
Problem Statement  
Brief Review of Recent Pertinent Studies  
Abbreviated Estimate of Potential Methods/Procedures  
Justification or Significance of the Study  
References

Students are expected to complete a self-assessment of their areas of expertise and interest, review texts, class notes, and literature in the domain, match interests and abilities with possible research areas, and confer with their advisor. Then, students explicate their potential research area in writing in the form of a concept paper.

Potential committee members should have an opportunity to examine the concept paper and to meet with the student prior to making a decision regarding participation on the committee. The concept paper, while not a formal document, serves as a communication mechanism and as an opportunity to verbalize a potential dissertation problem area.

### **Selecting a Chair**

Upon completion of the concept paper, students may enroll in thesis credit and secure a chair for the thesis committee. The thesis committee chair supervises the student's efforts in completing membership on the committee, conducting the research, and monitoring processes to make sure proper standards are met. In general, the chairperson will:

- Provide guidance to the student;
- respond to the submitted drafts within a reasonable amount of time;
- be reasonable and consistent with advice;
- offer guidance on securing needed resources;
- make referrals to others with expertise;
- protect the student from unreasonable demands;
- (if necessary), provide assistance as a faculty member advocate; and
- generally assist the student in pursuing the thesis.

Because of the paramount role of the chair on the committee, the student and the faculty member agreeing to serve as chair must be clear on the goals, processes, and directions of the thesis. Therefore, prior to requesting a faculty member to serve as chairperson, the concept paper should be shared and discussed. If the faculty member agrees to serve as chair, she or he will notify the Department Head who will recommend the appointment to the Dean of Graduate Studies.

### **Selecting a Committee**

Composition of the thesis committee is restricted to full or part time faculty with Graduate Faculty status. The student, with consent of the chair, will develop a list of potential faculty for service on the thesis committee. Students should approach eligible faculty members regarding their willingness to be on the thesis committee. Potential committee members will be provided with a copy of the concept paper and, after a reasonable amount of time and with consent of the chair, the student will ask faculty members to serve on the committee. Each faculty members being asked to serve may ask for a meeting with the student and/or chair before making a final decision. Eventually, the faulty member will notify the chair in writing of his or her decision about membership. When the committee membership is complete, the Department Head will be notified by the committee chair. The Department Head will recommend the committee membership to the Dean of Graduate Studies.

### **The Proposal**

Working from the concept paper as a foundational document, the student must prepare a written proposal of the study. Although a committee and/or committee chair may specify variations on the guidelines shown in Attachment A, the outline is presented as a guide for the subdivision of chapters for a typical proposal to encourage some degree of standardization. All proposals must follow the guidelines in the College of Graduate Studies *Thesis Manual*. A final copy of the proposal will be approved by the student's Master's thesis committee and will serve as the basis for the thesis process and product. The proposal, as an official document, will be prepared in the latest APA format for subdivisions, citations, tables, figures, and captions but will otherwise follow the requirements of the *Thesis Manual* for pagination, capitalization, margins, spacing, typeface, sections, titles, and general layout. The proposal will be made available to

the committee members and others in electronic form as a Microsoft Word document as well as in print.

The student will be responsible for the content and form of the thesis proposal document although the chair will provide advice and counsel during the process. It is anticipated that the full committee will meet one or more times to review issues, address concerns, and make recommendations — in general, to assist the student with framing and solidifying the proposal prior to a formal meeting to vote to approve or disapprove the proposal.

Subsequent to completion of the document and after the committee has read the final copy of the proposal, a formal meeting shall be called by the chair. The purpose of the formal meeting, in which committee members will meet with the student as a group, will be to vote on the proposal. Attendees may also include the Department Head and others deemed appropriate by the student and chair. At this time, the committee can (1) approve the proposal, (2) approve the proposal pending specified changes, or (3) decline to accept the proposal. The committee decision will be revealed to the student at the end of the formal meeting, and within one week, the outcome of the vote will be forwarded to the Department Head and the Dean of Graduate Studies (Thesis Approval Form in the *Thesis Manual*). Before beginning data collection, the proposal must receive committee, Department Head, Dean of the College of Graduate Studies, and Institutional Review Board approval.

Approval of the thesis proposal protects the student from later substantive or arbitrary changes in method or design unless such changes were included in the decision to approve the proposal. A thesis that is properly conducted in accordance with the proposal cannot be deemed unacceptable only on the basis of non-significant results. However, nothing in the approval of the proposal shall be constructed as requiring the master's committee's approval of the completed thesis or as an adequate defense of the thesis.

### **Institutional Review Board Approval**

Upon obtaining approval of the thesis proposal by the thesis committee, Department Head, and Dean of the College of Graduate Studies, the student must then obtain approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before

beginning data collection. The committee chair will assist the student in the preparation of the required documents and forms, which can be found on the Office of Sponsored Projects website. Once these are prepared, they are submitted to the Department Head for review and approval, who will in turn forward them to the IRB. Depending upon the nature of the research, approval by the IRB can take anywhere from a few weeks to a few months. The student should consult with the committee chair about the process and the formulation of realistic plans for the start of data collection.

### **Academic Honesty**

Each student's honesty and integrity are taken for granted. However, if any member of the committee or the faculty finds evidence of academic misconduct, the matter will be pursued to the fullest extent permitted by the university. University policy states students guilty of academic misconduct are subject to disciplinary action. "Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating on an examination or other academic work, plagiarism, collusion, unauthorized use of technology and the abuse of resource materials" (*Tarleton State University Student Handbook/Planner, 2009-10, p. 26*). Students are strongly advised to avoid even the appearance of academic misconduct. Academic misconduct or dishonesty will result in a grade of F, administrative withdrawal from the course and/or possible dismissal from the program. In addition to consulting the *Student Handbook/Planner*, students should also consult the College of Graduate Studies *Thesis Manual* for information about copyrights and plagiarism.

ATTACHMENT A  
RECOMMENDED SUBDIVISIONS  
For  
THESIS PROPOSALS

Introduction

A. Orientation — Provide the reader with a brief overview of the area you intend to investigate. Include a general purpose of your proposed study.

B. Problem Statement - Simply state the research problem (usually in question form) in conceptual (broad) terms that can later be operationalized and converted into hypotheses or research questions.

C. Significance of the Problem — Convince the reader that your study is important for both theoretical and practical reasons. The intent of this section is to show how the proposed study moves the field ahead in some important manner. The researcher should indicate ways in which the proposed study has generality beyond the local scene. That is, the proposed study should be placed in the context of the expansion of a field of knowledge, related literature, and the underpinning theory. This is an extremely important step in getting a proposal approved by a committee.

D. Theoretical (or Conceptual) Framework — Explain how constructs in your area of interest are related and how they predict and/or explain important phenomena. The theoretical framework will be a context from which your Problem Statement emerged. Confine your description to broad conceptual terminology and educational leadership constructs and the interrelationships among the constructs.

E. Definition of Terms — Provide a descriptive (syntactic) definition of concepts and constructs mentioned in the theoretical framework. *Operational definitions* should also be provided for major constructs that will be represented as independent, dependent, or control variables.

F. Hypotheses — Convert the Problem Statement(s) into one or more operational research questions or declarative sentence conjectures (hypotheses) if the study involves hypotheses testing. At this point, use

variables and operational definitions in the questions/statements rather than constructs as in the Problem Statement.

G. Limitations and Delimitations — Explain the extent to which the study results might be jeopardized in terms of internal validity due to methodology, sample size, uncontrolled extraneous variables, etc. or how external validity may be limited because of the type of sample to be utilized (limitations). Explain which particular aspects of the theory base are included and excluded for study (delimitations). Provide statements of justification if necessary.

#### Literature Review

Report and/or synthesize literature related to the theoretical orientation of the study, recent research in the area, methodology (or assessment techniques) used in such studies, and current issues in the field of interest. This section can be used to show how your proposed study "fits" with existing knowledge and/or how it may provide a distinctive slant to addressing the problem. Keep in mind that, at the conclusion of your study, you will need to relate your findings and conclusions back to the existing literature.

#### Methodology

A. Participants — To the best of your ability, describe the number of participants (N), the kind of sample to be selected, demographics of the participants, and other pertinent information regarding the sample of participants (i.e., special education, athletes, middle-school principals, aspiring administrators in alternative certification programs, statistical power analysis, etc.). If other than individuals, specify the aggregate for the unit of analysis to be used.

B. Instrumentation — Without sound justification for the use of proposed assessment techniques, the entire study will be subject to question. Provide a complete description of the instruments; provide reliability, validity, and other psychometric documentation for measurement methods; and disclose references pertinent to the instrumentation.

C. Procedures — Specify the sequence of events that make up the major milestones of your proposed study. This may be coordinated with the project timeline (see below).

D. Null (or Directional) Hypothesis(es) — For quantitative studies involving hypotheses testing, convert each operational hypotheses or research question posed earlier into the null form for statistical testing. If a directional (1-tail) test can be justified, provide details in section "F" below.

E. Data Collection — (and/or treatment) — Describe step-by-step procedures to be followed in collecting data (including plans for securing informed consent forms from the human subject participants). This section may be incorporated into the Procedures section (see C. above). If appropriate and not already covered by the description of instrumentation (see B. above), explicate any quantification rules used for the project; i.e., how were numerals assigned to various levels of variables?

F. Data Analysis — For each hypothesis, individually report the data analysis technique you expect to employ (assuming assumptions are satisfied). For quantitative studies, provide the estimated power of the statistical test and the predetermined level of risk for a type I error you are willing to take while testing the null hypothesis(es) (a.k.a. alpha - $\alpha$ ).

#### Timeline

Show milestones (may be keyed to procedures previously described) for completing the work. A diagram such as a PERT chart of timeline would be an appropriate illustration.

#### References

Use the most recent APA Style Manual for formatting citations and references in the body of the proposal and on the "References Cited" page.

Note: Expect to be required to revise drafts of the research proposal, perhaps several times. Very seldom will a proposal satisfy the necessary criteria on the first try. However, when satisfactorily completed, a sizeable segment of the first three chapters of the thesis will be complete (except for tense). And more importantly, if your thought processes are clear and your study is well-defined, the final proposal should require no more than 25 pages, depending on your topic and the complexity of your methodology. Students are encouraged to be concise and precise in expression, and parsimonious in scholarly style.