Guidelines for Completing an Undergraduate Thesis in HDFS

Overview

A research thesis is an exciting opportunity for highly motivated undergraduates to examine a question in depth. Although a thesis requires much work, it also provides many rewards. These include mastery of advanced skills such as technical writing, library searches, research design, statistics, and critical thinking. All of these skills are fundamental to success in graduate school, so completing a thesis is viewed favorably by graduate admissions committees. Another benefit is the close collaboration that develops with your thesis adviser. This intense working relationship often helps shape and clarify career goals, and may lead to doors being opened, along with the other benefits of mentoring. Finally, research is the cornerstone of our field. One not only gains personal insights into behavior by doing original research, if the work is published it contributes to our field's progress.

The sections that follow describe the steps you will take to complete a thesis. These steps should be planned and executed in close consultation with your thesis adviser. Given the work both you and your adviser will devote to the thesis, you should register for at least 4 credits total of HD499. The actual number of credits for your project will depend on how much effort you expend each semester, so be sure to check with your thesis adviser as you plan ahead.

The Thesis Committee

Your thesis committee consists of an adviser, another committee member on faculty in Human Development and Family Studies, and a third member from outside of the department. Your thesis adviser, who need not be your academic adviser, must have a doctorate and graduate faculty status in the HDFS department. Perhaps the most important consideration when selecting a thesis adviser is a shared interest in a particular topic area; in order to provide adequate research guidance, your adviser should be familiar with current issues, research, and methods in your chosen area. Other considerations include your ability to work with this person, in terms of compatible personalities and work styles, and similar expectations regarding the scope of the project. Typically, the other two committee members provide expertise that complements your adviser's, such as knowledge of different literatures, methods, or perspectives. Once you and your thesis adviser have come to agreement on the nature of your thesis, she or he can recommend others who might be able to serve on your committee.

Thesis Expectations and Procedures

A thesis is an empirical paper in which the student (a) identifies a well-defined research problem and justifies its investigation; (b) derives specific, testable hypotheses; and (c) tests the hypotheses by collecting and analyzing new data or by using an existing data set for secondary analysis. The data may be obtained by experimental, quasi-experimental, observational, or survey methods, or through qualitative analyses of interviews or documents. In order for the thesis to foster your professional skills, it is best if the thesis topic is compatible with the your interests, course work, and career plans. It should be done in close consultation with the committee, particularly the adviser.
The specific steps leading to completing the thesis are as follows:

1. Explore and define the topic area and research question. Often, this process begins in your courses, especially those that really interest you. The translation of broad "I wonder" questions into a manageable research question typically involves much discussion with your thesis adviser as well as library research.

2. Once a well-defined research question is agreed upon, you will write a thesis proposal. The proposal consists of (a) an in-depth review of the research literature and theories that support your research question, (b) a description of the methods you will use to test your hypotheses, and (c) a plan for how you will conduct your data analyses. When your adviser agrees that your proposal is complete (usually after several drafts have been written!), a proposal meeting is held with all committee members. This meeting is an opportunity to provide feedback on the completeness of the literature review, the adequacy of the method for answering your research question, and the quality of the writing. In other words, it's a form of quality control to make sure that you do the best possible study.

3. All studies involving data collection from humans must be approved by CSU's Human Research Committee. Studies involving high-risk populations (e.g., minors) or topics (e.g., grief, sexuality, substance use) receive extra careful scrutiny. Research involving analysis of existing data may require only a letter outlining what will be done whereas content analyses of published material usually does not require HRC approval. Your committee will provide guidance on this step.

4. Then you conduct the study as approved: collect the data, analyze it, and write the results and discussion. You may call upon other faculty or the statistical consultant for help with the data analyses, if your adviser thinks it would be wise to do so.

5. When your adviser says that your full thesis is complete, you schedule a thesis defense with your committee. Allow your committee 10-14 days to read your thesis. At a typical thesis defense, the student provides the committee and guests with an overview of what was done and found in the study. The audience then asks questions to clarify and amplify. They may ask you to explain ambiguous points, elaborate on thoughts, integrate your findings with other perspectives, or speculate on future directions. The committee often recommends that some changes be made to the thesis before it is bound and deposited in the department office. A signature page like that used for graduate theses should be included.

An undergraduate thesis usually requires two semesters to complete, though three semesters is not uncommon for a detailed study. You will need one semester to clarify your research question and review the related literature, and one semester to collect and analyze data and as well as to write the results and discussion sections of the thesis.
Format and Style

The following resources are helpful in making decisions about the format and style of the thesis:

- The CSU Thesis Manual, available at the CSU Bookstore, specifies the format for graduate theses and should be used for undergraduate theses as well.

- The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA) specifies the written format for all course papers and theses in the HDFS Department.

- Graduate theses, available at CSU Morgan Library and from the HDFS Department Office, will provide concrete examples of the format and style accepted in HDFS. Winners of the HDFS Graduate Student Thesis Award were selected because the exemplary quality of their work; their theses provide good templates to follow. A typical format includes the following elements:

  Abstract
  Chapter 1: Introduction [defines the research question or problem statement]
  Chapter 2: Literature Review [in-depth discussion of prior research and theory relevant to the research problem; organized thematically or by presuppositions--these justify the research question; concludes with specific hypotheses. Some advisers prefer a single chapter that integrates the introduction and literature review.]
  Chapter 3: Method [sample selection and characteristics, measures, procedure]
  Chapter 4: Results [description of data analyses and commentary on what was found]
  Chapter 5: Discussion [interpretation of findings in the context of issues discussed in the introduction and literature review]
  Appendices