**The Thesis Process:**

**A Guide for Graduate Students in Criminology and Criminal Justice**

Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice

Missouri State University

**What is a thesis?**

A thesis is an empirical research project that provides students with an opportunity to demonstrate mastery over each component of the research process. This process includes developing clear research questions, writing a quality literature review, forming theoretically-based expectations and hypotheses, constructing a sound research design, collecting data, demonstrating appropriate analysis techniques, and articulating the importance of the findings to criminal justice policy and practice. A thesis makes a unique contribution to the scientific literature, either by addressing an issue from a new angle or validating existing research through a replication study.

Theses usually have five chapters organized as follows:

1. *Statement of the Problem*
2. *Literature Review*
3. *Methods*
4. *Results*
5. *Discussion and Implications*

One of the best ways to better understand the form and requirements of a thesis is to review completed theses with topics similar to your own. The Meyer library has bound and electronic copies of theses from a wide range of disciplines, including criminology and criminal justice. Completed theses for our program include:

Don Ivie. (2009). “Stress and Burnout in Policing: Does Military Experience Matter?”

Gabrielle Wilson. (2010). “Is Reporting Rape the Same as Snitching: A Test of the Deprivation and Importation Models.”

Angela Collins. (2010). “Perceptions of the Work Environment in Female Prisons: A Comparison of Male and Female Staff.”

Julianna Cameron. (2011). “Missouri’s New Sentencing Assessment Report: Does the Courtroom

Workgroup Approve?”

Natalie Hanrion. (2011). “Assessing Student Perception of Social Media for Emergency Notification by

a University: A Case Study.”

**Why do a thesis?**

This is the most frequently asked question. A thesis is one of the most time-consuming and work-intensive aspects of graduate school and its size and scale can be intimidating. So why do it when there is a nonthesis option? One reason applies directly to those students considering Ph.D. programs. Although not a requirement for admission into most Ph.D. programs, a thesis prepares you for a dissertation, which is the unavoidable capstone of doctoral studies. A completed thesis will help demonstrate to admission boards that you have the desire, work ethic, commitment, and academic skills to successfully obtain a doctoral degree. Publications can come from thesis research, which is another plus when preparing your application packet. Writing and completing a thesis also provides students wondering whether they can handle the rigors of Ph.D. studies a boost of confidence and reassurance.

A thesis also has value for those looking to use their master’s degree to advance in professional careers. The thesis offers a platform upon which to sharpen and reinforce the skills gained from graduate education. The organizational skill necessary for drafting an informative literature review, the critical thinking and problem solving skills utilized to create a research design and analyze data, and the writing skills involved in persuasively communicating the contribution of the project are all strengthened and polished through the thesis. Students who complete a thesis also receive a bound document that becomes part of the Missouri State University library. Make no mistake…the thesis is the road less traveled in master’s programs, but traveling this path does have its benefits and rewards.

**How do I get moving on a thesis?**

*Ideas and Questions*

The first step is to figure out what you want to research. Think about what you find intriguing and what fuels your passion in criminal justice. What are some specific issues and problems from these topics that you would like to explore? How could your interests be framed in the context of a research question that will guide the development of the thesis? Although there is no deadline set for beginning the thesis process, students are strongly encouraged to do so in their first year, especially during their second semester, if the goal is to graduate in two years.

*Working with a mentor*

As you begin to gather your ideas, narrow them down, and craft research questions, it is important that you search for a faculty member to serve as a mentor in this process. A faculty mentor can help you with a number of things, such as:

* Identifying good places to start with a literature review
* Challenging a student to refine ideas and questions so that they are suitable for scientific study
* Offering ideas about how similar topics have been examined in past research
* Providing links to agencies which might be receptive to students collecting data for a thesis or assisting with the identification of databases suitable to the needs of a research project
* Motivating students to keep moving forward with generating a thesis framework.

*Selecting a chair and committee*

Students can certainly interact with multiple faculty members in a mentoring capacity, but at some point a thesis chair must be officially selected. The thesis chair will be the student’s main point of contact throughout the thesis experience. With the thesis chair, a student will establish a timeline and outline expectations for completing the research project. A thesis chair is also the primary authority and should be consulted with any plans to change the direction or format of the thesis.

The thesis chair also advises the student in selecting a thesis committee. Your thesis committee must have a total of three graduate faculty members including your chair. At least two committee members must be from the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice. The purpose of the committee is to offer constructive input and feedback in the development and refinement of the thesis product. The student is responsible for keeping the committee informed regarding the stage of the research project and the status of drafts or revisions.

The Graduate College provides the following suggestions for selecting a thesis committee:

* Students should discuss with their chair who would best serve their needs on a thesis committee
* It is important that each member of the thesis committee communicate and function well together
* Some general considerations include:
* Faculty members’ current and previous research
* A representation of different specialization areas and analytic expertise
* Personal or political conflict between potential committee members that would disrupt a student’s progress
* Persons who would provide a critical eye to a student’s work

*Initial concept paper*

Prior to registering for thesis coursework, a student must prepare and defend an initial concept paper. This paper will clearly a) identify the research question(s) to be addressed by the research project, b) provide a review of the main concepts and themes in the relevant literature, and c) specify a plan for studying and analyzing the issue. Students should consult with their committee regarding the appropriate length of the concept paper.

**Prospectus (Thesis I)**

Once the chair and all committee members have accepted and signed off on the concept paper, a student can register for Thesis I and begin the prospectus. A prospectus requires greater development of the initial concept paper and for the most part will serve as the first three chapters of your thesis. It represents a full proposal to conduct and complete the research project. The prospectus must contain the following:

*Statement of the Problem*

This section does not have to be long, but it must clearly articulate the significance of your proposed research. In other words, why is this research project important? What will it contribute to the field? Introduce the reader here to the key concepts and dilemmas connected to your proposed study. Finally, provide a short overview of the study you envision.

*Literature Review*

The goal of the literature review is to a) demonstrate mastery of the literature relevant to your thesis topic and b) identify how your proposed study will expand and contribute to existing literature. In many cases, this is the most time-consuming and work-intensive part of a thesis. Creating an outline and using headings and subheadings will help you to organize the information.

There is some variation in how literature reviews are put together. In general, a strong literature review should contain the following:

* A breakdown of the history and background of the topic in a criminal justice and broader social context
* Explanations of theories applicable to the research question
* Prior definitions of key concepts and variables in the research
* Major statistical figures and trends in the existing research
* Comprehensive coverage of relevant empirical studies, including analyses of the merits and weaknesses of methodological approaches used
* Identification of significant gaps in the literature necessitating further research

*Methodology*

This section describes in detail how you plan to carry out your study. Methods sections typically include the following:

Data/Sample: What type of data set is being used? If a sample is to be generated, what sampling techniques are appropriate? How many cases will be analyzed? What are the characteristics of the population to be sampled (if known)?

Variables: How will the variables be measured? Which variables will be set as independent and dependent? What evidence is there that the measurement of the variables will be valid and reliable? What sources were consulted in creating the variables?

Procedure: How will the data be obtained? For example, in surveys, is data to be collected through telephone, email, or mail questionnaires? What information will an informed consent statement provide (if applicable)? What procedures are in place to protect human subjects? If an existing database is used, how was that collected?

Analytic Strategy: How will your data be analyzed? Will you use qualitative or quantitative approaches? If quantitative, which statistical procedures and tests are applicable to your research question and data set?

Limitations: What are the limitations of your research design and how might these limitations affect the interpretation of findings? (This section is sometimes placed in the final chapter in the completed thesis product, but limitations are important to include in a prospectus methodology.)

After completing the written prospectus, students must orally defend their prospectus in front of the committee. The purpose of the prospectus defense is to show the committee that you have excellent command of the relevant literature and a research design suitable to proceed with data collection and analysis. It also ensures that each committee member understands and approves of the methodological and analytical directions you’ll be taking.

There is no specified page range for the prospectus or the complete thesis. However, students are encouraged to consult with their committee members regarding anticipated page lengths for each chapter.

**Completing the Project (Thesis II):**

Once a student has written a prospectus, had it reviewed and accepted by the chair and committee, and made an oral defense, permission will be granted to enroll in Thesis II. At this stage, the goal is to gather data, complete the analysis, and develop policy recommendations and directions for future research. The typical format is to describe your results and present tables in a Results chapter and critically discuss the findings in the context of criminal justice policy and future research in a Discussion chapter.

**Final Oral Defense:**

Before scheduling an oral defense, a student must have all chapters of the thesis completed and reviewed by the entire committee. You should work with the committee to identify and address any areas of concern to produce the strongest possible product. Students are encouraged to ask the committee if they are ready to proceed with a final defense prior to actually scheduling a defense with their chair. The format of a thesis defense can vary, but students should expect to spend about 20-30 minutes presenting their research and 30 minutes answering questions from the committee. Please notify the Graduate Director prior to scheduling your defense so that the appropriate paperwork can be filed to the Graduate College announcing the date of your defense.

The thesis is officially defended when all members of a thesis committee sign off on the thesis approval document. Be aware that revisions may be necessary following the oral defense, and signatures may not be provided until all final revisions are approved.

**Formatting Guidelines:**

The Graduate College has very specific guidelines for formatting the final thesis document. It also has instructions for making final copies and binding the finished product. Please go to the following web address to review these guidelines:

<http://graduate.missouristate.edu/thesis_information.htm>

**Student Responsibilities:**

A thesis is time consuming and takes great dedication and hard work to complete. Students should expect to exert considerable effort to produce an acceptable thesis. To complete a thesis, it is the student’s responsibility to do the following:

1) Make a clear timeline for completing all phases of the project in consultation with the chair and committee

2) Take personal responsibility for the work required and the end product

3) Report progress and setbacks to the chair periodically

4) Notify the chair when deadlines will be delayed

5) Expect critically constructive feedback at each stage of the thesis process and be receptive and responsive to suggestions from the committee

6) Follow ethical guidelines and comply with all policies and procedures outlined by the Institutional Review Board

7) Recognize that a thesis committee needs sufficient but reasonable time to answer questions and review drafts

8) Perhaps most importantly, ask for help when needed!

**Faculty Responsibilities:**

Faculty members serving as thesis chairs and committee members are expected to help students understand the importance and expectations of each stage in the thesis process. The chair is responsible for working most closely with the student and giving the most guidance. Chairs are expected to meet regularly with a thesis student to discuss progress and facilitate the thesis process. Although no firm guidelines are established, faculty members are expected to provide feedback on drafts and revisions within a 2-3 week timeframe. Student must understand that the quality of submissions will greatly influence how quickly feedback is received. If a very poor draft is received, a faculty member has the option of handing it back and requiring a complete redo. Faculty members are also expected to clearly communicate their availability to students, including summer semester and sabbatical commitments.

**Acknowledgment:**

A. I certify that I have read this document and understand all components.

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Thesis Student Date

B. I certify that I will be available under reasonable circumstances to the student for assistance in the completion of the thesis process.

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Thesis Mentor/Chair Date