

CAL POLY
CITY AND REGIONAL PLANNING DEPARTMENT

MCRP THESIS GUIDELINES
September 1985, Revised August 1992 and January 2002

The purpose of the masters thesis or thesis project in a professional program like City and regional Planning is to demonstrate the candidate's command (mastery) of the field. This is accomplished through a focused research exercise involving (1) application of the analytical and synthetic skills taught in the curriculum (2) to an aspect of the field of special interest to the student.

The quality of the work represents the competence of the candidate. Therefore, it must be conceptually clear, carefully designed, and thoroughly executed. Further, the product must be presented (written and illustrated) in a style that reflects the ability of the student to complete and polish the work. The effort involved must be impeccably documented both in oral defense and in the finished product submitted to the department and library.

Definitions

Masters thesis – a scholarly research paper which thoroughly investigates the selected subject, based upon the published theoretical and empirical literature and then extended further by the writer to reach general conclusion or a broad synthesis.

Masters thesis project – an applied research paper which uses the published literature to establish an analytical framework for investigating the selected subject – commonly an adaptation of the framework to a specific area, site or case.

Product – normally a written paper submitted in accordance with the manual provided by the Graduate Studies Office. Any alternate format –e.g., a videotape presentation – must be accompanied by a formal written report and must be approved in advance by the Graduate Studies Office.

Substance and scope of the thesis

The MCRP thesis may focus on any of a wide range of topics. The following categories suggest some of the possibilities which students might consider and are not meant to be exhaustive or limiting.

1. Investigation of some general aspect(s) of the urban and regional phenomena which planners try to understand, anticipate and influence.
e.g.,
 - Rural urbanization
 - Migration
 - Economic development or redevelopment
 - Residential preferences
 - Future communication technology

2. Understanding and adaptation of an analytical method which planners use to estimate the consequences of proposed plans or actions.
e.g.,
 - Environmental impact analysis
 - Social impact assessment
 - Financial feasibility analysis
 - Fiscal impact analysis
 - Legal feasibility or implications
3. Development of the rationale and design for, or critique and evaluation of , a plan or implementing ordinance, or some aspect thereof.
e.g.,
 - Growth management program
 - A specific plan for a neighborhood
 - An urban design element
 - A land use ordinance
 - A capital improvement program
 - A downtown redevelopment plan
4. Analysis and explanation of a particular planning situation, problem or case.
e.g.,
 - The leadership role of a planner, citizen or public official
 - The politics of plan-making and approval
 - The historical development of planning in a community
 - The formulation and revision of a proposal as it proceeds through application , review, negotiations and appeals to approval.
5. Examination of how the entire planning process, or any particular stage, works – quality, success, effectiveness.
e.g.,
 - How planning issues emerge
 - How alternatives are considered and evaluated
 - How planners influence political decisions
 - How plan implementation works
 - How and when to measure the success or failure of a plan
6. Investigation of how planning agencies function.
e.g.,
 - Management and budgeting
 - Work programming
 - Computer support systems
 - Professional development for staff
 - Inter-agency and inter-governmental relations

7. Exploration of the skills, abilities and behavior of professional planners.
e.g.,
 - Communication
 - Social-professional interaction
 - Public relations
 - Computation
 - Analysis
 - Graphic presentation

8. Examination of the ideology, motivation and values of planners, generally or individually.
e.g.,
 - Professional career paths in planning
 - Public, private and non-profit employment in planning
 - Reasons why students enter the field
 - Planners as agents of social change
 - The meaning of professionalism

Topics such as these may be examined for planning in general, within certain parameters (e.g., an historical period, a geographical area or political jurisdiction, a type or size of city), or for a specific case. The investigation can proceed deductively (e.g., how does a general understanding of how city councils and planning commissions behave help explain a particular decision?); or inductively (e.g., what can we learn from the BART experience which we can apply more generally to future transportation planning?). The research may depend entirely on secondary sources (published literature, reports and other documents); or may involve primary data collection (through field work, observations, interviews, surveys). It may be exploratory, qualitative and speculative, or circumscribed, quantitative and definitive.

Given the wide range of possible topics and investigative approaches available, the student must develop a research strategy that best fits the subject being studied. Will you be satisfied with an analysis and explanation of a situation, or do you want to explore the policy implications and make recommendations for action? Will you do an analytical case study, comparative analysis, or an essay?

- a. Is your work exploratory, dealing with a topic for which little previous work is available? Then a case study may be appropriate to develop hypotheses about the subject, or an essay may be desirable to define issues or develop a typology.
- b. Can you replicate another's method or apply an existing analytical technique to a specific situation? Then a case study may be appropriate to refine hypotheses, or a limited comparison may be possible to expand understanding of the subject under different conditions.
- c. Does the literature provide numerous studies and hypotheses that need synthesizing? Then a multiple comparison may be possible to integrate findings generalizable across different systems, conditions, or groups, or an essay may be desirable to synthesize some conclusions or a theory about the subject.

Remember that your choice of approach should be based on the state of knowledge and theory regarding the topic as well as its feasibility. Also, the nature of your conclusions will depend on the approach and methods you have followed: e.g., from a case study you can only speculate about transferrability to other situations; with a limited comparison you can only apply your conclusions to similar systems; but with a multiple comparison your findings can lead to general principles or theory.

To complete this discussion of substance and scope, the masters thesis can be contrasted with the more demanding doctoral dissertation and the results oriented professional staff report.

The masters thesis is not a doctoral dissertation. In other words, it does not require (1) exhaustive knowledge of the subject, (2) original research, nor (3) a contribution to the development of knowledge in the field.

The masters thesis is not a professional staff report. In other words, it does require (1) a literature review, (2) theoretical framework and (3) a logical discussion of methodology, which may be implicit, greatly condensed or placed in a technical appendix of a staff report. Professionals are paid for the results of the investigations, so recommendations dominate the report, but the masters thesis must show the underlying assumptions, analytical reasoning, and synthetic process followed to reach a set of recommendations.

Essential components of masters thesis research

The activities shown on the flow chart in Figure 1 must be accomplished during the preparation of masters thesis. Some of them are initiated early, some continue throughout and some represent discrete decisions. Some literally become chapters in the final product, others contribute to the reasoning more indirectly. The following comments highlight key conceptual aspects of the flow chart. The procedural activities speak for themselves.

1. Literature review – The literature review must be initiated early during the exploration of possible topics because the student needs to determine what is already known (and what is not known) about the topic and how it has been studied by others. This is a conventional library research activity which should lead to a preliminary annotated bibliography for the thesis. The student should begin using a citation system acceptable for the thesis at this time.

The literature review usually involves several categories of literature – information regarding the topic of investigation per se, information regarding the pertinence of the subject to city and regional planning, information regarding the research strategy or analytical approach to be used in the thesis. Therefore, a major task during the literature review is the classification of the appropriate material.

The literature review must be broad as well, drawing from monographs, journals and other published reports. The student should attempt to locate the most recent material. Also, the student should be sensitive to the quality of the literature reviewed, especially where there may be inconsistent or contradictory findings, and judge what is applicable to the thesis.

Many theses have a chapter literally labeled “literature review.” This is one acceptable organization of the final product. However, the literature may be incorporated other ways as well so long as the documentation of the review ultimately appears in the thesis.

2. Course review – Because one purpose of the thesis is to synthesize the student’s understanding of the field, exploration of possible topics involves a review of coursework. The student should screen both required courses and elective for ideas, approaches and techniques which can be applied in the thesis. In particular, the student should look for relationships among the material taught in discrete courses which can be productively combined or integrated into the thesis.

The course review contributes directly to the literature review in that it identifies both categories and sources to include. Therefore, while it contributes directly to the development of the topic, it does not appear as a written chapter in the thesis.

3. Prospectus and committee – a written prospectus becomes a contract between the student and thesis committee regarding the topic, methodology and schedule for completion. Therefore, it represents the transformation of a general topic into a specific thesis proposal. This involves the following points.
 - a. Statement of the topic in terms of specific researchable questions to be addressed.
 - b. Justification of the relevance and importance of the topic to planning.
 - c. Brief discussion of the theoretical context or logical framework for the investigation.
 - d. Thorough explanation of the research methodology or analytical approach to be followed.
 - e. Identification of information sources.
 - f. Specification of product
 - g. Tentative chapter outline
 - h. Schedule of work program
 - i. Identification of any necessary support services (e.g., for data processing)
 - j. Preliminary literature review or annotated bibliography.

The prospectus should be very carefully conceived and written so that there is no question regarding how the thesis work is to be pursued. It represents a plan and a commitment. Therefore the committee must be satisfied that the topic is clear, that the research approach is manageable, and that the student has the capability and resources to complete the work.

A copy of the approved prospectus must be filed in the CRP Department with the form identifying members of the thesis committee. The three-person committee normally consists of two CRP faculty, one of whom is chair, plus one outside member from a field appropriate to the thesis topic.

4. Execution or research and writing – Sections or chapters need to be written in draft form as close to the time as the preparation for them is completed as possible. The prospectus provides the preliminary literature review and methodology, so the student can focus on writing up the research findings and analysis as they are conducted. Emphasize getting sections and chapters drafted!

The chapters need not (in fact should not) be written in the order that they will finally appear in the thesis. The thesis should not be a play-by-play description of the research process. Rather, it should summarize the approach, discuss the findings, analyze the results, and present the conclusions. The introduction should be written last because it is a revision of the prospectus from a statement of what was planned to what was actually accomplished.

5. Revision, editing and polishing – Once all sections are drafted, the thesis can be assembled as a complete document. At this point the chapter outline or order within chapters may need revision to reinforce the logic of the argument that emerges. Chapter titles, headings, introductions and

conclusions need to be written or revised. Illustrations and format become important to show the coherence of the entire document. Editing for clarity and consistency begins to polish the thesis.

6. Oral defense – The final conceptual step is the oral defense of the thesis. The document should be generally satisfactory to the committee members before the formal defense is scheduled. Then the defense becomes a review of what the student planned, how the investigation was executed and how the results were presented. Any reservations about procedures, omissions or questions of interpretation may be raised. Once the committee is satisfied with the student's oral response, they may accept the document as is, or require corrections before the thesis is officially approved.
7. Filing – Final approved copies of the thesis must be submitted as follows:
 - 2 copies to the library as specified in the Graduate Studies Office Manual
 - 1 copy to the CRP Department
 - Copies for the chair and other members of the committee are optional

Bibliography

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Williams, Carol T. and Gary K. Wolfe. 1979. *Elements of Research: A Guide for Writers*. Sherman Oaks, CA: Alfred Publishing.

FIRST YEAR
SPRING QUARTER

COMPLETION OF CRP 513

SECOND YEAR
FALL QUARTER
(CRP 500 recommended)

ADVANCEMENT TO
CANDIDACY

REVIEW OF MCRP
THESIS GUIDELINES

IDENTIFICATION OF
POSSIBLE TOPICS

POTENTIAL CHAIR,
COMMITTEE

CITATION
SYSTEM

LITERATURE
REVIEW

METHODOLOGY
(research questions,
information sources,
analytical approach)

SECOND YEAR
END OF FALL QUARTER

SELECTION OF CHAIR
AND COMMITTEE

DRAFT
PROSPECTUS

SECOND YEAR
WINTER QUARTER

REVISION OF
PROSPECTUS

APPROVAL OF
PROSPECTUS
BY COMMITTEE

RESEARCH AND
ANALYSIS

SECOND YEAR
SPRING QUARTER

REGISTRATION
FOR CRP 599

PERIODIC
COMMITTEE REVIEW

WRITING

FORMAT

PERIODIC
COMMITTEE REVIEW

EDITING

COMPLETE
DRAFT

COMMITTEE
REVIEW

ORAL
DEFENSE
(COMMITTEE)

REVISIONS

COMMITTEE
APPROVAL

SECOND YEAR
END OF SPRING QUARTER

COMPLETION
OF CRP 599

CORRECTIONS

GRADUATE
STUDIES
APPROVAL

ACCEPTANCE
BY LIBRARY

FIGURE 1. MCRP Thesis Preparation Flow Chart