

**A PROCEDURAL GUIDE FOR  
MASTER OF SCIENCE STUDENTS  
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SCIENCE  
AUBURN UNIVERSITY**

Revised: 9/2021

Introduction  
Selecting Your Major Professor  
Choosing Your Advisory Committee  
Developing Your Plan of Study  
Annual Evaluation  
    Steady Progress toward the Degree  
    Evaluation Process  
    Evaluation Outcomes  
HDFS Assistantship Policy  
    Graduate Assistantship Evaluation Policy  
Selecting Your Thesis Topic  
Preparing a Thesis Proposal and Completing the Thesis  
    Guidelines for Working with Your Committee  
    Requirements for a Proposal  
    Elements of a Thesis  
Additional Notices  
    Correspondence  
    Lines of Authority  
Timeline for MS Students

**Introduction**

Successful completion of the Master of Science (MS) in Human Development and Family Science (HDFS) requires planning. This document summarizes the major steps, dates, and documentation needed for this process.

Before proceeding, you should note one important point concerning your role in this process. It is your responsibility to learn Auburn University and Graduate School policies and to notify the appropriate offices that these steps have been met. Thus, it is up to you to find and learn policies. If you have a question, the Auburn University Bulletin [http://www.auburn.edu/student\\_info/bulletin/](http://www.auburn.edu/student_info/bulletin/), the Student Policy eHandbook [http://www.auburn.edu/student\\_info/student\\_policies/](http://www.auburn.edu/student_info/student_policies/), your Major Professor, Graduate Program Officer (GPO) or Department Head, or the Graduate School staff <http://www.grad.auburn.edu/general/staff.html> are resources.

In addition to completing your master's coursework, the graduate program includes several major steps. Generally, they are accomplished in the following sequence: (a) selecting a major professor, (b) choosing an advisory committee, (c) developing a plan of study; (d) selecting a thesis topic, (e) developing and defending a thesis proposal, and (f) conducting the proposed research, writing and defending the thesis. It is possible for the order to vary slightly and some steps may be completed simultaneously. For current purposes, these steps are described separately.

## **Selecting Your Major Professor**

Selecting a major professor is one of the first milestones in the graduate program. When you initially enter the program, the GPO serves as your temporary advisor. The GPO can provide advising as you select a major professor. We encourage you to select a major professor by end of the first semester in the program. A major professor should be chosen from among the members of the graduate faculty. Currently, the following are the graduate faculty eligible to direct a master's thesis. Information about each faculty member's research interests as well as recent publications is available here:  
<http://www.humsci.auburn.edu/hdfs/faculty/>.

Francesca Adler-Baeder  
Katrina Akande  
Robert Bubb  
Adrienne Duke  
Mona El-Sheikh  
Stephen Erath  
Cynthia Frosch  
Tom Fuller-Rowell  
Ben Hinnant  
Scott Ketring  
Kyle Kostelecky  
Mallory Lucier-Greer  
Julianne McGill  
Joshua Novak  
Lauren Ruhlmann  
Diana Samek  
Wendy Troop-Gordon  
Brian Vaughn  
Silvia Vilches  
Angela Wiley  
Elif Dede Yildirim

Your choice of a major professor is important. Many diverse roles may be played by the major professor. For example, your major professor will help select members of your advisory committee, recommend and approve your selection of graduate elective courses (with the added advice and approval of your committee), direct your thesis research, and serve as a role model who facilitates your professional development.

Consider the following as you select a major professor.

- Choose a major professor who is interested in and knowledgeable about the topic you want to pursue as your thesis question.
- Choose a faculty member who can give you the amount of time and the level of guidance that is consistent with what you will need as you conduct your thesis research.
- Choose a major professor who is not advising too many students at one time.
- Review the Graduate Faculty interests and vitae on the HDFS web page:  
<http://www.humsci.auburn.edu/hdfs/faculty/>.
- Interview several department faculty members before you select a major professor.
- Talk to advanced students and/or graduates of the program before selecting a major professor.

## **Choosing Your Advisory Committee**

Once you choose a major professor, identify at least two additional faculty members to comprise the rest of your advisory committee. At least one of these faculty members must come from the HDFFS graduate faculty, but one or more may also be selected from graduate faculty of other departments on campus or even from other universities. The choice of committee members should be made in close consultation with your major professor. We encourage you to select your committee early in your second semester of graduate study.

Your advisory committee may recommend courses and will review and approve your curriculum before the Graduate School accepts it. Committee members may be valuable resources as you develop your thesis plans. In addition, you will present the thesis proposal to your full committee in a formal meeting. Your committee examines your plan and provides suggestions and guidance about your project. Your committee must approve your thesis plan before you are permitted to continue with data collection and analysis. At the end of your master's program when you have completed the thesis research, your advisory committee again joins you in a formal meeting where you orally defend your thesis. The committee's unanimous approval of your thesis and your oral defense are necessary for graduation.

## **Developing Your Plan of Study**

Once you have selected your major professor and advisory committee, the next step is to submit the Committee, Transfers, Exceptions and Candidacy Form (CTEC; <http://graduate.auburn.edu/current-students/committee-selection/>). The purpose of the form is to identify the student, committee chair/major professor, committee members, and any transfer courses or curriculum exceptions or substitutions. Transfer courses and curriculum exceptions or substitutions should be discussed and approved in advance by the committee chair/major professor. Master's students must submit the CTEC form no later than the semester prior to expected graduation.

## **Annual Evaluation**

Some master's students plan to complete the MS degree and move on to a professional position. Others plan to proceed to the doctoral program after earning the MS. Students in the latter category who are in the HDFFS-MS program will likely be advised to begin taking doctoral courses in the second year of their MS program. These courses will help both students and faculty gauge the fit between students and the doctoral degree work. (The second year of the MFT-MS program has no room for doctoral courses.)

The graduate faculty evaluate each student's progress in the program each year. Students must make steady progress in the MS program to retain assistantship support and to proceed from the MS to the doctoral program.

## **Steady Progress toward the Degree**

Progress toward the degree involves timely integration into the program, which consists of selecting a major professor and committee, developing a plan of study, and generating a thesis topic. Progress is also assessed in terms of completing core coursework, electives, and the MS thesis satisfactorily and in a timely manner. Skill building and professional development experiences outside of class that are recommended by your advisor and committee are included in the assessment of progress toward the degree.

For MS students who intend to complete the MS degree, graduate, and proceed with their

career, the MS degree program is conceptualized as a two-year program. These students can expect a maximum of two years of assistantship support.

For MS students who intend to pursue the PhD, the graduate faculty will monitor your progress through the MS program and provide feedback to you annually. Ultimately, admission to the doctoral program following the MS will require the approval of the graduate faculty at the end of the second academic year. MS students on track for the PhD who are progressing in all other ways may complete their MS thesis in their third year without being considered off-track.

Consequences for not making adequate progress toward the MS degree include termination of assistantship support (which also triggers termination of tuition fellowships) and denial of the opportunity to pursue the doctoral degree in HDFS at Auburn University.

### **Evaluation Process**

Early in the Spring Semester, the GPO will send all current graduate students a form for outlining progress over the prior year toward degree goals. In addition, goals for the coming year will be solicited in the areas of research, teaching, clinical training and outreach/service as well as other types of professional development. In this process, long-range goals and self-evaluations are requested. An updated curriculum vita is also required. Other supporting documents such as assistantship evaluations, extension/outreach products, conference presentations, published papers, etc. may be provided with the vita. Other input to the annual evaluation will come from faculty (teaching, clinical or other) with direct exposure to you as a student in the program. The faculty meet in the spring semester to discuss students' progress and to identify strengths, accomplishments, concerns, areas for improvement, and supportive actions.

### **Evaluation Outcomes**

Students will receive one of three overall ratings from the review.

- "Satisfactory progress" indicates the student is progressing as expected or better.
- "Concerns with progress" means the faculty have identified specific issues that must be addressed in the coming year. Students who receive a rating of "concerns" are funded as TAs or RAs only if their major professor is willing to provide funding for them or vouch for their progress the next year. Students for whom the faculty have concerns in consecutive years receive the rating "unsatisfactory" in the second year.
- "Unsatisfactory progress" indicates the faculty believe previously identified concerns have not been adequately addressed and/or the student is seriously off track in the program. Students with this rating will not be eligible for assistantship support for the coming year. A student rated "unsatisfactory" in one year must attain a rating of "satisfactory" during the following year to continue in the program.

Following the faculty meeting, your major professor will compile faculty feedback in a letter and share it with you. The letter becomes a part of your permanent record in the program.

### **HDFS Assistantship Policy**

All assistantship funding in HDFS is contingent upon remaining in good standing in the program, which means sustained, satisfactory progress toward the degree. Furthermore, all funding is dependent upon the needs of the program, the availability of funds, and the approval of the university's fiscal year budget by the Auburn University Board of Trustees.

The maximum assistantship support available to terminal master's students is two years. The maximum assistantship support available to master's students who are transitioning to the doctoral program is three years. Students making the transition to the doctoral program are paid at the master's level until the semester following the completion of the master's degree.

### **Graduate Assistant Evaluation Policy**

Each semester you hold a graduate assistantship, you should expect to meet with the supervisor of the assistantship at the beginning of the semester to discuss your duties and the advisor's expectations. You should also expect at least one meeting, typically at the end of the semester, during which your supervisor reviews your assistantship performance. Typical items in the evaluation include whether you were: timely in your performance of assistantship duties, thorough and thoughtful in your role, responsive to feedback, able to take the lead in appropriate times and ways, a team player in relation to the people you work with in your duties, and developing appropriate competencies related to the assistantship.

There is a separate evaluation form for each type of assistantship. You should expect to see your supervisor's evaluations and have the opportunity to discuss them in a meeting with her/him. These forms become part of your permanent record in the program and are also part of your annual evaluation. If you have concerns about your performance in an assistantship, you should approach your supervisor for feedback when your concerns arise rather than waiting to the end of the semester.

If you are the instructor of record for a class, the teaching evaluations completed by your students will also be part of your evaluation. They should be included with the material you provide for the annual review.

### **Selecting Your Thesis Topic**

The thesis is a major component of the program, as it provides the in-depth research experience necessary for students to enhance their knowledge and research skills in a chosen area of interest. In thesis research, students identify an interesting question and then pose and test a hypothesis. Through close collaboration with a major professor, thesis research lets students develop close, professional ties with faculty members widely recognized in their fields while learning first-hand about the research process. You learn to:

- Define a problem; identify and review appropriate literature; develop a realistic schedule; and carry out the steps necessary to find a solution to the problem.
- Prepare a written report that presents the results of the study comprehensively to others.
- Understand the rigor entailed, the time and work involved, the resources required, and the problems that can arise when conducting research.
- Explain and defend research approaches when questioned by others in an oral presentation.

Topics for a thesis can come from many sources. Discussion with other students, faculty, classroom lectures, and prior or current work or assistantship experiences are just a few. Reading and reviewing the literature in your field of study provides valuable leads to ideas for possible subjects. Faculty members may have ideas they are interested in pursuing with you. However, do not depend upon faculty to choose your topic; that is your responsibility. Work with faculty to develop your ideas.

It is never too soon to begin thinking about your thesis. If you identify a suitable topic early in your program, it is possible to tie some class projects to your topic. You can develop more depth in your area of specialization and likely produce a stronger thesis. Although the department does not have a specific timing policy about thesis topic selection, we encourage you to begin thinking about the thesis project during your first semester.

As you choose a topic and plan your thesis, you should be in regular contact with your major professor. Major professors have different styles of work and personalities, but it is your responsibility to schedule appointments, solicit advice when needed, and keep them informed on your work. Thesis research is time-consuming; you can expect to spend at least nine months of concentrated work on your thesis.

### **Preparing a Thesis Proposal and Completing the Thesis**

The thesis helps students develop skills in all aspects of the research process, including conceptualizing a research question, developing a research design, collecting data, coding and analyzing data, and interpreting and communicating results. The thesis provides the structure through which these skills are developed. Your committee, therefore, will expect you to demonstrate that you have acquired skills in each of these areas. It is the prerogative of the committee to ask questions regarding any or all of these skills.

The following guidelines may help in the preparation of proposals and theses:

#### **Guidelines for Working with Your Committee**

Although students will work primarily with their major professor, it is appropriate to seek advice from each committee member when preparing the proposal and writing the final thesis. When the time comes to defend the proposal (and later, the completed thesis), each committee member should receive the draft of the document at least one week in advance of the associated defense. However, different committees or specific members may need more or less time. It is wise to discuss the lead time that will be required by your committee members well in advance.

Collecting (or obtaining) data, analyzing and interpreting data, and writing the results and discussion sections for a thesis are labor-intensive processes. At least one full semester should be anticipated between the proposal defense and the final thesis defense.

It is the student's responsibility to check the Graduate School webpage for Graduate School deadlines and requirements (<http://graduate.auburn.edu/current-students/Graduation/>). Deadlines for format checks and submitting the final thesis vary by semester and are enforced by the Graduate School.

#### **Requirements for a Proposal**

A thesis proposal is the plan of action that results in a final thesis. As such, the Introduction and the Review of Literature will remain largely the same from proposal to final thesis. In most cases, the Method section will be changed only by conversion from future to past tense. Thus, the proposal is not a "draft" of something that will be "polished up" later. Students should understand, however, that many theses will confront unanticipated problems that will necessitate substantive changes to the proposal before the final draft of the thesis is submitted.

Students should consider the proposal defensible (i.e., ready for a proposal meeting) only

when the Introduction, Literature Review, Method, References, and appropriate Appendices have reached a finalized stage in the judgment of the student's major professor. All research in which human subjects are used must be approved in advance by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Use of Human Subjects in Research. This includes research based on data already collected by others. The required training pertaining to human subject protections, called CITI (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative), is part of your first class in research methodology. If a thesis student and major professor submit a research protocol to the IRB before the formal proposal defense meeting with the student's advisory committee, the committee may still require changes to their procedures. These changes will require further IRB review and approval. Such requests can be submitted to the IRB as an addendum after the proposal defense has occurred.

Forms for the IRB are found at the following website:

<https://cws.auburn.edu/OVPR/pm/compliance/irb/home>

Note that after your thesis research is complete and the final product has been defended in the formal meeting with your advisory committee, a final report is due to the IRB. The form for this final report is also found at the above website and should be submitted before you graduate.

### **Elements of a Thesis**

The APA Publication Manual and the APA website below provides guidance for most sections of a thesis (but not the review of literature or proposed analysis sections).

Consult: <http://www.apastyle.org>

Below are brief descriptions of the elements of a typical thesis with some of the ways in which the Auburn University Thesis guidelines differ from APA practice. Please use the APA Manual or website and the Auburn University Thesis guide as you prepare your document.

<http://graduate.auburn.edu/current-students/electronic-thesis-dissertation-guide/>

A thesis normally consists of:

**Prefatory Material:** Stipulated by the Auburn University Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Guide (certificate of approval, title page, table of contents, etc.)

The **Introduction** is a brief statement of the problem and an overview of the logic for the development of the problem (including supporting literature). It may help to think of the Introduction as a section that could (with little editing) become the Introduction to a published article. Specific hypotheses may be presented in the Introduction, or may be held for the Literature Review section (a decision students should reach with their advisor).

The **Review of Literature** is an extensive review of extant literature on all topics directly related to the thesis problem (e.g., theoretical and empirical background, a discussion of conceptual issues related to measures, any critique of previous literatures and/or methodologies). The Literature Review should build logically to a statement of the specific research hypotheses or questions that will guide the analytic strategy for the study.

The **Method** is organized by subheadings that provide information about the following topics: Participants, Procedure, Measures, and Proposed Analysis. (The proposed analysis should be linked directly to the research questions or hypotheses.) Generally this section includes estimates of reliability and validity for all measures.

The **Results** section is, at a minimum, a presentation of the outcome of all the proposed analyses. It may be organized (a) by research questions or hypotheses, (b) by issue or content area, or (c) some other logical criterion. In some cases, the planned analyses raise other interesting questions, and thus, the Results section may contain analyses beyond the originally-planned analyses.

The **Discussion** is a brief presentation of each finding or group of findings together with explanations and alternative explanations of their meaning. The Discussion should be related to the Introduction by connecting the findings with the driving issues that originally sparked the project. Furthermore, implications, limitations, and caveats of the results should be considered.

The **References** section includes all materials cited in the text. They are listed according to APA guidelines for references.

**Footnotes**, according to the Graduate School, may be placed at the bottom of the relevant page or the end of the section in which the footnote appears.

**Appendices** present pertinent material that one would not want directly in the text but that would help a reader understand some part of the thesis better (e.g., copies of questionnaires or surveys, the informed consent letter, a bibliography beyond the references, observational coding forms, additional analysis not presented in Results). Separate appendices present each kind of supplementary material (e.g., the questionnaire belongs in its own appendix) and are identified alphabetically at the end of the thesis (i.e., Appendix A, Appendix B, ... Appendix X).

### **Additional Notices**

#### **Correspondence**

The Department may use printed correspondence and memos to get important information to graduate students. It is your responsibility to check your mailbox in the HDF5 (Spidle Hall) office and to inform the GPO of any changes to your current contact information.

By Auburn University policy, e-mail is the official medium for communicating with enrolled students. All students are responsible for checking their Auburn University issued e-mail account in a timely fashion and on a regular basis. The university is responsible only for getting your e-messages to your university account. Any forwarding of e-mail is done at the student's risk.

#### **Lines of Authority**

There may be times when you have a concern regarding a course, aspects of the MS program, MS requirements, assistantships, or other issues. For concerns regarding a course, you should first discuss your concern with the faculty member who is teaching the course. If your concern is not satisfactorily addressed, you should then discuss the concern with the GPO or Department Head. If your issue concerns your graduate assistantship, start with the faculty member with whom you work, then the GPO or Department Head. If your issue concerns your program of study, begin first with your advisor, then the GPO or Department

Head. If you don't know where to begin to address a concern, start with the GPO or Department Head. The focus of our department is interpersonal relationships, so let's "practice what we preach." Concerns should be dealt with directly and by following established lines of authority.

### **Timeline for M.S. Students**

Below is a summary schedule to show you when specific tasks should be completed by full-time master's students. The table assumes a 3-semester year. The program is considered a 2-year project for students who are "on track." To remain on track, following the recommended time frames is strongly encouraged. See "How do you stay on track for graduation" for additional information from the Graduate School:

<http://graduate.auburn.edu/current-students/Graduation/>

#### **MS Program Timeline for Full-Time Student**

<b>Task</b>	<b>Time Frame</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Select a major professor ( <b>MP</b> )	End of 1st semester in program	
Select an Advisory Committee ( <b>AC</b> )	Early in 2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	
Develop a Plan of Study	2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	Fill out CTEC form.
Select a thesis topic	2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	Work with MP; consult with others on AC.
Prepare and defend thesis proposal	3 <sup>rd</sup> -4 <sup>th</sup> semester	Work with MP; consult with others on AC.
Conduct thesis research	4 <sup>th</sup> semester through 6 <sup>th</sup> semester	Work with MP; consult with others on AC.
Submit thesis draft to AC	Beginning of graduation semester	
Oral defense of thesis	Beginning of graduation semester*	Submit Master's Thesis Final Examination Report
Make necessary thesis revisions	Mid-term of graduation semester*	Submit ETD Publishing Approval Form
Upload approved thesis to AUETD	Mid-term of graduation semester*	

\* The Graduate School sets specific dates for these tasks each semester. Check the current Graduate School calendar (<http://graduate.auburn.edu/calendar/>) for those dates that may apply to you.