

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

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**Introduction**

The successful completion of the Master of Science (MS) in Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) depends upon your willingness and ability to plan your program. 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> may all be resources.

In addition to completing your master's course work, there are several major steps to be taken in your program. 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**

One of the first decisions you need to make is the selection of a major professor. When you initially enter the program, you are assigned to a graduate faculty member as a temporary advisor. This person is someone you can go to for advice and counsel until a major professor has been selected. *It is the department's policy that the selection of a permanent major professor be made by the end of the first semester in the program.* A permanent 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 at the following url: <http://www.humsci.auburn.edu/hdfs/facstaff-main.php>.

Ellen Abell  
Francesca Adler-Baeder  
Adrienne Duke  
Mona El-Sheikh  
Stephen Erath  
Tom Fuller-Rowell  
Megan Haselschwerdt  
Ben Hinnant  
Jennifer Kerpelman  
Scott Ketring  
Margaret Keiley  
Jackie Mize  
Greg Pettit  
Joe Pittman  
Amy Rauer  
Diana Samek  
Tommy Smith  
Donna Sollie  
Brian Vaughn

Your choice of a major professor is an important one; it should not be taken lightly. Your major professor can be the one who "makes or breaks" your program. 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.

Think carefully about your selection of major professor. Consider the following as you decide.

- 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 an 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/facstaff-main.php> See the links to faculty lists organized by Developmental Period and Core Area on the HDFS Faculty and Staff Directory Page.
- 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 a major professor is chosen, at least two additional members must be identified to comprise the rest of your advisory committee. At least one of these members must come from the HDFS 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 is not yours alone. These choices are to be made in close consultation with your major professor.*

Your advisory committee recommends classes and will review and approve your Plan of Study before the Graduate School accepts it. Committee members may be valuable resources as you develop your thesis plans. They also test you. In the first test, you present the thesis proposal that you developed primarily with your major professor to your full committee in a formal meeting. Your committee examines your plan and challenges you to defend it. Your committee must approve your thesis plan before you are permitted to implement the plan with data collection and analysis. The second test comes at the end of your master's program when you have completed the thesis research. For this test, 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 defense of it are necessary for you to graduate.

Departmental policy dictates that you have your committee selected early in your second semester of graduate study. Just as soon as your committee membership is finalized, you should inform the HDFS graduate program officer of the committee's membership by turning in the "Appointment of Major Professor and Advisory Committee for the MS Degree" form.

### **Developing Your Plan of Study**

Once you have selected your major professor and advisory committee, the next step is to develop a Plan of Study. A Plan of Study is a listing of the courses you plan to take in your graduate program. When you submit your Plan for approval, each member of your committee will review and approve it before the Graduate School will approve it and treat it as official. Department policy states that you should have the Plan completed and approved before the end of your second full semester in the program. Instructions to complete the Plan of Study (i.e., Planner) in DegreeWorks are available on the Graduate School website ([http://grad.auburn.edu/degree\\_works\\_student\\_planner.html](http://grad.auburn.edu/degree_works_student_planner.html)), and the Planner can be accessed through tiger i after logging on to AU Access (<https://auaccess2.auburn.edu/cp/home/displaylogin>).

The core requirements for each MS program option are already shown in each plan of study template. Remaining classes (electives, courses required by your committee, required courses selected from a set of options) must be entered into the plan.

#### **M.S. Program – HDFS Option**

The HDFS program is designed to be flexible. With your major professor's advice, pick courses from among the selectable required classes and electives that allow you to tailor the program to your needs, skills, goals, and interests. Understand that your choices may be limited by your objectives, background, advisory committee suggestions, and course offerings in a particular semester.

#### **M.S. Program – MFT Option**

The MFT program option is designed to train students to be marriage and family therapists. MFT students are required to take a specific course sequence to complete the program and become eligible for AAMFT clinical membership.

### **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 HDFS-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 (2) 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 deemed off-track.

Consequences for not making adequate progress toward the MS degree include an end to assistantship support (which also means an end of university 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 made over the prior year toward degree goals. Also as part of this process, 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.

Your major professor and at least two faculty will review these materials. 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 to discuss each student's progress and to identify problems or concerns so corrective action can occur. Suitable opportunities for students who are on track may be raised and particularly outstanding student accomplishments will be brought to the attention of the faculty.

### **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. It is a warning. Students who receive a rating of "concerns" are only funded as TAs or RAs 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 comments 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.

Assistantship stipends are paid on different scales for master's versus doctoral students.

The maximum assistantship support available to terminal master's students is two (2) years. The maximum assistantship support available to master's students who are transitioning to the doctoral program is three (3) years. Students making this transition 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 advancing in the development of 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 a teaching assistant who is also the instructor of record for a class, the student teacher evaluations completed by your class will also be part of your evaluation. They should be included with the material you provide for the annual review.

### **Selecting Your Thesis Topic**

You should begin thinking about your thesis from your first days in the program. The thesis is a major component of your 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, you identify an interesting question and then pose and test a hypothesis. It is an opportunity to develop an idea from its inception to its end. 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 taken 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. Even before selecting your major professor, it is a good idea to approach faculty members to let them know your interests and your post-graduation goals. A faculty member may have an idea well-suited for 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 produce a better thesis by such a strategy. Although the department does not have a specific timing policy about thesis topic selection, and it is easy to put off those things that are not due "next week," you should think about and work toward your thesis even if it seems a long way off. For you to graduate on time and complete a project that you can be proud of, you must begin your thesis research early.

As you choose a topic and plan your thesis, you should be in regular contact with your major professor. Different 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 from 6 to 9 months (or longer) of concentrated work on your thesis. Understand that your degree is not complete before the final thesis is defended.

## **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 question you 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. 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 url:

<http://www.auburn.edu/research/vpr/ohs/protocol.htm>

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 url 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://www.grad.auburn.edu/cs/thesis\\_guide.html](http://www.grad.auburn.edu/cs/thesis_guide.html)

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 analysis. It may be organized (a) by research questions or hypotheses, (b) by issue or content area, or (c) some other logical criterion. Usually, the planned analysis raises other interesting questions, and thus, the Results section usually contains analysis beyond that originally planned.

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. It would not be unusual, particularly when dealing with alternative explanations, to present limited additional data analysis in the discussion.

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 HDFS (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 main focus of our department is interpersonal relationships, so let's "practice what we preach." Concerns always should be dealt with directly and by following established lines of authority.

### **A Time Line for Full-time 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.

### **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	All Committee members sign Department form; Student returns form to GPO.
Develop a Plan of Study	2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	Fill out Plan of Study on Web.
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	AC.
Oral defense of thesis	Beginning of graduation semester*	MP and AC. Do Form 9 from Grad School website
Make necessary thesis revisions	Mid-term of graduation semester*	Obtain final approval and signatures from AC.
Upload approved thesis to AUETD & file Form 9 with Graduate School and GPO	Mid-term of graduation semester*	
Submit final report to IRB	Before end of graduation semester.	

\* The Graduate School sets specific dates for these tasks each semester. Check the current Graduate School calendar for those dates that may apply to you.