**Title:**

Defining Master’s Thesis and Non-Thesis Programs

**Introduction:**

Currently, the Graduate Bulletin distinguishes between two types of master’s programs – thesis and non-thesis. The Graduate School, along with the Chairs of the GPC, with advice from the University Registrar and the Office of Faculty Development and Advancement, propose to change this to three types: thesis, coursework-only, and project.

The goal of this policy is to: 1) recognize creative achievement and activity taking the scope of a terminal project as its own master’s-type program, 2) distinguish between work taking the scope of a thesis , and 3.) work taking the scope of a course or capstone experience.

At present, various units use thesis-type language for courses and student work that are not equivalent in scope to a thesis. In addition, some units register students for thesis credit hours though the student is in a non-thesis program. These irregularities are an issue and we need to move forward with clear definitions, so students’ transcripts correctly reflect the type and scope of work they have completed. However, without centrally defined language, no guideline exists for units as to classifying student work appropriately. The growth and evolution of the broad array of graduate programs required a policy to define and differentiate the nature of the different programs. The policy below provides clear definitions, defines the scope, and sets minimum requirements while allowing units flexibility in nomenclature that suits their discipline-specific needs.

**Origin and Reasoning for Definitions:**

In Spring 2017, the previous Dean of the Graduate School, Dean Nancy Marcus, attempted to tackle an inquiry involving thesis vs non-thesis programs. The concern was unavoidably dropped because her health rapidly declined. The concern involved graduate students in some of the non-thesis programs on campus taking thesis hours, a thesis defense, and in some cases, courses with “thesis” in the title. This created confusion in determining whether a graduate student is truly completing a formal thesis. It raised the question of whether the university should define what a “thesis-type program” requires versus a “coursework-only program,” especially for procedural purposes, and led to the idea of developing a third category of master’s programs called “project.”

At many external institutions, such as UF, programs being considered “thesis-type” and completing a traditional thesis necessitates the manuscript being sent to the Graduate School for formatting review and publishing.

Currently, a potential risk exists in which outside employers could perceive a non-thesis graduate student (who is enrolled in a course-type program) as a thesis student if he/she is taking thesis hours and/or completing a thesis defense. Neither diploma nor transcript notates whether a graduate student completed a thesis or non-thesis track. Outsider employers could misidentify non-thesis students as thesis students if the transcript shows thesis hours, a thesis defense, or a course with the title of “thesis” in it. This could lead to the interpretation that the student completed a formal thesis, submitted the manuscript to the Graduate School, and went through the standard formatting and publishing process.

In light of this issue, the following definitions and procedures are being suggested with the hope of providing transparency and consistency to avoid any potential academic misrepresentation. Please keep in mind that the credit hour requirements outlined below for both the thesis- and course-type master’s programs are straight from the Graduate Bulletin and have not been amended in any way.

**Suggested Policy:**

***Definitions and Minimum Academic Requirements***

Thesis-Type Master’s Program

A thesis-type degree program is focused on research and scholarship, culminating in written output in the form of the thesis. Thesis-type programs usually include graduate coursework in specific content areas, research methods, analysis, and theory. The scope of the thesis is discipline-specific and typically requires more than one semester of intensive work. A thesis clearly exceeds the requirements of a typical course paper and follows the traditional model of academic, publishable work (i.e., consists predominantly of written work). The thesis must present original research conducted by the student under the close supervision of the student’s faculty supervisory committee.

To qualify for a master's degree under a thesis program, the student must complete a minimum of thirty semester hours of credit including thesis credit. At least eighteen of these hours must be taken on a letter-grade basis (A, B, C). The minimum number of thesis hours for completion of a master's degree shall be six hours.

Theses can only be completed by students in a thesis-type program and require two course codes: one for thesis credit hours and one for thesis defense. Graduate students pursuing a thesis-type program must adhere to all committee composition requirements set by the university and their academic unit. Additionally, students in a thesis-type program must electronically submit their manuscript to The Graduate School for format review and adhere to all manuscript clearance deadlines.

Coursework-Only Master’s Program

A coursework-only program may include capstone options such as comprehensive exams, graduate-level internships, or cumulative projects (written or creative). Coursework-only programs are not required to include one of these capstone options by the university. These capstone options exceed the scope of a typical course assignment but are smaller in scope than master’s thesis or project-track. Typically, capstone experiences are completed at the end of the program under the supervision of one faculty member while students are registered for a capstone-type course. Each unit may choose its own nomenclature for the capstone option (including but not limited to: “capstone,” “capstone project,” “capstone experience,” or “comprehensive project”), as long as the terminology does not include the word “thesis” and is distinct from terminology chosen for the project programs within that unit.

To qualify for a coursework-only master's degree, the student must complete a minimum of thirty semester hours of credit. At least twenty-one of these hours must be taken on a letter-grade basis (A, B, C). In a coursework-only master’s program, graduate students complete a degree broadly sampling discipline-specific and/or interdisciplinary content courses, theories, and methods.

Capstone options can only be completed by students in a coursework-only program and require one course code for the course during which the capstone experience is completed. The capstone option may take any format and students are not required to submit evidence of the completed work to The Graduate School, only to their unit. Any capstone option is subject to unit requirements, but not subject to university rules regarding committee composition, manuscript formatting, or manuscript deadlines.

Project Master’s Program

A project master’s program is primarily focused on creative achievement and activity culminating in a terminal project distinguished by its predominantly non-written output. While project master’s programs include graduate coursework in specific content areas, the emphasis is on applied and/or creative activity, interpretation, and theory. The project in a project master’s program does not follow the traditional model of academic, publishable work and does not need to be limited to writing. There may or may not be a written component included in the project (e.g., students may do both a performance and written assignment), but the majority of the work should be in a format other than written. The project may take a variety of specialized interactive formats, including but not limited to: audio/digital (e.g., film, video, photography, or static image), performance (e.g., dance, theater, music), or art (e.g., exhibit). The scope of the project is discipline-specific and typically requires more than one semester of intensive work and exceeds the requirements for a typical course project/assignment. The project must present an original artistic and/or professional endeavor produced by the student under the close supervision of the student’s faculty supervisory committee. Each unit may choose its own nomenclature for the project (including but not limited to: “creative project,” “project in lieu of thesis”, etc.), as long as the terminology does not include the word “thesis” and is distinct from terminology chosen for the coursework-only program within that unit.

To qualify for a master's degree in a project program, the student must complete a minimum of thirty semester hours of credit. At least twenty-one of these hours must be taken on a letter-grade basis (A, B, C). The minimum number of project hours for completion of a project master’s program shall be six hours.

Projects in lieu of thesis can only be completed by students in a project master’s program and require two course codes: one for project credit hours (or unit-specific nomenclature) and one for project defense (or unit-specific nomenclature). Additionally, graduate students completing a project master’s program are required to submit a record of their output (e.g., copy of digital file, photographs of an exhibit, footage from a performance, etc.) to The Graduate School in electronic format for storing and cataloging.

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