



University Policy Statement

UPS 330.163

**CULMINATING EXPERIENCE GUIDELINES FOR  
MASTER'S PROGRAMS OR MASTER'S LEVEL  
DEGREES**

The culminating experiences signify the completion of graduate programs. These experiences include theses, projects, and comprehensive examinations, in which students showcase their mastery of disciplinary materials. These experiences are tailored to each student and must consist of individual student work, unless the program requires multiple culminating experiences.

**I. Individual and Group Student Work**

- A. For purposes of this policy, *individual student work* shall include exhibitions in which individual work is clearly identified but displayed alongside the work of others. Similarly, for purposes of this policy, *individual student work* shall include accompanied artistic performances or performances rendered in ensemble, in which individual student performances are clearly identifiable.
- B. Students whose programs require a culminating experience that is undertaken in groups (e.g., for the M.B.A.) shall receive an individual assessment based on a component of the work identifiable as authored or created by each individual student.
- C. When programs require more than one culminating experience, at least one culminating experience must be based on individual student work.

**II. Types of Products**

**A. Theses**

A *thesis* is defined as the written product of a systematic study of a significant topic. Within the body of the paper, the student identifies the issue or problem, states the major assumptions, explains the significance of the undertaking in the context of previous work on the problem or issue, sets forth the sources for and methods of gathering information, and analyzes the data, evidence, or patterns to offer a conclusion or recommendation. The finished product provides clear evidence of originality, critical and independent thinking, and organization and format as appropriate for the discipline.

## **B. Projects**

A *project* is a significant undertaking normally used in the fine and applied arts or in professional fields, although it may be an appropriate culminating experience in other fields as well. It provides clear evidence of originality, independent and critical thinking, appropriate form and organization, and a rationale. It is described and summarized in a manner that documents the project's significance, objectives, methodology, main findings or outcomes, and a conclusion or recommendation.

## **C. Comprehensive Examinations**

Departments and programs may offer a comprehensive examination as an alternative to the thesis or project. A comprehensive examination is an assessment of the student's ability to integrate the knowledge of the area, show critical and independent thinking, and demonstrate mastery of the subject matter. Departments set their own policies and procedures for such exams. Each academic department or program that offers a comprehensive exam as an alternative to the thesis or project must provide students with a written policy statement in advance of the exam, that includes each of the following items: (a) the approximate timing when comprehensive exams shall be administered; (b) the format of the exam --- whether written or oral, or some format thereof; (c) general topical emphases that define the content of the exam --- e.g., "theory and methods in the discipline plus questions concerning the student's area of specialization within the field;" (d) method of assessment of the examination --- including the number of readers who will evaluate the student's responses; and (e) options for retaking a portion or all of the exam in those instances where the student does not demonstrate adequate proficiency. A minimum of two full-time faculty members serve as evaluators of the comprehensive exam's quality and adequacy for the culminating experience. A record of the examination questions and responses shall be maintained in accordance with the records retention policy of California State University.

- D. The above definitions describe minimum standards for a culminating experience for earning a master's degree. Departments may choose to adopt more rigorous standards for theses and projects in their graduate programs as appropriate for their respective disciplines. Policies informing students of such standards and expectations must be publicly posted or distributed upon matriculation into the program.

## **III. Oral Defenses of Theses and Projects; and Oral Comprehensive Exams**

- A. The academic unit offering the degree has the authority to decide whether an oral defense is required for a thesis or project, which may be conducted in person or virtually. Typically, an oral defense involves the master's or doctoral candidate presenting their work to a faculty panel capable of evaluating its quality, followed by a period of questioning directed towards the candidate by the same group of faculty.
- B. Oral defenses and oral comprehensive exams should include not fewer than three such faculty members, one of whom should be the student's supervisory committee chair and one other committee member, though they may include more than three faculty members, even the entire program faculty. Any member of the University community may attend a public defense.

- C. The defense exam will be held in an appropriate academic environment, normally on campus. Program faculty may approve oral defenses undertaken partly or wholly in mediated environments, including via conference call or online, provided that the defense takes place in “real-time.”
- D. The oral defense or an exam, normally a graded pass/fail event, is documented by a signed statement attesting to the outcome of the defense. Such records must be complete enough to afford protection for both the student and the faculty members involved.

Source: Graduate Education Committee

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