



University Policy Statement

UPS 330.163

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

Culminating experiences mark the end of graduate programs. Through theses, projects, performances, exhibitions, and comprehensive examinations, individual students demonstrate mastery of disciplinary materials. Because these demonstrations of mastery are specific to individual students, culminating experiences shall be composed of individual student work, unless more than one culminating experience is required in the program.

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 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 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 The 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. Students must be informed of such standards and expectations in a written policy statement upon matriculation into the program.

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

- A. The decision to require an oral defense of either a thesis or a project is the purview of the academic unit offering the degree. An oral defense of either a thesis or a project normally includes a presentation by the master's candidate to a group of faculty capable of assessing the quality of the student's work, and/or a period of questioning directed to the master's candidate by said 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 the 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 on-line, 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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