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Thesis Support: A Comprehensive, Multi-Support Approach

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Abstract

The completion of an undergraduate thesis may be the single most rewarding and most challenging aspect of graduating with honors. However, simply encouraging students is not enough to ensure that most students will complete the thesis successfully. Research shows that students need more than verbal encouragement. The multi-support approach, which includes face-to-face meetings, peer mentoring, online discipline-specific thesis guides and a dedicated thesis course throughout the curriculum have reduced the number of thesis related withdrawals, and have likely improved the quality of the theses from the Schreyer Honors College at Penn State University. In this article, the supports that have been implemented are described to offer any institution or program requiring a thesis a variety of proven best practices to support students through their thesis process.

Thesis Support: A Comprehensive, Multi-Support Approach

There are many benefits to students, faculty, institutions and society of the publication of undergraduate theses. However, honors programs that require undergraduate theses can improve completion rates by offering students support during the process. One of the undeniable benefits of writing a thesis is that it offers honors students the opportunity to deeply explore an area of academic interest and to contribute original research to their academic discipline. Through their thesis writing process students begin a relationship with leading researchers in their area of honors. Pragmatically, for students angling toward graduate school, writing a thesis provides them with a ready writing sample, often required in the graduate admission process. Employers are likely to view with favor the skills that are required for a student to successfully complete a thesis. Years after a student graduates with honors, it is likely the thesis will remain in their minds as a memorable and significant project that helped the student grow academically and personally since it requires organizational skills, stamina, and confidence to complete a thesis.

For faculty, supervising a thesis is an opportunity to engage in research with some of the brightest and most motivated undergraduate students at their institution. As much as students learn from working with leading Scholars, faculty gain the fresh perspectives, initiative and enthusiasm that comes from seeing their scholarship through a young Scholar's view. It may have a rejuvenating effect on their work, leading to more studies, experiments and even publications. In many ways the undergraduate thesis experience is an ideal academic arrangement. Indeed, the benefits of writing a thesis are not reserved only for students, as the college or university benefits from the prestige of having students complete undergraduate research and even society benefits as original discoveries are made that result in advancements in disciplines across the entire spectrum of academic study.

A number of scholarly articles in a range of disciplines offer specific strategies that have proven to be successful. John J. Siegfried writes in the *Journal of Economic Education*, that for economics majors who wish to complete a thesis, a required econometrics course and a policy seminar prepare students, and a series of short-term deadlines helps combat procrastination.¹ Brian Paltridge, in the *Journal of English for Specific Purposes*, argues that students are able to produce better theses research when presented with the range of thesis options that might be open to them when pursuing their thesis research.² And Ford, Bracken, and Wilson present a two-semester course sequence that serves as a capstone experience for students' writing, designing, editing and presentation skills.³

In this article, we contend that a variety of supports are most effective to ensure better theses and a higher completion rate. Writing an undergraduate thesis is also an exclusive academic activity. Once admitted to the Schreyer Honors College at Penn State, thirty-six credit hours of honors coursework, a grade point average of 3.4 or higher and original research in the form of a thesis are the requirements that afford students the honor of graduating. Completing honors work, maintaining a high GPA and writing a thesis are opportunities to make the most of undergraduate education.

Yet, for all the benefits of writing a thesis, there are as many challenges associated with it. By design, the thesis is the most ambitious undertaking by students aspiring to graduate with honors, and it can be one of the toughest academic challenges for them. For some students it is the generation of a thesis topic that keeps them from moving forward. Some students struggle to communicate successfully with busy faculty whom they need to work with to complete their project. Others find they simply can't make the time to write, or the research question they started out with has fizzled in the light of more research so their motivation to continue has

waned. Assessment of academic programming has revealed that the seemingly complex process of completing the thesis is a leading reason why some students withdraw from the Schreyer Honors College, despite the successful completion of honors coursework and a high GPA.

Every year students withdraw from the honors college because they are struggling to complete their thesis than for any other reason.⁴ Some students withdraw as late as the second semester of their senior year, and the reasons associated with their decision to leave the honors college because of the thesis requirement include trouble completing the research and writing needed, the attainment of desirable employment, and complications in working with their thesis supervisor.⁵ In 2013, forty-four Scholars (which makes up 2.3% of our students population) withdrew from the honors college and 76% of these withdrawals were due to the thesis requirement.⁶

Through a multiple support approach, the academic department has developed several strategies to support Schreyer Scholars with the tools they need to successfully navigate the thesis process with relative ease, with the goal of reducing the number of students who leave the honors college because of thesis complications and difficulties. Benchmarking of other honors programs offered a number of insights that have been incorporated into our multi-support approach. And, after a year of implementing our new supportive tools, we have seen a slight decrease in the number of scholars withdrawing; in 2014, 33 scholars withdrew; for the spring semester of 2015, only 19 withdrew. We firmly believe the processes put in place helped decrease the number of scholars who withdraw due to the thesis process.

The academic department of the Schreyer Honors College has focused on supporting students with the thesis process in a number of ways:

Face-to-Face Communication

This is a meta-communication part of the support since several members of the honors college staff and faculty meet face to face with our Schreyer Scholars to offer advice about the thesis and other graduation requirements during the course of their time as honors students.

During these meetings, which include the freshmen orientation, one-on-one and small group meetings as well as the senior group meeting (held at the end of the junior year for all rising seniors), staff and faculty underscore the importance of effective communication management with professors and honors college personnel in order to progress successfully toward the completion of the thesis. Some of these communication management tips include:

- Respect professors' time by allowing for time for review of work instead of submitting work and expecting a 24-48 hour turnaround. A week is the minimal amount of time you need to provide a professor to review your thesis materials.
- Include your honors college designation on your email signature to signal to professors your academic seriousness
- Be willing to meet with faculty at their convenience, not yours.
- Do not be overly sensitive about harsh criticism of your academics. While you may be a star student, your faculty member is more experienced and can guide you to greatness, if you are willing to be tough about criticism. Original research is at a higher level than coursework, even honors coursework, so be ready to be communicated with as a peer and don't panic if the professor is harsh.

Group Senior Meeting

These mandatory meetings are for all rising senior Schreyer Scholars to help them prepare for their final semester(s). The academic team reviews important information regarding the thesis process and key due dates to prepare our Scholars to successfully graduate with honors. We also underscore the moral hazard of leaving the honors college after enjoying all of the benefits of being a Scholar either since freshman year or when they entered, either through the Sophomore or Junior Gateway admission process.⁷

Been There, Wrote That: The Ins and Outs of Thesis Writing

Both a helpful “how to” and an inspirational talk to our Senior Schreyer Scholars on the ins and outs of writing a thesis presented by a graduate student in a similar field to the attending group of Scholars. This peer-to-peer mentoring has proven helpful because it offers students advice from someone who has recently been through the process successfully.

Thinking about the Thesis with the Associate Dean

This is an informal brainstorming session for all Schreyer Scholars who want to think about their thesis whether they are at the beginning of the process or at the very end. For many writers, simply beginning and developing potential topics can prove to be the most difficult aspect of writing a thesis. For this reason, a helpful and supporting “thinking” session is one venue where multiple ideas may be developed and students develop a relationship with the academic department of the honors college, thus giving them support to help them in other ways, including their topic formation.

Curricular Structural Support

One of the most comprehensive supports for the thesis is curricular structural support in the form of a uniform thesis course. All academic colleges or departments (depending on the

college size) have created a uniform thesis research course, (at Penn State this will be Thesis Research 494H), and that title will appear on Scholars' transcripts. The course ranges from 1-6 credits for research and writing. Having this course appear on the student's transcript signals to employers and grad schools that the student completed a thesis, instead of the previous listing of "independent research" or "independent study." Furthermore, grading the thesis credits creates a more systematic approach to quality for the thesis work. Previously, some faculty felt obligated to offer honor students an "A" for thesis work, simply because they are honors students and by nature are performing at a higher level than they would if they were not honors students. However, all theses are not "A" work and should be graded more accurately. Instructions to faculty for the new grading policy are as follows:

Grade honors thesis research as you would any other course, in accordance with the expectations set forth in the syllabus for 494H. The grade should accurately reflect the quality of the student's work, attendance and participation.

1. Honors thesis or project coursework graded "B" or higher in all components will count toward graduation credit and fulfillment of graduation with honors from the Schreyer Honors College.
2. Honors thesis or project coursework graded "B- or below" will count toward graduation credit but not fulfillment of SHC requirements
3. If the course is offered twice, we leave the grading of the first semester to the discretion of the department. An R either for ongoing research may be offered or an actual letter grade that evaluates the quality of the research. The grade in the final 494H course must be B or higher for the student to graduate with honors.

Best Practices Guides by Department or College and Other Online Resources

Books and articles that offer general how-to advice for writing theses and dissertations can only go so far to help a student who is writing an undergraduate thesis. We have found a number of book length references for students who are writing theses or dissertations, and all are generic in nature. James Mauch and Naomi Park offer the fifth edition of their popular *Guide to the Successful Thesis and Dissertation: A Handbook for Students and Faculty* (2003). Allan A. Glatthorn and Randy L. Joyner 's *Writing the Winning Thesis Or Dissertation: A Step-by-Step Guide*, (2005) is divided by sections, focusing on each specific part of the process. Raymond L. Calabrese's book, *The Elements of an Effective Dissertation and Thesis: A Step-by-Step Guide to Getting it Right the First Time* (2006), and Susan Carter, Frances Kelly and Ian Brailsford's *Very thorough Structuring Your Research Thesis* (2012) offer the basics for thesis development. While they are helpful additional reference material for students who are writing theses, they fall short of individually guiding students through the hurdles that they are bound to face during the process.

Whether the student is working in engineering, history, science or math makes a difference in the structure or the department requirements, which is why discipline-specific guides are so valuable.

Like many honors colleges, we place discipline supervision in the hands of the discipline experts within colleges and departments. Therefore, the discipline-specific guides are written by the departments, not the honors college. Because there are twelve colleges, and more than 160 majors, students writing theses benefit most from having a discipline-specific example from which to base their thesis writing. Links to each college or department guide are housed on the Schreyer Honors College website for students to find the resource easily.⁸

Formatting and Writing Support

Structural and communication support and not the only barriers students face when writing a thesis; the actually formatting and finding quit time to write can serve as a frustrating road block. The following processes have become very popular amongst our students.

Thesis Boot Camps

Thesis Boot Camp is a one day (7 hour) thesis writing program to help Schreyer Scholars progress through the sometimes difficult stages of the thesis journey. By offering a supportive environment for this intense and focused project, the camp provides participants with the structure and motivation. Formatting and technical support, as well as a brief “pep-talk” from our associate dean take place during this time. We also provide the Scholars with breakfast and lunch for these 7 hour sessions. We offer three camps for spring graduates during their final semester.

Thesis Formatting Sessions

Students are invited to a one-hour session led by our Student Academic Services Specialist, to go over the template and specific formatting requirements step by step. We end each session with an open Q&A. These are beneficial to Schreyer Scholars who are having difficulty navigating the formatting on their computers. Our Student Academic Success Specialist demonstrates the proper formatting through both a PC and a Mac computer.

Format Review

Each Scholar is required to electronically submit a draft of their thesis for review of the formatting. This is *not* a submission of the final form of the thesis; rather it is simply a review of the *format* of the thesis. We check, for example, to make sure of the proper use of fonts, tables, and pagination. We do not expect Scholars to have their thesis completed at this point, but they

must submit a draft so that we can review the format. Each student receives individual feedback via an email.

Presentational Practice

R.O.A.R. (recording of academic research) – This practice will improve Scholars communication skills; the Recording of Academic Research, known as the ROAR contest, has been developed to require students to make a 2-3 minute video of their thesis research.⁹

Technological Support

Online Submission

Every completed and approved thesis is submitted electronically through the library and will be displayed on the World Wide Web for eternity. This gives Scholars the incentive to create the best possible thesis.

Bibliography

An online bibliography to assist students and a lending library for thesis prep books is available to Scholars. In addition, special thesis related meetings are held regularly.

Conclusion and Future Direction

The thesis is a crowning achievement for any high-performing student, however; a good honors program must support its scholars through the thesis process in multiple ways to ensure success. This article offers the ways that Penn State's Schreyer Honors College has supported students through the thesis process through face-to-face, structural, formatted and presentational methods. In the future further support for thesis preparation at Penn State and elsewhere may include an honors exclusive writing center; perhaps staffed by seniors or recent alumni. Another way to improve and strengthen the thesis process would be to institute a university-wide defense of the thesis. The goal of all of this support is to offer students the best possible academic

experience during their thesis process. This support will prepare them for graduate school and/or the world of work, where they will likely draw upon the skills of perseverance, communication, both oral and written, and the determination to see a project through to completion in order to experience success.

Notes

¹ Siegfried, John J. "Principles for a Successful Undergraduate Honors Program." *The Journal of Economic Education*, 32.2 (2001) 169-177.

² Paltridge, Brian. "Thesis and dissertation writing: an examination of published advice and actual practice," *English for Specific Purposes*, 21.2 (2002) 125-143.

³ Forde, Julie Dyke; Bracken, Jennifer L. and Gregory D. Wilson. "The Two-Semester Thesis Model: Emphasizing Research in Undergraduate Technical Communication Curricula." *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 39.4 (2009) 433-453.

⁴ The academic department conducted an assessment of emails sent to the honors college dean during academic year 2014 and determined that the greatest percentage of those leaving the college did so because they did not want to complete the thesis.

⁵ This data was a result of the assessment of emails from 2014.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The Gateway entry process is based upon an evaluation of a student's performance and research potential. The evaluation of all applications is done by the faculty and/or administrators of an academic unit.

The evaluation is typically based on:

Academic achievement since beginning college, desire, ability and motivation to conduct research or creative projects leading to the completion of an undergraduate honors thesis;

interest in and aptitude for leadership, civic engagement, and international experiences as an undergraduate.

⁸ Thesis Guides Appear on the Schreyer Honors College website: <https://www.shc.psu.edu/academic/thesis/help.cfm> (accessed January 20, 2016).

⁹ The Recording of Academic Research (ROAR) videos appear on the Schreyer Honors College website: <https://www.shc.psu.edu/academic/research/roar.cfm> (accessed January 20, 2016).

The Authors

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Debra J. Rodgers is the Coordinator of Academic Services for the Schreyer Honors College. She has a B.S. in psychology from Penn State. She coordinates student records related to the successful enrollment, transition, and graduation of all Schreyer scholars and supports students through grade audits, academic plans, theses process, and graduation checkouts. Ms. Rodgers plans and implements student-focused programs and services including orientation, Thesis Boot Camps, Thesis Formatting Sessions, Senior Meetings, and the Medals Ceremonies.