Culminating Experience Policy Guide

School of Public Affairs
San Diego State University

Master of
City Planning
Criminal Justice
Public Administration

Culminating Experience Policies and Guidelines

This guidebook provides information about the policies and important guidelines for completing the Culminating Experience in the Masters degree programs offered by the School of Public Affairs.

Students in the City Planning, Criminal Justice, and Public Administration Masters Programs will declare their Capstone Project or Thesis option on the **Culminating Experience Declaration Form** at the end of the spring semester prior to their final year. Students should submit this form to their respective major **Graduate Coordinator** by the provided deadline. *For students beginning their final year in 2023, this information will be collected by the Capstone Coordinator during the fall PA 605 course.*

Please note, per CSU rules for dual degree students, all MPA-MA Latin American Studies students are required to complete a thesis. All students in the fast-track fully online MPA program complete a separate workplace-based Capstone Project as a cohort that is not described in this document; these students can speak with their PA 795 instructor for more details on their specific process.

This Policy Guide provides important descriptions and information about requirements for the Capstone Project and Thesis. Please refer to the Student or Faculty Guide for more specific information. These guides are updated yearly, or on an as needed basis, to reflect the most current information.

Snapshot of the Culminating Experience

Capstone	Thesis
- Group-based project - Applied research with community partner - Solutions-focused project - Guided by assigned Faculty Supervisor - Complete summary report and other deliverables - Enroll in PA 795	- Individual project - Basic or applied research on topic of interest - Guided by Thesis Committee - Complete scholarly research document - Enroll in PA 799

Capstone Project

The Capstone Project is a "a culminating experience that assesses students' capacity to synthesize their previous coursework and apply the knowledge and skills they have learned."[1] It is designed to guide students in developing and executing a research project that draws on what they have learned throughout the program. This project allows students to reflect on and integrate the knowledge they have obtained in previous courses. Students will work in small, cross-disciplinary teams to address a relevant "real-world" issue on behalf of a local governmental or non-profit sector organization.

This section provides important information about the Capstone Project **requirements, timelines,** and other **key information** for completing the Capstone Project as part of the overall requirements for your Masters degree in the School of Public Affairs. Students will enroll in PA 795 Capstone Course in the Spring semester of their final year in the program. Students must complete PA 605 (Advanced Seminar in Research Methods) **and** PA 606 (Quantitative Methods) prior to taking PA 795.

The Capstone Project is a group-based research endeavor in partnership with a Capstone Partner client. Capstone Project groups comprise between 3 and 5 students but may vary depending on a given project's needs. Students will perform research tasks and activities as agreed upon with the Partner organization/agency and under the supervision of a School of Public Affairs Faculty member. Along the way, the Capstone Coordinator will collaborate with the Capstone Partners and Faculty Supervisors to support student progress toward successful completion of the culminating experience.

The Capstone is aligned with a May graduation. Students on a December graduation timeline should speak with their Program Coordinator about the Individual Capstone Project alternative[2].

Skills and Abilities Assessed

As described in the Course Learning Outcomes for PA 795, the Capstone Project assesses the following skills and abilities:

1. **Analytical skills**: Students will gather, analyze, and synthesize quantitative and/or qualitative data into information that can be used to craft compelling, evidence-based explanations.
2. **Writing and oral skills**: Students will communicate complex ideas to diverse audiences in a compelling and professional manner in written and oral form.

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[1] Campbell, D. & Lambright, K. (2011). How valuable are capstone projects for community organizations? Lessons from a program assessment. *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 17*(1), 61-88.
[2] Under certain circumstances, students will be allowed to complete an Individual Capstone Project. These projects will be approved by the program's Graduate Coordinator and supervised by an agreed upon faculty member. Please review these guidelines and speak to your Graduate Coordinator directly for more information.

3. **A solid formation in methods:** Students will select appropriate methodological strategies from a menu of quantitative and/or qualitative methodological approaches, and will execute the methodology(ies) effectively, in order to answer a specific research question
4. **Ability to engage in discussions requiring a working knowledge on their chosen topic.** Students will engage in discussions requiring a working knowledge on their chosen topic.

Capstone Requirements

There are **five core requirements** to completing the Capstone Project. To successfully complete the Masters Program Capstone Project, students will:

1. Produce and maintain a client agreement on the scope of work and project plan, and continued communication
2. Conduct research and analysis as designed in relation to the project needs
3. Complete individual & group-based assessments throughout the Capstone experience
4. Provide group-based Capstone Project Deliverable(s) submitted to the Supervising Faculty Member, Capstone Coordinator, Capstone Partner Organization, and deposited in the SPA archive
5. Give an oral presentation at the Capstone Event (scheduled in May)

These requirements will be assessed and documented by the Capstone Coordinator and supervising faculty in the PA 795 Capstone course. Each of these requirements is detailed below:

1. *Produce and maintain a client agreement on the scope of work and project plan, and continued communication*

At the beginning of the Capstone Project, student teams will be provided with an initial proposal and/or scope of work (SOW) from the Partner Organization. During the fall semester of their final year, and prior to taking the PA 795 course, student research teams will develop a project plan and establish collaborative communication with their Capstone Partner Agency. This communication will continue throughout the Capstone Project period.

2. *Conduct research and analysis as designed in relation to the project needs*

Based on the proposal/SOW, communication with the Capstone Partner, consultation with the Faculty Supervisor, and research team collaboration, students will conduct research activities and analysis of data relevant to their project's needs and goals. Students will consult with their Faculty Supervisor for guidance and various quality assurance steps along the way.

3. *Complete individual & group-based assessments throughout the Capstone experience*

Throughout the fall and spring semester of the final year, students will engage in a series of individual and group-based assessments at the discretion of the Faculty Supervisor. These

assessments will gather information about student contributions to the project, working relationships with teams, and execution of the research tasks and activities. These assessments will be the performance metrics that help to determine the successful completion of the Capstone Project.

4. *Provide group-based Capstone Project Deliverable(s) submitted to the Capstone Coordinator, Capstone Partner Organization, and deposited in the SPA archive*

Through development of the project plan and as required by the Capstone Project Faculty, students will produce deliverables that will be disseminated and archived at the SPA. This typically takes the form of a Final Report and Presentation but can vary depending on the SOW and other project needs/characteristics.

5. *Give an oral presentation at the Capstone Event (scheduled in May)*

The final activity in the Capstone Project experience is presenting the project results to Capstone Partners, community members, and faculty. The specifics of the event will be provided in advance but typically include a 10-15 minute presentation, question and answer period, and evaluation by Supervising Faculty members and an assembled panel of experts.

Timeline and Capstone Selection Process

The figure below depicts a typical timeline for the culminating experience. It is reflected across two years of coursework; however, if you are attending part time, adjust to the year before you plan to graduate/ the year you plan to graduate.

<u>Year 1</u>

End of Spring Semester

● Students begin to decide if they want to pursue a Capstone or Thesis Project
● Capstone Request For Proposals goes live
    o Students with project ideas should reach out directly to the Capstone Coordinator
● Partner organizations and Scopes of Work are developed by Capstone Coordinator and Committee

<u>Year 2</u>

Fall Semester

● August – Students enrolled in PA 605 and choosing a Capstone will begin reviewing available Capstone Project Scopes of Work
● September – Students will fill out the Capstone Interest Survey to select their top 3 project choices (rank-ordered) and provide other information

- October – Students are selected into Capstones by the Capstone Coordinator, PA 605 and PA 795 faculty; Capstone Partners are notified; Students directly engage with Capstone Partners and develop proposal
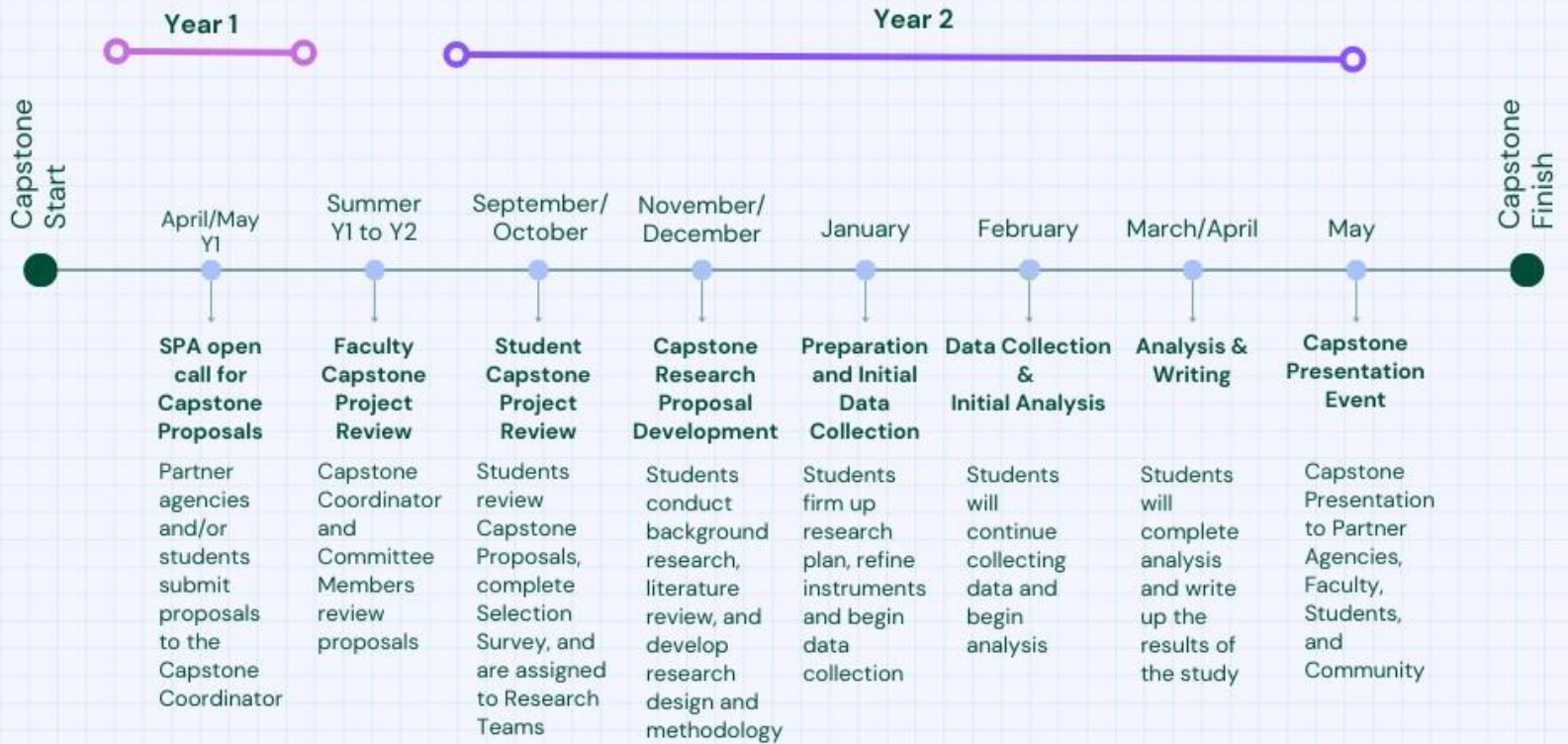
Fall Semester (continued)

- November – Students continue work on Capstone Proposal including conducting meetings with partners, developing data collection instruments, and collecting initial data (if applicable).
- December – Students complete proposal and submit for review and feedback from the Capstone Partner

Spring Semester

- January – Students develop timeline and allocate specific tasks; final data collection instruments are approved
- February – Data collection begins; revisions to and development of the final deliverable components
- March – Data collection and initial analysis
- April – Analysis and preparation of the Final Deliverable
- May – Submission of Final Deliverables to Capstone Partner and Oral Presentation

Sample Capstone Timeline

Year 1

Year 2

Capstone Start

Capstone Finish

April/May Y1	Summer Y1 to Y2	September/ October	November/ December	January	February	March/April	May
SPA open call for Capstone Proposals	**Faculty Capstone Project Review**	**Student Capstone Project Review**	**Capstone Research Proposal Development**	**Preparation and Initial Data Collection**	**Data Collection & Initial Analysis**	**Analysis & Writing**	**Capstone Presentation Event**
Partner agencies and/or students submit proposals to the Capstone Coordinator	Capstone Coordinator and Committee Members review proposals	Students review Capstone Proposals, complete Selection Survey, and are assigned to Research Teams	Students conduct background research, literature review, and develop research design and methodology	Students firm up research plan, refine instruments and begin data collection	Students will continue collecting data and begin analysis	Students will complete analysis and write up the results of the study	Capstone Presentation to Partner Agencies, Faculty, Students, and Community

Capstone Project Team Selection

Capstone Project Research Teams are determined by information provided by 1) a Capstone Project Selection survey taken by students, and 2) Faculty Supervisor assessment.

In the Fall of the final year, the Capstone Coordinator will disseminate the project SOW summaries for that year to the students. Students will then be provided a confidential survey link to provide information on their top selections, any specific skills, anything else relevant to creating the research teams.

After students have completed the survey, Faculty Supervisors and the Capstone Coordinator will assess the choices and information and place students into research teams. The size and scope of the research team will be determined by the nature of the research and SOW.

> *Students: Some students may wonder what they should consider when selecting certain Capstone projects on their survey. Sometimes the projects neatly align with your topical interests; other times, the projects might be best suited for a particular career path/goals. Sometimes they are one in the same. If you're interested in multiple projects or are not sure which might be best suited for you, please contact the Capstone Coordinator to discuss further!*

Project Management & Deliverables

Each research team will be responsible for project and data management. To assist with these tasks, students will develop detailed project plans for conducting the research, timelines, and plans for equitable team member contributions to the project tasks and activities. The Faculty Supervisor and requirements for the PA 795 course will help guide the preparation of these deliverables. The typical deliverables related to the Capstone Project are:

- Proposed Project Plan
- Tools and Instruments for Data Collection
- Project Summary for Dissemination
- Promotional Materials for SPA website and other relevant stakeholders
- Sections of the Final Report for Review (Introduction, Literature Review, Methods, Findings, and Recommendations/Conclusions)
- Final Report (see below)
- Final Presentation File

Keep in mind that these are the most commonly produced deliverables, but some projects may have different or additional components. Your Faculty Supervisor will guide you in the development of these products so they attain the same quality and rigor as more typical outputs.

Shared Google Drive

Data security and project management are important components of the Capstone Project process, as well as invaluable skills for your career. Capstone Project Research Teams will create folders to be housed on the SPA Capstone Project Shared Google Drive. The research projects will contain potentially sensitive information and data and sharing controls and permissions will be identified and created based on each project. Research teams will house all data and research information on the Shared Google Drive. Faculty Supervisors will also have access to these drives. For information security and privacy purposes, any and all data and information related to Capstone Projects is housed on the SPA Capstone Project Shared Google Drive and is not permitted to be kept on students' personal devices.

Final Deliverable

The Final Deliverable will typically be in the form of a Final Report provided to the Capstone Partner organization and to be archived with the School of Public Affairs. The Final Deliverable can take many shapes but should be professional and polished. Your Faculty Supervisor will be your guide. Regardless of the ultimate format, the Final Report is typically between 40-50 pages in length and should contain the following sections of information:

- Title Page information (Title, Authors, Capstone Partner Organization)
- Acknowledgements
- Researcher Bios
- Executive Summary (approximately 1-2 pages)
- Introduction/Background
- Literature Review
- Methods
- Findings/Results
- Recommendations & Conclusions
- References (in APA format)
- Appendices (optional, but this typically includes interview guides, coding schemes, etc.)

Any additional sections, or alterations to this list will be at the discretion of the Faculty Supervisor. Examples of prior Capstone Project Final Reports can be found on the SPA website.

Below is some additional guidance for preparing the Final Report. Thinking about these segments of your project in advance will assist in a smoother process as well as higher quality assignments in your Capstone course!

- *Title Page*: The title page should be polished and eye-catching with any necessary/desired Capstone Partner logos.
- When the final report is finished, create a *Table of Contents* and List of Tables or Figures; make sure they're accurate. The titles are specific enough to signal what is included.

- *Acknowledgments*: You can write the Acknowledgments any time, but most people write them after the bulk of the report has been completed so that you know who has been helpful. You should also list any funding that supported your work.
- *Researcher Bios*: Short bios of each research team member are encouraged but not required.
- The *Introduction* gives an overall picture of the issue, why it's important, and provides a bit of a roadmap of the report. Here, you will also briefly describe the agency and provide context for the current research question/project.
- The *Literature Review* situates your work within the larger context of your field. This section explains how your work grew out of earlier, related research and, in doing so, details the major developments and contrasting approaches in your specific field. You make clear what was the seminal work and then explain both chronologically and thematically the important findings that preceded and motivated your research project. This section will likely begin broadly and be refined multiple times.
- The *Methods* section contains information about how you went about answering the research question or developing data to support solutions. Describe the research design, explain your data sources and how you collected them. If you used a survey or interview protocol, include those in your report as an Appendix. You will also describe your approach to analyzing the data.
- *Findings/Results* walks through the main findings of your analysis. Make sure you leave time to revise these sections/chapters – often, the structure only becomes clear after you've written the first draft.
- The *Conclusion* summarizes your findings and discusses their implications; it often ends by suggesting future work. The report should contain thorough recommendations for the Capstone Partner to consider for future action.
- *References*: We highly recommend using bibliographic software (like Zotero). In general, SPA programs use APA (American Psychological Association) references. See the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Seventh Edition (2020); https://apastyle.apa.org/products/publication-manual-7th-edition-spiral.
- *Visuals, Charts, and Figures*: Make sure to follow SPA best practices! All visuals should include a title and source information and should appear within a page after they are mentioned in the text.
- *Formatting Considerations*:
    - Choosing one template and color scheme for your report will make it look more professional. You can find numerous free software to polish up your report.
    - Headings, sub-headings, lists, and captions should be consistent in style.
    - Proofread!! Make sure you review your final draft to check that your sentences, paragraphs, sections, and chapters are clear and logically sequential, not to you, but to your outside reader. If you sense that something isn't clear, believe that it isn't, and fix it. Ask someone else to read it and note any unclear sentences or sections.

Final Presentation

Capstone Project teams will disseminate their primary findings in a presentation to Capstone Partners, community members, and faculty. The final presentation will be oral and rely on projected slides (using PowerPoint, Google Slides, etc.). The final presentation file will be archived by the SPA. Research Teams will work with their Faculty Supervisor to develop, refine, and practice their presentations. Students should follow presentation best practices they acquire in their final year of study.

The Final Presentation Event will be scheduled well in advance, but typically takes place on the evening of the PA 795 class session during the week of Finals. All students are expected to attend and present their research. Logistics and preparation for the Capstone Presentation Event will be provided to students by the Capstone Coordinator.

Individual Capstone

In some cases, it is appropriate for a student to complete the Capstone Project individually. These cases are rare and will be approved at the discretion of the Graduate Coordinator. Students will be required to have the support of a Faculty Supervisor who will work with the student to complete the same **Capstone Project Requirements** listed above. The Faculty Supervisor will communicate with the Capstone Coordinator to ensure that all requirements are met. The student will be responsible for identifying and engaging with a Capstone Partner Organization and developing an appropriate project. The student will complete an agreed upon Scope of Work and will communicate this relationship with their Faculty Supervisor, Graduate Coordinator, and Capstone Coordinator.

FAQs

Will choosing a Capstone over a Thesis better equip me for a career in the field?

The Capstone project will provide skills and knowledge that are directly related to work in the field that are easily translatable from the project work. The Capstone also supports networking and professional development through collaboration with the Partner Agency. However, a Capstone project is also a useful product to display project management skills and research abilities to a doctoral program.

Can a student submit a Capstone Project idea?

If a student has a working relationship with a community-based or government agency and a research idea that they think would work well for a Capstone project, they can bring this proposal to the Capstone Coordinator. The student and coordinator will meet to discuss the project details and if deemed appropriate, the Capstone Coordinator will reach out to the prospective Partner Agency to build the proposal.

Can someone take courses out of sequence and complete the Capstone?

No, taking PA605 prior to PA795 is critical to having the methodological understanding for completing the Capstone Project and engaging in the research process. Students with these circumstances should speak to their Graduate Coordinator about pursuing an Independent Capstone Project or Thesis.

Under what circumstances can a student be removed from a Capstone Project Team?

Students who are not performing in accordance with the PA 795 course requirements, not completing assigned research tasks and activities, or are failing to manage requirements, including positive collaboration with other research team members, may be removed from the Capstone Project Team. Removal from the Capstone Project will likely result in delayed completion of the Culminating Experiences requirement for the Masters programs.

What should I do if I feel like the project workload is unbalanced among my research team members?

The equitable distribution of work is important in any group-based project. During the Capstone, your Faculty Supervisor will guide you and your team in developing timelines, tasks/activities, group agreements, and assessments that will hopefully avoid these experiences. Still, if it seems the workload is unbalanced it is critical to speak with your Faculty Supervisor to address it.

Thesis Project

The Thesis Project also fulfills the requirement for a culminating experience in SPA masters programs. The thesis project is a student-driven, individual research study under the supervision of a Faculty Chair. Students who opt to write a thesis often choose to do so because they are interested in pursuing a research-based career in the public or non-profit sector or as a member of the academy. This section of the Policy Guide describes the thesis project and its requirements, and provides students with some insight into the independent research endeavor.

What is a Thesis?

According to the graduation requirements in the SDSU Catalog:

> *A thesis is the written product of a systematic study of a significant problem. It identifies the problem, states the major assumptions, explains the significance of the undertaking, sets forth the sources for and the methods of gathering information, analyzes the data, and offers a conclusion or recommendation. The finished product evidences originality, critical and independent thinking, appropriate organization, language, and format, high level of writing competency, and thorough documentation. In most cases, an oral defense of the thesis is required.*

The goal of the thesis process is to develop independent, original, empirical scholarship under the guidance of a faculty committee. Thesis scholarship must be original research and should include theoretical and empirical contributions.

Working on a thesis is a much more individual and independent endeavor than participating in the team-based Capstone Project. A thesis is an independent, single-student effort to create original research. The thesis is a good option for students who have a strong interest in a specific research question that they would like to pursue in great depth. Meetings with faculty are on an occasional, as needed basis rather than part of a regularly scheduled class. Students who are self-motivated, organized, good at keeping themselves on a schedule, and able to meet deadlines without reminders tend to be successful and graduate on time when selecting the thesis option for degree completion.

Other aspects of the thesis process students may consider are cost and time. First, the thesis may come with additional costs that are not applicable to the Capstone project. For example, costs of conducting research (e.g., travel, participant incentives, etc.) and formatting the thesis for publication (see the section on Montezuma Publishing below) are incurred by students. While there are some possible funds or scholarships to defray these costs, these are the student's responsibility. The second consideration is time. As mentioned, the thesis is an

independent research effort meaning that there is no prescribed time to completion as there is in the Capstone Project. Thesis research can be delayed for many reasons, including challenges obtaining data, meeting IRB requirements (if applicable, see below), revisions required by the Faculty Chair and committee members, and other things. For some students, this is the first time they are completing a project outside of the normal class schedule which can be hard to adjust to. It's important to have transparent conversations with your Faculty Chair about the process.

Examples of recent School of Public Affairs student theses can be found here. Theses average around 75-100 pages and often involve human subjects research or analyzing original datasets. A thesis typically contains the following major sections, divided into chapters: Introduction/Background, Literature Review, Methods, Findings/Results (sometimes more than one chapter), Discussion/Conclusion, References, Appendices. Theses conform to scholarly standards in terms of formatting and referencing. In the SPA programs, we typically follow American Psychological Association (APA) 7th Edition formatting guidance.

Some SPA students have had the opportunity to present their thesis research at academic conferences, publish versions of their thesis research in academic journals (often with assistance from faculty), and expand their thesis research while enrolled in PhD programs.

Requirements

The formal requirements for a thesis project are set by the College of Graduate Studies. Some of these requirements include:

Thesis Committee Formation:

The thesis committee is composed of at least three full-time SDSU faculty members. At least two of the members, including the committee chair, must hold permanent faculty appointments, or be an approved emeritus faculty including faculty in the Faculty Early Retirement Program. The first two committee members must be faculty from the degree program in which the thesis is written. The third committee member must be an SDSU faculty member from a degree program other than the program in which the thesis is written.

Because the School of Public Affairs has three different graduate degree programs all three faculty members can be from programs within our School, but students are also welcome to include a third member from a degree program outside the School of Public Affairs.

Students should begin with identifying a **Committee Chair**. The Chair should be someone who has related expertise to the proposed topic of interest or study methodology, and/or be someone the student feels they can work well with. Students should approach faculty who may serve as their Chair for an initial conversation to discuss the project and possible collaboration.

Students should also think about who might serve as the **2ⁿᵈ and 3ʳᵈ members** of their committee. Students can consult with their Chair and then approach the prospective 2ⁿᵈ and 3ʳᵈ members with their thesis idea and request to serve on their committee. Students should discuss the outreach process with their Chair for more specific guidance.

Thesis Committee Roles:

- **Chair** (within program): The Thesis Chair will guide the thesis project and set the parameters for completion of the research study in conversation with the student. The Chair should provide guidance and support on developing the research question fully, identifying and solidifying research design and data, completing IRB approvals, reviewing and providing feedback on thesis drafts, and approving the move forward to present the thesis to the committee for review and approval.
- **2nd Member** (within program): The second member of the committee, who is a faculty member within the program, should be selected for their topical and/or methodological expertise and is available to provide guidance on specific aspects of the research project as identified by the student and their Chair. The second member will read the thesis in full once provided by the Thesis Chair and offer feedback to the student, revisions for approval, and confirmation of completion.
- **3rd Member** (outside program): The third member of the committee, who is a faculty member outside the program, should be selected for their topical and/or methodological expertise and can offer insight and perspective from another discipline. The third member may provide guidance on specific aspects of the research project as identified by the student and their Chair. The third member will read the thesis in full once provided by the Thesis Chair and offer feedback to the student, revisions for approval, and confirmation of completion.

These role descriptions serve as general guidance. You should have an in-depth conversation with the Faculty Chair to establish the roles and responsibilities of the members of the committee, and the process by which you communicate these roles and responsibilities to committee members.

> *Communicating with your Thesis Committee:* This may be the most important information in this policy guide for thesis students. Communicating with your Faculty Chair and Committee Members is the key to a smoother thesis study and process. Faculty will agree to work with you when you demonstrate professionalism, responsiveness, and focus in your work. Once you've identified your Faculty Chair, establish the parameters around communication. *What are the best modalities (in-person, email, etc.)? How often should you communicate? How quickly should you expect a response from your Chair? How do they advise you to communicate with your other committee members? What is the timeline they see as appropriate and will agree to?* The student drives this communication, but these are among the questions you want to have answers to.

Required Forms:

The student must obtain the following forms from the Division of Graduate Affairs:

- Appointment of Thesis Committee Form
- Rights to Thesis/Dissertation Data
- Publication Authorship Form
- Advance to Candidacy Form

These forms must be signed by all committee members and the graduate adviser. The Division of Graduate Affairs will then review the composition of the student's committee, verifying that it meets university requirements. Submission deadlines and other administrative information are available through [Graduate Studies](#).

Enrolling in a course for Thesis Hours:

Students must enroll in 3 units of Course 799A Thesis, for which the Division of Graduate Affairs will award a grade of CR. Some students may need to enroll in an additional 3 units of 799B Thesis Extension during a subsequent semester to finish their thesis. Consult with the Program Coordinator and/or Thesis Chair for guidance.
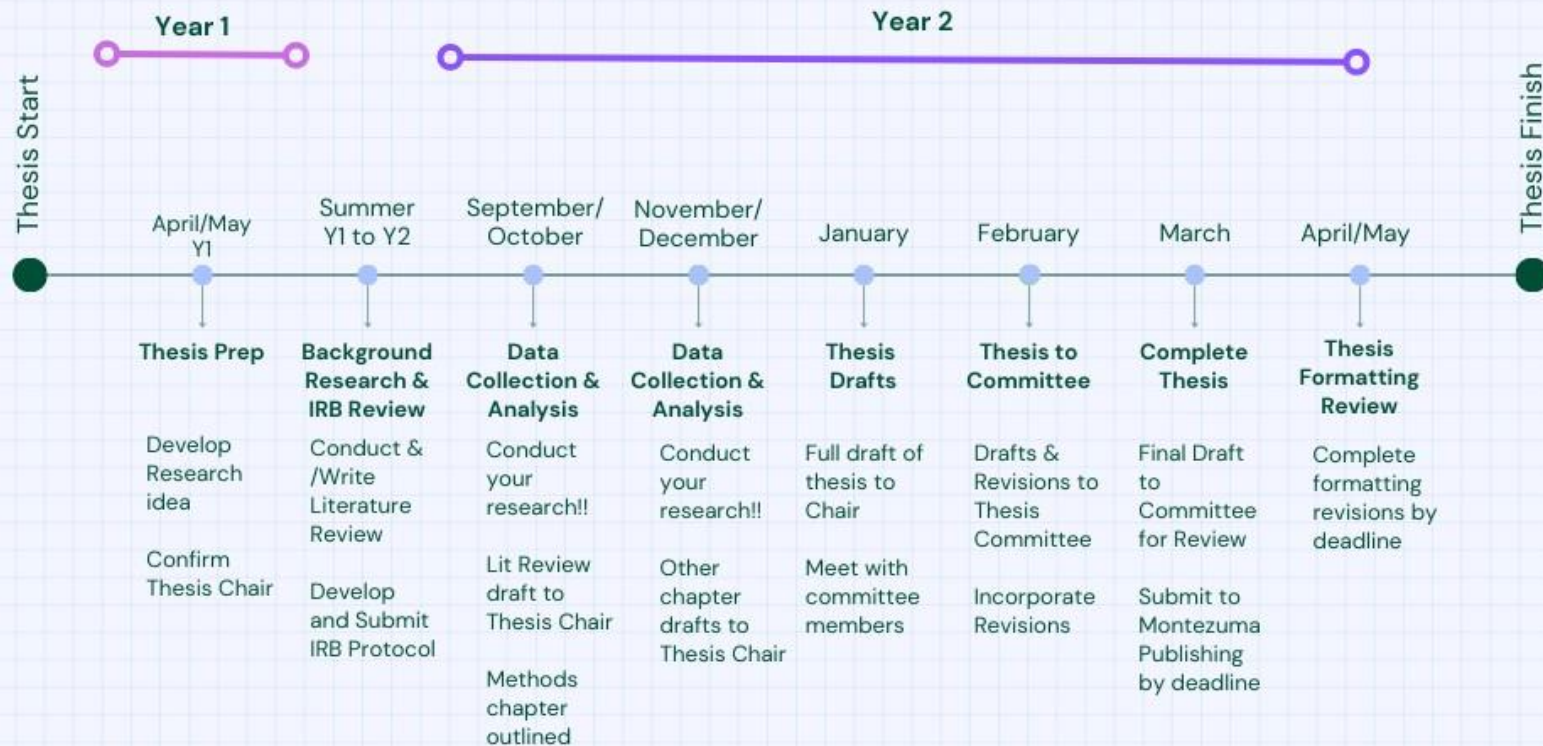
Timelines and Key Deadlines

There are numerous important timelines and deadlines thesis students must consider. Be sure to consult with the Graduate Coordinator and Division of Graduate Studies for up-to-date milestones/deadlines.

Suggested Timeline for Thesis

One of the most important things students can do to successfully complete the thesis is develop a timeline for progressing through the project. One strategy is to identify the final deadlines for submitting the thesis and work backwards considering all of the other demands or commitments you have (and that your committee members have!). For a May graduation, the thesis completion date is typically the third week of March. Below is a suggested timeline for completing the thesis:

Sample Thesis Timeline

Year 1

Year 2

Thesis Start

Thesis Finish

April/May Y1	Summer Y1 to Y2	September/ October	November/ December	January	February	March	April/May
Thesis Prep	**Background Research & IRB Review**	**Data Collection & Analysis**	**Data Collection & Analysis**	**Thesis Drafts**	**Thesis to Committee**	**Complete Thesis**	**Thesis Formatting Review**
Develop Research idea	Conduct & /Write Literature Review	Conduct your research!!	Conduct your research!!	Full draft of thesis to Chair	Drafts & Revisions to Thesis Committee	Final Draft to Committee for Review	Complete formatting revisions by deadline
Confirm Thesis Chair	Develop and Submit IRB Protocol	Lit Review draft to Thesis Chair	Other chapter drafts to Thesis Chair	Meet with committee members	Incorporate Revisions	Submit to Montezuma Publishing by deadline	
		Methods chapter outlined					

First Year or Prior to Graduation if Part Time Student

- *Fall and Spring semesters*: When possible, use class assignments as an opportunity to review literature and explore topics related to your thesis interest and narrow your thesis question.
- *Spring semester*: Begin identifying your thesis committee chair (and possible members). Discuss your topic area with your faculty advisor. Begin building a literature review for your thesis. Begin drafting a sample methods section based on your methods courses (PA 604, PA 606, and other methods courses you may have taken).
- *End of Spring semester*: Latest date for formation of thesis committee and finalization of thesis topic. Ideal date to draft a brief (1-3 page) thesis proposal.
  - If you plan to collect human subjects data for your thesis, end of Spring semester also is the latest advised date for submitting an IRB proposal for review.
- *Summer*: Latest date for collection of any data for inclusion in thesis (after IRB approval). Beginning of data analysis.

Second/Final Year if Part Time Student

- *Fall*: Conclusion of data analysis and beginning of writing thesis analysis sections.
- *Winter break*: Finalize a solid first draft of your thesis. Send it to your Chair.
- *Late-January*: Suggested date to send thesis to full thesis committee, after receiving permission and approval from your thesis chair (giving committee members 2 weeks for review and feedback). You should expect substantial feedback from all committee members and will need time to incorporate this feedback into your thesis.
- *Final week of February*: Suggested latest date for oral defense (if required) and final edits to thesis committee members (giving committee members 2 weeks for review and feedback)
- *Second week of March:* Suggested sign off date from thesis chair and committee members
- *Third week of March of Spring graduating:* Final deadline to submit thesis to Montezuma Publishing

This timeline is suggested and reflects common experiences, but does not necessarily contain buffer time for challenges that arise such as multiple IRB reviews or revisions from committee members, delays in collecting or analyzing data, and life circumstances. The earlier you can begin, the better! **It is never too early to begin conversations with Faculty advisors about doing the thesis!**

IRB Approval

Students who plan to collect original data with human subjects (people) or use confidential or identifiable data, you will need to obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. You can find more information about SDSU's [Human Research Protection Program](#) here.

Students should consult with their Faculty Chair about whether they need to complete this process, and if so, how to approach it. If students do need to submit their project to the IRB, they will need to obtain CITI certification and create an [InfoEd](#) account. InfoEd is the platform used by IRB to organize, process, and review proposed projects.

When submitting the application and research instruments (if any) for IRB review, the project will be considered for one of three types of review:

- **Exempt**: Studies that pose minimal risk AND meets [certain criteria](#).
- **Expedited**: Studies that according to 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110: Involve no greater than minimal risk AND fit into one (or more) of [nine specific expedited review categories](#).
- **Full**: Studies posing greater than minimal risk studies OR studies that are minimal risk, but do not fit in an expedited review category (such as those with vulnerable populations).

The IRB may also determine that the study is not subject to review for a variety of reasons (such as the work falling under the evaluation research standards). Check out [this video](#) on the SDSU IRB webpage for more information.

IRB review can take multiple iterations, where researchers provide revisions and rationale to the IRB Analysts or Committee to determine if your project meets ethical research standards. Be sure to check the InfoEd account regularly for updates. Once approved, students will be able to begin research activities. The thesis committee chair may ask students to include a copy of the IRB approval letter as an Appendix in the final thesis project.

Montezuma Publishing

An important component of the thesis process is publishing. SDSU partners with Montezuma Publishing to move your final, approved thesis project to formal publication. Montezuma Publishing sets the dates for completion in order to graduate in May, Summer, or December. **IMPORTANT**: Students must have an accepted thesis document by the date set by Montezuma Publishing in order to be considered successfully completed and participate in graduation. For a May graduation, this deadline is typically in mid-March.

Formatting guidelines are set by [Montezuma Publishing](#). As students begin their thesis preparation, they should download and review the thesis formatting guide and the thesis template. Students should become familiar with Microsoft Word as this is the software that Montezuma Publishing uses to review and publish theses. Note that online word processing software (like Google Docs) does not align with these formatting specifications.

One important, but not obvious, step that can cause delays is the initial formatting of the thesis document. Montezuma Publishing requires the research document to be in Word format and offers a template to build the text into. If you're not familiar with Microsoft Word, ensure you have enough time to navigate and troubleshoot. While it is a lot like other word processing software, it does have some specific processes. Luckily, there are many video and web-based tutorials available.

Once students submit the completed thesis to Montezuma Publishing, they will have to pay the submission fee and then the project will undergo review. Publishing staff will return the thesis with any errors that need to be corrected. They will offer for students to resubmit the thesis and pay an additional fee or hire a copy editor to complete the revisions for a separate fee. Students should familiarize themselves with these fees and options as they begin the thesis process.

FAQs

Will doing a thesis make me a better candidate for acceptance into a PhD program?

Maybe, but not necessarily. Doctoral programs range in the types of scholarship and research experience they may emphasize for prospective student applicants. To get a better understanding of this dynamic in your specific discipline, discuss with your Graduate Program Coordinator and Thesis Committee Chair.

What happens if my faculty advisor/committee member leaves the university during my thesis process?

If your Faculty Chair or one of your committee members leaves the university during your research, reach out to the Graduate Coordinator of your program to help you identify a new person to take on the oversight of your project. Don't let something like this stop you from working on your thesis! You can still write and research while the committee issues are being sorted out.

I am planning to be done in time for a May graduation. What happens if my thesis is not approved by the deadline set by Montezuma Publishing?

If the thesis is not approved, the process for completion would be the same as if you hadn't completed the thesis by the deadline. Students enroll in a section of 799A, which does has an associated cost for the units.