

Honors Thesis Direction

Guidelines for Directors¹

Honors students are bright and intellectually curious, and many write pretty well. By the time they begin an Honors thesis or project, most are also well-motivated. But most of them have never done a major project like a thesis before. Students who complete the thesis say that it's the most rewarding experience of their academic lives - and the scariest. They're scared because they don't think they're prepared for it, because they can't imagine any academic project that takes this much time, because they've never done original research or creative work before, because they have no experience working closely with faculty, because they've never had to be this thorough and meticulous before, because they've never been taken this seriously before, because they know it's a tremendous amount of work, and because the amount of work is almost unimaginable to them.

In addition, while some students are good at budgeting their time and meeting deadlines, many aren't so good. And most of them really understand or appreciate how much time and effort a thesis will take. In short, they need all the support and guidance that faculty can give them. They're capable of doing outstanding work, but they need help and prodding along the way.

Some faculty members may feel that bright students can do an Honors thesis or project more-or-less on their own, coming up with their own topic, their own research approach, their own analysis - rather like graduate students. But it's important to remember that these aren't grad students; they don't have the training or the time to do a mini-Master's. To create and complete an Honors thesis or project, they need a lot of help from their faculty advisors. Students and faculty need to work closely together, developing ideas, during the research or creative process, and writing the thesis. The thesis must be an ongoing, collaborative process between the student and his or her advisors.

There are some guidelines that the faculty advisor can use to make the thesis or project experience beneficial for all involved:

1. Be Helpful
2. Be Proactive
3. Be Demanding
4. Be Collaborative
5. Be Supportive

While all these guidelines are useful throughout the entire process, each seems to be most applicable during a different stage in the process, so they're listed here in the order they're most likely to be needed.

¹Material quoted from National Collegiate Honors Council – “Honors Thesis & Project Direction”

Be Helpful

At the earliest stage of the thesis process, students are exploring ideas, developing a topic. Some will have good ideas that are simply too broad to be studied, like, "I want to study crime." Some will have focused ideas that would be great for a Master's thesis or a Doctoral dissertation, but not doable as an undergraduate thesis or project. Some students will have an area of interest but no topic and no idea how to approach the area. And some students will have no real idea at all. (Maybe they took a course from an instructor and found it interesting, so they decided to approach that instructor.)

At this stage, it's tempting for a potential advisor to say, "Sure, I'm willing to work with you. Think about what you want to study and come back when you have some ideas." Faculty should resist this temptation, because students need a lot of help during this formative stage. They need help to transform a vague interest into a doable project. They need help to fashion testable hypotheses or working questions. They need help to translate their hypotheses or questions into a realistic research plan or project schedule. They need help - advice, guidance - with their review of the literature and their actual project and their drafts. Why? Because they've never done anything like this before. Work closely with them and help them turn their ideas into an excellent undergraduate thesis.

Be Proactive

Again, the temptation for busy faculty is to tell students to go away and come back when they have something to show. But busy students tend to put off work that doesn't have a definite due-date. So thesis work - work that they have the least experience with and need the most help with - tends to get put aside. Since they have no work to show, they don't make another appointment. Then, since they haven't come to see their advisor, the downward spiral continues.

Students say that they're most likely to do their thesis work when they have regularly-scheduled appointments with their faculty advisors. Students who are given specific tasks to accomplish at regularly-scheduled meetings will almost certainly complete their theses on time. Students left to their own devices frequently let things slide and wind up trying to complete their theses past graduation,² over the Summer or into the next Fall semester, an unpleasant experience for everyone.

Students should never plan to leave their advisor's office without scheduling another appointment, but they don't always do this on their own. So, it's important for an advisor to be proactive: to make regular appointments with the advisee, once a week or once every two weeks, depending on their progress. If they don't show up for an appointment without letting the advisor know in advance, the student should contact the advisor and reschedule. (Part of the thesis experience involves learning to budget time, to work with advisors, and to be responsible.) If they show up unprepared, the advisor should reschedule and take whatever steps necessary to ensure that they're prepared next time. Advisors need to be proactive.

²Something that is not permitted at Saint Anselm College.

Be Demanding

To continue with the above thought, it's tempting to let students slide, especially when they're bright and the faculty member is overloaded. "I know I said I'd have a hypothesis for you today, but I've been real busy. I mean, I'll get my thesis done before I graduate." Advisors should be reasonable but also be demanding. Insist on regular appointments. Insist that the student do the work that was agreed upon. And insist that the work be high quality. Do not settle for sloppy, incomplete, or badly-written work - even if the student gives the strongest assurance that it will all be better in the end. Generally, what you see now is what you get later.

At the same time, advisors should remember that these are not graduate students and this is not a Master's thesis. What faculty should expect is undergraduate work of the highest quality, and our students rely on us for help, prodding, and on-the-job training to achieve that.

Be Collaborative

Students should be told right from the start that an Honors thesis or project is a collaboration between the student and the advisors. They should know that they cannot simply hand something to an advisor and say, "Here it is. Grade me." But it is important to recognize that this is the model they're used to. The professor gives an assignment, the student does the work and hands it in, the professor delivers a grade. It is part of the thesis advisor's job to show students a collaborative model, to work closely with them at every stage of the thesis process, to make the thesis a collaboration between student and faculty.

In some Honors programs and colleges, students have more than one advisor for their thesis or project. In these cases, a thesis should also be a collaborative process between advisors. Advisors should work in whatever way will best enable the student to meet their expectations and his or her scholarly needs. For the sake of clarity, fairness, thoroughness, and consistency, thesis advisors should consult each other on a regular basis, to compare notes, to monitor progress.

Be Supportive

An Honors thesis or project is a long process - often tedious, sometimes mysterious, frequently overwhelming, always stressful. It's easy for students to give up, to believe they don't have what it takes or that there's no way they can finish it all. That's where advisors take on another role - that of pep-talk-giver. It's important that advisors help students realize that we've been down this road ourselves and that we really do understand how they feel. This is the time to tell them that everyone who's ever done this kind of work has felt the same things, that they are smart enough, that they can see it through to the end. An Honors thesis or project is a lot of pressure that non-Honors students don't have. If we want them to do a good job, sometimes we have to help revive their flagging energy and outlook.