

**UMBC APPLIED SOCIOLOGY M.A.
CAPSTONE REQUIREMENT**

As a capstone to the M.A. in Applied Sociology, each student will complete an independent research project. This gives students an opportunity to investigate and analyze an area within Applied Sociology that is of particular interest to them, as they employ and demonstrate the skills they have learned during their MA course work. This research project may either be a Master's Paper that follows departmental guidelines or a Master's Thesis that adheres to standard university guidelines. Students should talk with faculty members in order to identify an area of focus for their independent research paper, the most suitable type of paper for them, and the faculty members who will serve on their paper committee. All students are required to create a digital file representing their research before graduation (Master's Paper students can create a poster file, Master's Thesis students will create a presentation file for use in their final defense).

OPTION 1: THE MASTER'S PAPER

Guidelines for the Master's Paper are set within the department and require:

- a committee of 2 department faculty members (1 first reader + 1 second reader)
- completion of 1 semester of SOCY 711: Master's Paper Research = 3 credits
- one additional elective course
- creation of a digital file of a poster summarizing their project

The benefits of completing a Master's Paper include that it requires only 3 credits and it can be done in about 9 months (see time line). Unlike the thesis, there is no formal defense. Students can choose to write either a SCHOLARLY PAPER in the style of an academic journal article (Option 1A) or an APPLIED PROBLEM PAPER in the style of a research report to an organization (Option 1B).

| MASTER'S PAPER | SOURCES TO ANALYZE | | | BENEFITS |
|--|---|---|--|---|
| | Secondary Data Set | Original Data Set | Research Literature Review & Analysis | |
| <p><u>Option 1A:</u> <u>SCHOLARLY PAPER</u> This is written in the style of a journal article, with a particular journal in mind.</p> | Analysis of an existing secondary data set (quantitative or qualitative) | Collection and analysis of a small original data set (quantitative or qualitative) | Scholarly review and critical analysis of the state of the art in a subfield of Applied Sociology research (similar to an <i>Annual Review of Sociology</i> article) | Requires enrollment in 3 credits and allows for an additional regular course; may lead to a publication; less formal than the thesis but still for an academic audience. |
| <p><u>Option 1B:</u> <u>APPLIED PROBLEM PAPER</u> This is a written assessment of a problem or a question that an agency is facing. Students identify an organization to work with, identify questions of interest to the organization, and conduct research to provide recommendations.</p> | Analysis of an existing secondary data set of an agency (quantitative or qualitative) | Collection and analysis of a small original data set based on agency research (quantitative or qualitative) | Review and critical analysis of an area of sociological research that addresses the questions identified by the agency ("state of the art") | Requires enrollment in 3 credits and allows for an additional regular course; fosters contact with target organization; more applied to appeal to non-academic audience; demonstrates connections of MA skills to organization interests. |

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OPTION 2: THE MASTER'S THESIS

Guidelines for the Master's Thesis are laid out by the university and require:

- a committee of 3 faculty who are official members of the UMBC “[graduate faculty](#)” (1 chair + 2 members)
- completion of 2 semesters of SOCY 799: Master's Thesis Research (3 credits each) = 6 credits
- a thesis proposal and a formal thesis defense

The Master's Thesis is a major independent scholarly project. It is widely recognized as the standard product of an MA program and is similar to a dissertation in form and process. It is especially well-suited to those wishing to go on to doctoral level work or professional-level research. Students who write a Master's Thesis are required to present their work at a formal defense of their research findings in front of their committee, the timing and structure of which adhere to university policy.

| Overview of the Master's Thesis Process |
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| <p>How does the content of a Master's Thesis differ from that of a Master's Paper?</p> <p>The Master's Thesis takes 6 credit hours to complete, is typically longer than a Master's Paper, has a more in-depth analysis of data sources, and includes a thesis committee, a proposal and formal thesis defense. The thesis also must be completed on an inflexible university-specified timeline and be formatted to specific university style guidelines: http://gradschool.umbc.edu/graduation/dissertations/guides/</p> |
| <p>What is a Master's Thesis defense? (see process below)</p> <p>The thesis defense is a formal oral examination. The committee decides whether the student is ready to defend. The defense may be delayed if more work is requested. If the committee agrees to the defense, receipt of a Master's degree is dependent on the committee's decision that the thesis has been defended successfully. Students can pass the defense with minor revisions, major revisions (delays graduation by 1 semester), or fail the defense.</p> |
| <p>What happens before a Master's Thesis defense?</p> <p>The student works with the thesis chair to develop a proposal that outlines the research plan (Semester 1). The committee reviews the proposal and decides whether the proposal should involve a formal defense or an informal review. After the committee provides proposal feedback, the student works with the chair to generate a thesis draft for the committee to review until the committee believes it is ready for a final defense (Semester 2). The student addresses committee feedback in the thesis document and defense presentation. University paperwork must be filed according to strict deadlines throughout the process (see timeline).</p> |
| <p>What happens during a Master's Thesis defense?</p> <p>The thesis defense event involves a 4-stage process. (1) At the start, the student leaves the room while the committee confirms their agreement that the thesis is ready for a defense. (2) The student returns to provide a presentation (20 minutes) focusing on the key issues of the work and how s/he responded to committee input. Presentations are public and guests can observe and ask questions. (3) Once guests have asked questions, they must leave before the committee begins the oral examination (30-60 minutes). The student receives questions from each committee member, which include a discussion of the limitations of the thesis, how the student did/did not address previous feedback, and remaining or new revisions. The student is expected to demonstrate proficiency and professionalism. (4) Afterwards, the student leaves the room while the committee decides about the outcome of the examination based on how well the student answered questions and how much work needs to be done to the thesis document. The university mandates specific categories that symbolize the outcome of the oral examination, which include: pass with minor revisions, pass with major revisions, or fail. After a decision is reached, the student returns to hear the decision/next steps.</p> |
| <p>What happens after a Master's Thesis defense?</p> <p>If the committee decides there are <u>minor revisions</u>, students may need a couple days to a couple weeks to make the changes (often including formatting the document to ETD). Changes may need to be approved by the committee, but often are approved and supervised only by the chair. If the student receives an outcome that requires <u>major revisions</u>, graduation is delayed and the student is given 60 days to address the revisions and resubmit the thesis to the chair and committee. If the student <u>fails</u>, the committee will discuss next steps.</p> |

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TIMELINES

Students should enroll in 3 credit hours for their Master’s Paper for one semester (under the direction of a 1st and 2nd reader) and their Master’s Thesis for two semesters (under the direction of a chair and 2 committee members). However, students should begin planning their Master’s Paper during their second semester in the program and contact potential faculty 1st readers/chairs at least 1 semester before they anticipate enrolling in paper/thesis hours. This provides time for students and faculty to develop/refine the idea together, coordinate their schedules/availability, and begin to create a timeline for completion. Students should not expect faculty to be fully available over summer or winter, but students are expected to work on their projects during these periods according to plans laid out with their 1st reader/chair*. Following the suggested schedules (below) is not a guarantee of satisfactory completion of the required work and students who do not complete the work on time should discuss options with their 1st reader/chair. To avoid a delayed completion, students should confer early and often with their 1st reader/chair regarding the schedule, conceptualization, planning, and deliverables.

Timeline for Completing the Master’s Paper (~ 9 months)

| STUDENT TASKS | FOR DECEMBER (FALL) GRADUATION | FOR MAY (SPRING) GRADUATION |
|---|---|---|
| | <i>Master’s Paper hours (SOCY 711) for Fall</i> | <i>Master’s Paper hours (SOCY 711) for Spring</i> |
| Approach faculty with a paper idea; discuss and develop idea; identify potential 1 st reader | March | October |
| Confirm 1 st reader and draft summary of paper idea to send to potential 2 nd readers; Confirm 2 nd reader | April | November |
| Work with 1 st reader to create plan for completion and set up timeline, enroll in 3 credits of SOCY 711 for next semester; start searching for relevant literature and data during the respective break*. | May | December |
| Contact 1 st reader and work on executing plan to complete paper (SOCY 711). | August | January |
| Meet regularly with 1 st reader to review timeline for paper completion, discuss data/IRB when relevant, conduct analysis/information-gathering, and draft Master’s Paper; Consult 2 nd reader as needed | August-October | January-March |
| Submit full draft of Master’s Paper to 1 st reader and allow for 2-4 weeks of feedback and revisions | End of October | End of March |
| After 1 st reader is satisfied with the draft, draft is sent to 2 nd reader for at least <u>2 weeks</u> to review); Student revises draft until 2 nd reader is satisfied | End of November | End of April |
| Student creates digital file of poster for submission to graduate program | End of November | End of April |
| Student should have a final, completed Master’s Paper that is signed off on by the 1 st and 2 nd readers | 1 st week in December | 1 st week in May |
| Master’s “Certification of Completion Form” | Firm deadline last day of classes - December | Firm deadline last day of classes - May |
| Submit final Master’s Paper with approval sheet to Graduate Program Coordinator (signatures required from 1 st reader, 2 nd reader, and Graduate Program Director); 1 st reader submits SOCY 711 grade | End of Fall semester | End of Spring semester |

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Timeline for Completing the Master’s Thesis (~ 13 months)

Students opting for a Master's Thesis should consult the Graduate School’s [website](#) for guidance on specific forms and formatting. Students should also consult the site for formal deadlines, as these vary each semester. The general thesis process is outlined below.

| SEMESTER 1 | | |
|--|---|--|
| STUDENT TASKS | FOR DECEMBER (FALL) GRADUATION | FOR MAY (SPRING) GRADUATION |
| | <i>Thesis Hours (SOCY 799) for Spring</i> | <i>Thesis Hours (SOCY 799) for Fall</i> |
| Approach potential chair with paper idea and refine the idea in consultation with your potential chair; Discuss potential committee members | November before semester 1 of (Spring) thesis hours | May before semester 1 of (Fall) thesis hours |
| Confirm committee chair and finalize idea for thesis; Create plan for semester 1 of thesis hours with committee chair; Create an outline of the thesis to send to potential committee members; Enroll in 3 credits of SOCY 799 for spring semester | December | May |
| Start working on your literature review and search for data sources during the winter/summer break; Begin meeting with chair regularly for thesis hours and confirm committee members | February | August |
| Work with chair to (1) outline the thesis sections, (2) draft a thesis proposal, (3) draft IRB application when relevant, (4) consult committee as needed | March/April | September/October |
| Submit thesis proposal to the committee for review after it is approved by the chair; Committee provides feedback on the work to date and plan going forward; Schedule defense of proposal (if needed) | April | November |
| Work with chair to address feedback from committee on proposal; Begin intensely working on completing sections of the thesis; Create a plan/timeline for Semester 2 | May | December |
| Continue thesis research and use semester break to collect primary data and/or prepare secondary data | Summer Break | Winter Break |

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| SEMESTER 2 | | |
|---|--|--|
| STUDENT TASKS | FOR DECEMBER (FALL) GRADUATION | FOR MAY (SPRING) GRADUATION |
| | <i>Thesis Hours (SOCY 799) for Fall</i> | <i>Thesis Hours (SOCY 799) for Spring</i> |
| Continue to analyze and write, according to timeline developed with chair and plan outlined in proposal | August | January/February |
| Due date for the “Nomination of Members for the Final MA Thesis Examination Committee” Form (<u>2 months before defense</u>) to finalize committee composition. Student obtains signatures from committee and GPD and then submits to GPC. Once approved, Graduate School will identify which committee member will serve as the Dean’s Representative. | September 1 st | February 1 st |
| Full draft of Master’s Thesis due to committee chair, then student and chair make revisions back and forth until chair is satisfied with the full thesis draft. | September 15 th | February 15 th |
| After the chair is satisfied with the draft, the draft is distributed to the committee at <u>least 1.5 months before the Graduate School’s final electronic submission deadline</u> . The committee should have <u>at least 2 weeks to review</u> the draft and provide feedback. During this time, the chair will ask the committee for permission to schedule a defense for middle of November. The committee may agree to schedule while the student continues to revise the thesis, or may ask for a revised version of the draft before scheduling. | October 15 th | March 15 th |
| Once the committee agrees the defense is ready to be scheduled, the student and chair must provide <u>minimum 2 week notice to the Graduate School</u> by submitting the “Certification of Readiness to Defend the Master’s Thesis” Form (obtain signatures from committee and GPD, then submit to GPC). The scheduled defense date should also be <u>3 weeks before final electronic submission deadline</u> . Once approved, the Graduate School will send the official paperwork to be used during the defense to the faculty member who is the Dean’s Representative. | October 31 st | March 31 st |
| <u>Last possible week to have a defense</u> , as students should plan to need 2 weeks after the defense to make minor revisions and format the document in ETD regulations. <u>By 1 day after defense</u> , faculty member serving as the Dean’s Representative submits defense decision form (“Report of Examining Committee” to the GPC (to submit). | November 15 th | April 15 th |
| <u>Firm and final deadline from graduate school</u> for (1) “Approval Sheet” (chair submits to GPC early so GPC can submit to Graduate School by this date); (2) “Thesis and Dissertation Electronic Publication” Form (student submits to Graduate School); (3) Final, fully edited and revised ETD formatted thesis for UMI/Proquest (student submits to Graduate School and GPC); (4) “Certification of Completion” form (Chair submits to GPC) | End of November (check graduate school website for exact deadline) | End of April/ Beginning of May (check graduate school website for exact deadline) |