

WASHINGTON COLLEGE
Department of Political Science
CHESTERTOWN, MARYLAND 21620

April 24, 2012

TO: Junior Political Science Majors

FROM: Melissa Deckman, Chair

SUBJECT: Senior Capstone Experience

The presentation of an in-depth, substantial research paper during the senior year is the special graduation requirement for all political science majors. This memorandum discusses the purpose of the senior capstone experience and provides an explanation of the methods and deadlines for fulfilling it.

In the academic setting, the writing process represents a crucial learning tool as well as a means of communication. In other words, there is a direct correlation between clear thinking and good writing. One important purpose of a student-initiated, long-term research project, which will be initiated in the junior year and completed in the senior year, is to provide all political science majors with resources for strengthening their academic growth by developing the ability to use writing as a way of discovering and developing their ideas and communicating those ideas effectively to others. In our complex society this developing process of intellectual maturity is vitally necessary for communication.

A senior research project, as required by the Department of Political Science for all its majors, is one wherein students either pursue topics covered in class lectures and assigned readings or explore topics beyond their regular coursework. Unlike essentially passive approaches to learning such as reading or listening to lectures, the senior thesis actively involves the student in a long-term, substantial project of research and writing. Using reading, writing, research and discussion (with the faculty adviser and others) interchangeably and regularly, students gain the necessary skills to develop reading and writing fluency, as well as analytical rigor. The department's senior capstone experience is, in short, designed to contribute invaluable to student learning.

This project requires all political science majors to design independently their own individual projects and to pursue them under the supervision of an individual faculty member. Consequently, selection of the subject matter for inquiry falls entirely upon students, who will appreciate the delegation of responsibility, freedom and creativity, the direct contact with faculty outside class, immersion in topics of their interest and selection, and the unique opportunity that research provides.

Beginning next year, the thesis will be given a **letter grade** as students will be expected to complete numerous learning objectives that relate to the thesis. More detailed information on how the theses will be graded will be handed out at the beginning of the Fall 2012 semester, but it will

be based upon a rubric that has been used by the political science department for the past several years that give students a score from 1 (unsatisfactory) to 5 (excellent) on nine different learning objectives that relate to the following: the research question; the thesis statement, the command of the literature, the use of sources; methodology; analysis; organization; the writing style; and students' ability to meet deadlines in a timely fashion. Students and advisors will be given a grading rubric that can be used in consideration of the development, writing, and completion of the thesis. Please see the attached "Political Science Grading Rubric: Learning Objectives" for more specific information as to the specific objectives political science faculty consider when evaluating student performance on the senior thesis.

To help assure successful completion of the department's senior capstone experience, you are urged to heed the following procedures and to meet specific deadlines as you move toward the completion of your senior thesis.

1. **Junior Second Semester.** Majors normally take POL 401, Empirical Political Research, during the second semester of the junior year. This course introduces you to contemporary techniques and methodology in political science. The course includes a discussion of the use of theory building, hypothesis testing, survey research, statistics, and computers in empirical political inquiry. The course will attempt to address the particular research interests of the students enrolled. The course is not intended solely to teach the craft of research in preparation for work on the senior thesis, but generation of a thesis topic for each student is a major purpose of the course. Whether you wish to pursue a topic requiring the use of behavioral techniques of empirical research, or a topic employing more traditional methods of analysis, you are expected to submit a carefully prepared thesis proposal as part of the work of this course. Your specific topic should be formulated in consultation with a member of the department who, whenever possible, will then be assigned as your thesis adviser. (In this connection, a course term paper may be developed and expanded into a senior thesis.)

Senior research projects must embody three aspects: the descriptive, the analytical, and the evaluative. Students whose particular circumstances, such as transfer status or study abroad, require them to take this course either earlier or later than normal should consult with the chair of the department concerning the development of their senior thesis projects.

2. **By March 23, 2012.** You are required to submit to the instructor in POL 401 **two copies** of your completed, edited formal thesis proposal to the department chair. **The department expects that the thesis proposal you submit will be the one you actually pursue. Students will not be given permission to change their topics except for the most compelling reasons.** You are also asked to indicate your first and second choice of professors within the department to serve as your thesis supervisor. The department will honor this request whenever possible, but it must also take into consideration the expertise of department members and the need to achieve a fair distribution of the workload.

3. **By April 23, 2012.** You will be assigned a thesis adviser and informed if the department has any concerns about your proposal. **Please confer with your thesis adviser before the end of the spring term.**

4. **By September 10, 2012.** Submit to your thesis adviser a **detailed outline** of your senior thesis (**proposed chapters and subdivisions thereof, in outline format**), accompanied by an **updated bibliography** of sources you have determined to be useful and available. It is expected that this document will reflect significant progress beyond the proposal submitted in April. **You should arrange for periodic, regularly scheduled meetings throughout the fall semester.**
5. **By October 22, 2012.** You must submit to your adviser a **draft of one chapter (or evidence of systematic data collection, entry, and statistical analysis)** of your thesis, which need not necessarily be the first chapter. The chapter should be word-processed (or typed), double-spaced, and should **include footnotes and bibliography**. Any student who fails to provide some evidence of written progress by this date will be reported to the department chair for appropriate action.
6. **By December 3, 2012.** By this date you must submit to your adviser a **draft of a second chapter (or evidence of systematic data collection, entry, and statistical analysis)** of your thesis, which need not necessarily be the first chapter. The chapter should be word-processed (or typed), double-spaced, and should **include footnotes and bibliography**. Any student who fails to provide some evidence of written progress by this date will be reported to the department chair for appropriate action.
7. **January 28, 2013.** By this date you must submit to your adviser a **draft of a third chapter** of your thesis, **including footnotes and bibliography**.
8. **March 11, 2013.** By this date you must submit to your adviser **the balance of a complete rough draft of your senior thesis, including footnotes and bibliography**, word-processed (or typed), double-spaced. **IF YOU FAIL TO TURN IN A ROUGH DRAFT BY MARCH 11, 2013, THE DEPARTMENT WILL ASSUME THAT YOU DO NOT INTEND TO GRADUATE WITH YOUR CLASS IN MAY. Students who give no clear evidence of serious progress will be reported to the department chair, who, in turn, will advise the Associate Dean and the Registrar that they are in danger of not graduating.**
9. **By May 2, 2013, THE LAST DAY OF CLASSES,** you must deliver to your adviser one printed copy of your thesis. **This is the ABSOLUTE DEADLINE by which to submit the final draft of your thesis.** The department insists that everyone who hopes to graduate in May abide strictly by this College-wide deadline. **NO GRACE PERIOD WILL BE GRANTED UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES.**

THE REQUIRED MINIMUM LENGTH OF THE THESIS IS 50 PAGES OF ACTUAL TEXT, EXCLUSIVE OF FOOTNOTES, BIBLIOGRAPHY, AND OTHER APPENDED MATERIAL. The final draft is to be printed or typed on white paper in high quality print, double-spaced, properly documented, and prepared in accordance with the practices described in a style manual acceptable to your adviser. It must contain a title page, which includes the full statement of the Washington College Honor Pledge and your

signature. There should also be a Table of Contents, a Bibliography or list of Works Cited, and other elements if needed, e.g., List of Figures, Table of Cases.

10. **Examination week.** During this period your adviser will evaluate your thesis and make the determination of its acceptability and determine a final letter grade for the thesis. **After you have been notified that your thesis has been accepted, you must submit an electronic copy to the library, in accordance with instructions that will be provided.** Any student who does not complete the senior capstone experience—either because a completed thesis was judged unacceptable or because a thesis was simply not completed in time—will not be allowed to graduate at the May commencement. **THERE WILL BE NO EXCEPTION TO THIS RULE.**

The department can take no responsibility for the acceptability of theses prepared without regular use of the adviser's counseling and without adherence to the deadlines listed above. We have learned from many years of experience with the senior thesis that students who fail to meet regularly with their advisers and who delay their work, attempting later to hurry through the various stages in the final weeks of the semester, will simply not complete an acceptable thesis in time to graduate with their class. If you have any questions about this, please see your thesis adviser or the department chair.

Students are reminded that plagiarism in any form will be severely punished. Any evidence of willful plagiarism will be grounds for failure.

First-semester seniors who hope to complete their work in December 2012 and any senior who will not be in residence during either semester of the senior year should see the department chair.

Honors Thesis

Students who wish to attempt an honors thesis, as an alternative to the regular senior thesis, must make their intention known to their adviser no later than February 1, 2013. Students must have a GPA of 3.5 in their major to apply for honors consideration. The department expects that an honors thesis will involve the use of primary sources and reflect an element of originality in analysis, interpretation, or evaluation. The adviser must approve the project and agree to supervise the honors thesis, and a detailed outline of the thesis must be distributed to all faculty in the department by the beginning of February if not before. Since all faculty members of the department must read the thesis before the examination period begins, the department has established an **earlier deadline** for the submission of the final draft, namely, **April 22, 2013.**

Theses submitted after this deadline will be treated as ordinary theses. A student who has decided to attempt an honors thesis may change his or her mind at any time and switch to the preparation of a regular senior thesis. **No one, however, will be permitted to select the honors option after February 1, 2013.** Students who are candidates for honors on the thesis will take an oral examination on their project, administered by the department, normally on the day after the last day of classes. All members of the department will participate in the determination of whether or not a thesis is worthy of honors. Those students who are successful will receive a grade of Pass with Honors in addition to the letter grade (as determined by the advisor of the thesis). Students who do not earn honors will still receive a letter grade as determined by the advisor of the thesis.

Students who wish to graduate with Honors in Political Science must earn honors on the senior thesis, as well as achieving a GPA of 3.5 in all political science courses.

Double Majors

If a student wishes to pursue a double major, he or she should coordinate with the chairs of Political Science and the other department involved. If the capstone experience in the other department is also a thesis, and that department agrees, the student may pursue a joint project that results in either one thesis acceptable to both departments or two overlapping versions of the thesis, tailored for the respective departments. If the capstone experience in the other department is something other than a thesis, then the student will have to complete two separate capstone experiences.