

Interpretation of Title V Requirements for Culminating Experiences in Master's Programs

Endorsed by Cal Poly's Graduate Studies Committee on May 5, 2003

Background.

As required by Title V in the California Code of Regulations, Cal Poly requires a culminating experience as part of all Master's programs. The culminating experience may be a thesis, a project, or a comprehensive examination. Each of these is defined in some detail in Title V and in the Cal Poly catalog, as follows:

TITLE V:

(3) Satisfactory completion of a thesis, project, or comprehensive examination, defined as follows:

(A) 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 methods of gathering information, analyzes the data, and offers a conclusion or recommendation. The finished product evidences originality, critical and independent thinking, appropriate organization and format, and thorough documentation. Normally, an oral defense of thesis is required.

(B) A project is a significant undertaking appropriate to the fine and applied arts or to professional fields. It evidences originality and independent thinking, appropriate form and organization, and a rationale. It is described and summarized in a written report that includes the project's significance, objectives, methodology, and a conclusion or recommendation. An oral defense of the project may be required.

(C) A comprehensive examination is the assessment of the student's ability to integrate the knowledge of the area, show critical and independent thinking, and demonstrate mastery of the subject matter. The results of the examination evidence independent thinking, appropriate organization, critical analysis and accuracy of documentation. A record of the examination questions and responses shall be maintained in accordance with the record retentions policy of The California State University.

CAL POLY CATALOG:

Culminating Experience

The culminating experience for the granting of a graduate degree is the successful completion of a thesis, project or comprehensive examination. The quality of the work accomplished, including the quality of the writing, is the major consideration in judging the acceptability of the thesis, project, or comprehensive examination. The student must successfully complete the culminating experience required by the specific program to be granted a graduate degree.

Comprehensive Examination

A comprehensive examination is one of the possible culminating experiences for the Master's degree and assesses the student's ability to integrate knowledge, show critical and independent thinking, and demonstrate mastery of the subject matter. The results of the examination should provide evidence of these abilities and achievement. A record of the examination questions and responses is maintained.

Thesis or Project Report Requirements

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 methods of gathering information, analyzes the data, and offers a conclusion or recommendation. The finished product evidences originality, critical and independent thinking, appropriate organization and format, and thorough documentation. Normally, an oral defense of thesis is required.

A project is a significant undertaking appropriate to the fine and applied arts or to professional fields. It evidences originality and independent thinking, appropriate form and organization, and a rationale. It is described and summarized in a written report that includes the project's significance, objectives, methodology, and a conclusion or recommendation. An oral defense of the project may be required.

Both Title V and the Cal Poly catalog are silent on whether the culminating experience is an individual requirement for each student, or whether joint theses, projects, and even comprehensive examinations are permissible. At Cal Poly, the vast majority of theses and projects are authored by individual students and comprehensive examinations are individual undertakings. Occasionally, however, theses and projects co-authored by two or more students have been accepted. Similarly, some programs have defined a "team" undertaking as a comprehensive examination. For example, a team of business students might undertake, as a culminating experience, an extensive analysis of a corporation, applying and integrating all of the knowledge and skills gained throughout their program.

The Graduate Studies Committee wishes to clarify Cal Poly's policy regarding joint culminating experiences, so as to 1) provide guidance to programs that may wish to deviate from traditional embodiments of the thesis, project, or comprehensive exam; and 2) ensure the academic rigor of the culminating experience for all students.

Position of the Graduate Studies Committee.

The Graduate Studies Committee considers the culminating experience to be an individual student experience. Only in extraordinary cases should students collaborate on theses or projects. In such cases, the need for collaboration must be clearly justified and approved by the respective graduate coordinator prior to the start of the project. Each student must have a designated piece of the work for which he/she is individually and independently responsible and which, alone, meets the definitions provided in Title V and

the Cal Poly catalog. Each student must be judged independently by the thesis/project committee and must prepare a separate, written thesis or project report in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree. Similarly, where required, each student must be responsible during the thesis/project defense, for his/her portion of the work.

Programs that choose to use a form of “assessment of the student’s ability to integrate knowledge, show critical and independent thinking, and demonstrate mastery of the subject matter” other than a traditional comprehensive examination must demonstrate how these abilities and achievements will be assessed **for each student** being evaluated. For new programs, this alternative form of assessment must be described in the program proposal and approved as a substitute for the traditional comprehensive examination.

This interpretation of the culminating experience is consistent with that of many other CSU campuses. In addition to ensuring that each student fulfills the requirements for the Master’s degree, it also ensures that one student’s degree is not dependent on another student’s contribution or performance.