

## **Guidelines for Polymathic Scholars/ Evidence & Inquiry Certificate Capstone Thesis Faculty Mentors**

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### **The E&I Certificate/Polymathic Scholars Program Overview**

The Evidence & Inquiry certificate program evolved from the Texas Interdisciplinary Plan (Texas IP or TIP Fellows) program. It was transferred to the College of Natural Sciences in 2013 and became a core feature of the new [Polymathic Scholars](#) honors program. More than 90% of the students who earn Evidence & Inquiry (E&I) certificates are Polymathic Scholars—honors students in CNS who wish to pursue multidisciplinary interests beyond their majors—but each year a few students join the E&I cohort from other colleges or schools, or remain in the program after transferring to another college or school. These students take the same E&I coursework as their colleagues in Polymathic Scholars and are held to the same high standards.

The E&I certificate gives undergraduates the opportunity to design fields of study based on their own intellectual interests. Under the guidance of UT faculty and Honors Center staff, E&I students develop a field of study, propose it in writing to a faculty panel, and (if approved) begin their field's curriculum. This curriculum includes four courses in at least two disciplines related to the student's field of study. Since the program began, students have created over [250 fields](#), ranging from "Biomimicry" and "Public Health in Underdeveloped Countries" to "The Anatomy of Artistry" and "Consciousness Studies." In their final year at UT, students write a thesis inspired by their E&I field of study.

### **The E&I/Polymathic Scholars Thesis**

The senior thesis is the capstone to the student's undergraduate experience in the E&I/PS program. It is typically a two-semester research project, often based on secondary research methods, that results in about 30-40 pages of body text (double-spaced) as well as a formal references section, an abstract, and any additional materials (such as graphics or appendices) that the writer and mentor deem appropriate. The student is instructed to write the thesis for an audience of well-educated non-specialists. Some students will go on to revise their theses and submit them for publication, typically in an undergraduate research journal, but sometimes in a more prestigious journal in the discipline. Students are given a thesis guide, which they are encouraged to share with their faculty mentors.

When selecting a thesis mentor, the student may choose a professor from any department at UT whom they feel will best guide their research and writing. Faculty mentors may be UT faculty of any rank, including lecturers (provided they have time to supervise the thesis to completion). Graduate students are not eligible to serve as primary mentors, but may serve as secondary mentors with the approval of the primary mentor. Students frequently propose interdisciplinary theses that bring together two or more areas of interest. They may develop topics that would not be supported by a departmental honors program. For these interdisciplinary topics, the student is encouraged to find an additional mentor or second reader whose field of expertise complements that of the primary thesis mentor.

During the fall semester of their final year at UT, students formulate a topic, perform research, create a substantial bibliography, and write a brief thesis proposal. Students are expected to enroll in the NSC 323: Capstone Preparation Seminar, which helps guide their efforts and provides structured deadlines. If the student has not yet identified a receptive faculty mentor, the seminar supports his/her search. The faculty mentor often helps shape the student's project so that it will be compelling and manageable for both. Students must secure a faculty mentor no later than the fall semester of their final year. In the second half of the fall semester, the student submits a Thesis Registration Form signed by the faculty mentor, indicating a willingness to supervise the thesis and approval of the thesis proposal.

In the spring of their final year, students enroll in the NSC 371: Capstone Thesis Seminar and write the thesis. Each student is expected to submit a detailed outline and a partial draft in the first half of the semester, and then a full rough draft of the thesis about one month prior to the final due date. Near the end of the semester, students must present their work orally at a forum approved by the NSC 371 instructor. Thesis mentors are strongly encouraged to attend the student's presentation, both to support their student and to evaluate how well the student is able to communicate about his/her research.

### **Role of the Thesis Faculty Mentor**

The primary responsibility of the faculty mentor is to guide the student toward appropriate sources, methods, and approaches to the thesis topic both before and during the writing process. This includes meeting with the student regularly, advising him/her on appropriate research directions, providing feedback on written work, and suggesting revisions that can be incorporated into the final version of the thesis. Students are expected to submit evidence of progress to the mentor by the dates noted in the NSC 371: Capstone Thesis Seminar syllabus. The faculty mentor is welcome to discuss additional expectations with the student beyond those presented in the thesis seminar syllabus.

In addition to providing thesis guidance, mentors are asked to complete one or two very brief online Progress Report forms during the spring semester. This form can be completed in just a few minutes. The form will be emailed directly to the faculty mentor and will provide an opportunity for frank assessment of the student's progress and an avenue to express concerns to the thesis seminar instructor.

Mentors are also asked to recommend a final grade for the student's thesis and to sign the title page of the completed work. The NSC 371 instructor will provide the mentor with an

online form and due date for the recommended grade. Grades are typically due during the final exam period in May.

### **Role of the NSC 371: Capstone Thesis Seminar**

This graded seminar offers students a sense of community, a forum for discussing thesis progress, an opportunity to exchange feedback with peers, a structure for incremental assignments and deadlines, and guidance necessary for timely completion of the Capstone thesis project. The instructor also meets individually with each student at least once over the course of the semester, and is available for additional help as needed.

### **Evaluation of Student Work**

A full range of grades, from A to F, may be assigned for a Capstone thesis. An “A” thesis should be significantly more substantial than an “A” term paper, but is not expected to demonstrate graduate-level work. Though the thesis does not need to present original data, it does need to present an original argument based on the student’s own synthesis and analysis of existing information.

In our experience, most students write theses that exceed the minimum standards of acceptability. The thesis receives a passing grade when the faculty mentor and the NSC 371 instructor agree that it deserves at least a D. If the thesis is found unacceptable or unfinished, the NSC 371: Capstone Thesis Seminar instructor may assign an incomplete and allow the student to finish by a date convenient to the faculty mentor. Otherwise, it will be assigned an F. Incompletes are rarely assigned and are only considered appropriate in extenuating, non-academic circumstances.

The final grade in the NSC 371: Capstone Thesis Seminar consists of two components: the Final Thesis (the grade assigned to the student’s work by the thesis faculty mentor and NSC 371 instructor), and the Thesis Seminar (the grade the student earns for timely completion of incremental assignments, presentation of work, participation in class activities, etc.). If a student misses multiple meetings and deadlines in the thesis class, his or her final grade in the course will be lower than the Final Thesis grade assigned by the thesis faculty mentor and NSC 371 instructor. Additional details are available in the Thesis Seminar syllabus.

Because of the diversity of Evidence & Inquiry certificate/Polymathic Scholars thesis topics and formats, no single set of standards can be applied universally. Faculty mentors assess thesis quality based on the standards for their fields, which vary across disciplines. Below are the most general guidelines for grading the E&I/PS thesis.

- A grade of A (*exemplary*) on the final thesis should demonstrate thorough research through a familiarity with authoritative sources and methods of the discipline, a well-reasoned analysis of the research methods and sources used, direct application of the research to the argument being made, a cogent conclusion based on the research, and superior written presentation of the thesis argument.
- A grade of B (*better than required*) should demonstrate all of the above, but may use fewer or less appropriate research sources and methods, and sufficient (rather than superior) written presentation.

- A grade of C (*as required but no better*) will indicate a basic grasp of the data and appropriate sources, limited application of the research towards the argument being made, and merely acceptable written style.
- A grade of D (*barely passable*) indicates minimally acceptable research findings in addition to poor analysis and writing standards.
- A grade of F is appropriate where the thesis represents a crudely thrown-together or last-minute effort or even evidence of unoriginal work.

The faculty mentor's assessment of the final thesis is averaged with that of the seminar instructor (or other Honors Center faculty). This ensures that the student's work is reviewed by an experienced researcher in his/her field, while also maintaining consistency of evaluation across the breadth of the program. The thesis seminar instructor takes the faculty mentor's grade recommendation seriously, and is likely to adjust this recommendation only when the suggested grade is inconsistent with the range of work submitted by the student's cohort.

The faculty mentor is expected to submit his or her grade recommendation by a specified date during the final exam period in May so that the NSC 371 instructor may submit final course grades on time. Mentors will be given at least two weeks' notice of the grade deadline. If the mentor anticipates a possible conflict with the deadline, he or she is requested to contact the NSC 371 instructor as soon as possible so that the mentor's schedule may be accommodated. (See contact information below.)

### **Student Responsibilities**

The student's responsibilities include, but are not limited to, maintaining good communication with mentors, attending thesis seminar meetings, submitting drafts to both the faculty mentor and the seminar instructor on or before deadlines, obtaining signatures on the Thesis Registration Form and title page of the thesis, turning in required forms to the CNS Honors Center office on or before deadlines, and giving a formal poster or symposium presentation on their thesis work. If a student is not fulfilling his or her responsibilities to the mentor's satisfaction, the mentor is encouraged to discuss the problem with the student. The mentor is also welcome to discuss the issue with the Capstone Thesis Seminar instructor, Rebecca Wilcox, at [rebecca.wilcox@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:rebecca.wilcox@austin.utexas.edu) or (512) 232-5930.