

POLICY ON MASTER'S LEVEL PROGRAM CULMINATING ACTIVITIES

This policy statement was recommended by the Academic Senate on March 20, 2025, and approved by the President on April 11, 2025.
(Supersedes PS 95-07, 81-08, and 75-15.)

1. Introduction

Culminating activities—theses, projects, and comprehensive exams—completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's level degree at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) shall meet the following definitions outlined in Section 40510, Title 5, the policy herein stated, and the policy presented within the academic unit, when applicable. This policy presents the minimum guidelines and regulations outlined in Title 5 and CSULB to award a master's degree. Academic units are encouraged to create more comprehensive policies and procedures on master's level culminating activities to ensure student, faculty, and advising expectations are clear and highly-valued degrees are awarded.

Students shall formally engage (e.g., enroll in units, where applicable) in the culminating activity only when they have attained candidacy status for the degree or in the term when advancement to candidacy will occur.

Students shall be responsible for understanding the definition of a master's thesis, project, and comprehensive exam as outlined below. Students shall be responsible for initiating, preparing, and completing their culminating activity in accordance with the guidelines (where applicable) established by the academic unit (i.e., College, Department, Program, or School) in which the culminating activity is completed and must follow CSULB's formatting (where applicable) guidelines.

The preparation and acceptance of graduate theses, projects, and culminating exams shall be governed by the applicable academic unit. Each academic unit shall ensure that culminating activities adhere to the Policy on Academic Integrity Regarding Cheating and Plagiarism (PS 21-01). Students shall not receive a grade on their culminating activities until their activity has officially been submitted per university and/or academic unit guidelines, as applicable. When assigning a final grade, faculty shall adhere to the Policy on Final Course Grades, Grading Procedures, and Final Assessments (PS 22-02).

Each College Dean or designee shall ensure that each academic unit has policies and procedures establishing the necessary components of the culminating activity (e.g., comprehensive exam readers, approval of thesis committees, or project specifics), processes for appeals and grievance issues related to the culminating activities, and a system for maintaining theses and project reports according to retention guidelines (published in campus designated repositories such as

Proquest or ScholarWorks). These policies and procedures shall be available to the students to guide them as they complete their culminating activities.

Master's programs may either allow students a choice of one culminating activity (thesis, project, or comprehensive exam) or require both a final comprehensive examination and either a thesis or project. In programs with a choice of one culminating activity, once a student has attempted the comprehensive exam or been evaluated on the thesis or project (e.g., submitted final draft for review, completed oral defense), they may not change from one option to another except under extenuating circumstances and with the approval of the Thesis Chair or Project Director (where applicable), Graduate Advisor, Dean or designee, and the Dean of Graduate Studies or designee.

2. Theses

According to Title 5, “A thesis is the written product of the 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 the thesis is required.”

A thesis shall be undertaken by an individual student. CSULB will award a minimum of three and a maximum of six semester units for the successful completion of a thesis. The academic unit must specify all thesis units as either credit/no credit only or letter grade only.

Where applicable, students, under the supervision of their thesis chair or director, shall obtain and maintain institutional (e.g., IRB; IACUC) approval for their theses. Students shall consult CSULB’s thesis reviewer for information, advice, and assistance on the mechanics of preparing and submitting a completed thesis, under University guidelines; students shall also consult their academic unit guidelines, as applicable. Prior to submission to their thesis committees and the University Thesis and Dissertation Office, students shall ensure that their thesis meets University Thesis and Dissertation Office and applicable academic unit guidelines.

Once the thesis is submitted to the University Thesis and Dissertation Office, students shall ensure all revisions required by the University Thesis and Dissertation Office are made by the deadline set by the Office.

Thesis committees shall consist of at least three members qualified in the thesis area. Only CSULB tenured or tenure-track faculty members shall serve as committee chairs, and typically the committee chair shall be from the unit offering the degree. The Department Chair or designee from both the Department granting the degree and the home Department of the Thesis Chair must approve thesis chairs from outside the department. Each committee must have at least two members from the unit offering the degree.

Responsibilities of Thesis Chairs and Committees

1. The chair of the thesis committee directs the thesis and performs supervisory duties, which shall include:
 - a. Informing the student of campus resources and materials (e.g., space, equipment, facilities, and qualified faculty) that exist and are reasonably available to the student to support their thesis;
 - b. Advising the student on their thesis work;
 - c. Being the major contact point for the student;
 - d. Overseeing the other committee members' work with the student;
 - e. Assuring that the student has addressed editorial and format standards appropriate to the preparation of the thesis document as dictated by the academic unit and the University Thesis and Dissertation Office;
 - f. Establishing guidelines and timetables, and encouraging the student to adhere to them, in order to facilitate timely completion of the thesis.
 - g. Arranging for the oral defense of the thesis, or discipline-specific alternative;
 - h. Ensuring the thesis follows academic integrity rules and guidelines; and
 - i. Submitting the final thesis grade upon submission of the thesis to the University Thesis and Dissertation Office.
2. Thesis committees shall be approved by the designated body (e.g., Graduate Advisor or Graduate Committee) from the academic unit. This designated body is responsible for reviewing the justification for, and approving, any change in the composition of the committee. Aside from the minimum requirements outlined in this policy, the size and the composition of the committee are at the discretion of the academic unit.
3. The duties of the thesis committee members shall include:
 - a. Delineating the roles and responsibilities of each member;
 - b. Guiding students for the full duration of the thesis research;
 - c. Participating in the oral defense or discipline-specific alternative;
 - d. Ensuring that the thesis meets the standards and definition of a thesis outlined in Title 5 and this policy; and
 - e. Signing the thesis signature page.
4. In signing the thesis signature page, each committee member certifies that:
 - a. They have read and reviewed the thesis, and
 - b. The thesis meets the standards of scholarship and formatting required for a graduate degree.
5. Following the committee signatures, the thesis approval page shall show:

Accepted and Approved on Behalf of the University
(Name of College Dean or Designee, Highest Degree Earned)
(Dean, School of (as appropriate))

Responsibilities of College Deans

1. Each College Dean or designee shall ensure that each academic unit has policies and procedures, establishing the necessary components of the thesis and processes for appeal and grievance issues.

2. College Deans or designees may elect to review and approve theses prior to submission to the University Thesis and Dissertation Office.

Responsibilities of the Academic Unit

1. Academic units shall
 - a. Develop a procedure to monitor thesis progress each semester; and
 - b. Be responsive to any extraordinary circumstance that may develop during the thesis effort over which the student, Thesis Chair, thesis committee, or academic unit have no control, such as reduction in funding, equipment failures, unobtainable supplies, departure of qualified faculty, denial of access to needed data, et cetera. In most cases, an amended program of study, a redesigned thesis, or a reassignment of faculty to the thesis committee will be sufficient to alleviate the circumstances.

Responsibilities of Thesis and Dissertation Office's Thesis Reviewer

1. The University Thesis and Dissertation Office's Thesis Reviewer
 - a. Verifies that the thesis meets the format regulations prescribed by the University;
 - b. Verifies that the thesis meets all procedural requirements for theses imposed by the University; and
 - c. Clears the thesis for publication.

3. Projects

According to Title 5, "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 abstract that includes the project's significance, objective, methodology, and a conclusion or recommendation. An oral defense of the project may be required."

A project shall be undertaken by an individual student or group, each member of which makes an individually distinct contribution that meets Title 5 requirements as a project culminating activity. Students may not earn more than six units of project-designated courses, where applicable. Students may not enroll in such courses, where applicable, unless they have been advanced to candidacy for the master's degree or unless advancement to candidacy will occur in the semester in which the enrollment takes place. The academic unit must specify all project course units, where applicable, as either credit/no credit only or letter grade only.

Projects must be supervised by at least one faculty member from CSULB qualified in the project area. The decision to require a committee for project oversight and evaluation will be at the discretion of the program.

Each academic unit shall establish and communicate to students the format, processes, procedures, and other guidelines for completing the project in the relevant discipline. The academic unit shall inform the student of campus resources and materials (e.g., space, equipment, facilities, and qualified faculty) that exist and are reasonably available to the student

to support their project. The academic unit shall ensure that the project meets the standards as outlined in Title 5, this policy, and academic unit policies and/or guidelines. The academic unit shall also ensure that the project obtains and maintains institutional (e.g., IRB; IACUC) approval, where applicable.

The academic unit shall be responsive to any extraordinary circumstance, such as reduction in funding, equipment failures, unobtainable supplies, departure of qualified faculty, denial of access to needed data, et cetera. In most cases, an amended program of study, a redesigned project, or a reassignment of faculty will be sufficient to alleviate the circumstances.

For CSULB to award a candidate the master's degree for a particular semester, the academic unit must report project completion to Enrollment Services prior to the end of that semester; grades submitted for courses that involve projects do not constitute notification to Enrollment Services that the culminating activity is complete.

Project reports are not typically submitted to the University Thesis and Dissertation Office. However, academic units may require students, or students may elect, to submit their project reports to the University Thesis and Dissertation Office for publication in ProQuest, in which case they shall follow the deadlines and formatting guidelines from University Thesis and Dissertation Office. They may also elect to submit their project to the University Library for publication in ScholarWorks via the academic unit's designee.

4. Comprehensive Exams

According to Title 5, "A comprehensive examination is an 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 [sic.] of the examination evidences 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 records retention policy of The California State University."

Each academic unit offering a comprehensive examination determines the content and mode of the examination. A faculty committee comprised of at least two members, at least one of whom is tenured/tenure track and represents the academic unit granting the degree, shall prepare the questions, administer the examination, and score the results, using a grading rubric or specific grading criteria. Through the comprehensive examination, the faculty provides an opportunity for the master's degree candidate to demonstrate analytic ability and knowledge of the field or discipline.

Students may not take the comprehensive examination unless they have been advanced to candidacy for the master's degree. An academic unit granting the degree may allow a candidate who has failed the comprehensive examination to take it a second time, and the student must contact the academic unit for specific procedures for the second attempt, when allowed. Each academic unit shall have policies and procedures outlining processes for appeal and grievance issues.

In order for CSULB to award a candidate the master's degree for a particular semester, the academic unit must report the results of the comprehensive examination to Enrollment Services prior to the end of that semester.

EFFECTIVE: Fall 2025