

**Department of Government and Law  
Honors Thesis Guidelines**

**Effective for the Classes of 2025 and 2026;  
Students in the Class of 2026 can follow either these guidelines or the updated version  
adopted for students starting with the Class of 2027**

Students who have demonstrated excellence and superior academic performance may be eligible to undertake an honors thesis in Government and Law.

The independent research in these courses will be supervised by a faculty member in the department, and the honors thesis produced at the end of the year will be judged by a thesis committee composed of the faculty supervisor, at least one other member of the department, and one faculty member from outside the department. Only work judged to be outstanding will be awarded honors.

An honors thesis is a major research paper produced as a result of a focused and sustained scholarly inquiry. The typical honors thesis in Government and Law is 80 to 100 double-spaced pages in length. The thesis must pose a specific researchable question that: (a) permits the formulation of hypotheses that can be confirmed or disconfirmed by empirical research; or (b) allows for rigorous argument to confirm or disconfirm a proposition based on logical analysis and the interpretation of texts and/or historical evidence.

Pursuing honors is an important and rewarding enterprise, requiring initiative, independence, perseverance, and a significant time commitment. Honors work is challenging and should only be undertaken by those who have the time and a genuine interest in conducting a year-long research project. When deciding whether to pursue honors, students should consider the alternative opportunities for conducting in-depth research, such as independent study projects and EXCEL Scholarships.

Students may pursue a joint honors thesis in Government and Law and another major/program. Students who pursue joint honors enroll in one semester of honors in Government and Law and another semester of honors in the second major/program, with thesis supervisors from each program. Students pursuing a joint thesis should consult with potential faculty supervisors from each major/program to determine how to satisfy the expectations and requirements of joint honors.

Students who pursue honors are encouraged to consider participating in NCUR, the National Conference on Undergraduate Research. This annual event provides students an opportunity to present their academic research in a conference setting. [For more information on the NCUR.](#)

**Prerequisites for Pursuit of Honors**

An overall GPA of 3.0 and a major GPA of 3.2 are necessary for the pursuit of an honors thesis.

Students who pursue honors in Government and Law must register for a two-course sequence, GOVT 495-496, typically during their senior year. Unless waived by the thesis supervisor, students (starting with the class of 2012) must take one of the following courses as a prerequisite for pursuing honors:

- GOVT 275: Political Analysis
- A&S 200: Research Methods and Design
- ECON 253: Fundamentals of Econometrics
- HIST 206: The Politics and Practice of History
- IA 280: Research Methods in International Affairs
- MATH 110: Statistical Concepts
- MATH 186: Applied Statistics
- PSYC 120: Quantitative Methods in Psychology

Students are encouraged to take one of the Government and Law 400-level seminars during their junior year.

### **Timetable for Pursuit of Honors**

Students typically register and complete the two-course honors sequence in their senior year. The guidance provided below is geared toward that timetable. Students may explore the possibility of starting the two-course sequence in the spring of their junior year. Students interested in undertaking honors on an earlier timetable should consult the department head and/or their academic advisor no later than the beginning of their junior year.

#### **Junior Year**

Students identify and discuss with potential thesis supervisors possible research topics suitable for honors. Students are encouraged to begin this discussion early in their junior year, by contacting faculty with whom they wish to work, and no later than January 31 (in time for registration for senior year classes). Potential supervisors determine whether they have the expertise to serve as supervisors and may request that students submit a prospectus describing the proposed thesis.

Students may not register for a thesis without identifying and gaining the endorsement of a thesis supervisor. Faculty may decline to supervise an honors thesis, and the thesis supervisor's signature must appear on the student's add/drop slip before a student can register for honors.

After registering for honors thesis work, each student should consult with her or his supervisor to plan summer readings and research.

#### **Summer Following Junior Year**

Students begin research in the general area of their thesis. Although students do not register for honors work over the summer months, successful completion of a thesis often depends on groundwork conducted over the summer months.

## **Senior Year**

### **September**

Prior to the end of the add/drop period, honors students submit a prospectus to their thesis supervisor (with a copy to the department head). The prospectus should include the research question; a proposed method for examining the question; a draft outline of the chapters; and a preliminary bibliography. The supervisor determines whether the student may continue with the thesis as planned. If the thesis plan is approved, the supervisor sets a schedule for the student's fall semester work on the thesis, setting expectations, meetings, and deadlines. With the approval of the supervisor, the student recruits additional faculty members to serve on the thesis committee.

### **October/November**

The department head, in consultation with faculty and honors students, arranges a date for the Honors Thesis Proposal Presentation. Prior to the Honors Thesis Proposal Presentation, each student submits to the department head, for distribution to thesis committee members and department faculty, an abstract of the proposed thesis.

### **December**

At the Honors Thesis Proposal Presentation—usually held on the reading day of final exam week—candidates for Honors will give a presentation to the Government and Law Faculty, outside members of the thesis committees, and students. At this session, candidates summarize their thesis proposals, research design, completed research, and expected contribution to knowledge. After students present their proposals, faculty in attendance ask questions and offer feedback.

By the end of the fall semester, students must demonstrate to their supervisor that sufficient progress has been made to warrant continued pursuit of honors in the spring semester. The supervisor, after determining the likelihood of successful completion of the thesis and evaluating the quality of the work to date, will submit a grade. The grade submitted must be an "A" for a student to continue with the honors thesis in the spring semester. Students who do not earn an "A" will receive a grade for Govt 390, independent study research.

### **January**

The supervisor sets a schedule for spring semester work on the thesis, setting expectations, meetings, and deadlines.

## **January-March**

Students submit working drafts of thesis chapters to the supervisor and other members of the thesis committee for review and comment.

## **April-May**

A date for submission of the final draft of the thesis and the oral defense is set by the supervisor. To merit an oral defense and be considered for honors, students must submit a final draft of the thesis to all members of the thesis committee no later than April 30.

Unless permitted by the thesis supervisor, attendance at the oral defense is limited to the honors student, the thesis committee, and members of the faculty. At the oral defense, the thesis committee evaluates the quality of the work. To award honors, all committee members must agree that the thesis is deserving of honors and an “A” grade. If the thesis is judged to merit honors, the supervisor submits an “A” grade for Govt 496 to the Registrar and notifies the Chairperson of the Honors Committee of the result of the defense and the final thesis title.

Students who do not earn honors will receive a grade for Govt 391, independent study research. The grade will be determined and submitted by the thesis supervisor.

Students who earn honors provide final copies of the thesis to members of the committee and to Skillman Library. The Department pays for duplicating expenses for four copies of the thesis and may provide financial support for reasonable expenses, such as bibliographical searches, data collection, and analysis.