

Sustainable Communities Program

SUS 699 Thesis Guidelines for Students

The culminating experience in the Sustainable Communities M.A., the thesis is an individualized inquiry into some dimension of sustainable communities. Each student develops a unique thesis in close collaboration with a committee of faculty mentors. The inquiry inherent can take numerous forms, from qualitative or quantitative research to creative exploration to applied problem-solving in a community. But all theses share common elements:

- Each is interdisciplinary.
- Each addresses the program theme of “good and sustainable communities.”
- Each must show intellectual rigor expressed through:
 - a. A thorough engagement with academic literature focused on your topic.
 - b. A theoretical frame that critically explains your orientation to the core values and assumptions expressed in your inquiry.
 - c. Thoughtful consideration of and/or practical application of your thesis to a concrete, “real-world” context.
- Each must be inquiry-based, meaning that it seeks information, solutions, or knowledge through systematic searching and questioning.

Within these parameters, there is great flexibility in developing a thesis appropriate to your skills, interests, and professional path. The format of your thesis is limited only by your imagination and capability, but some possible examples include:

- A deep inquiry into some element of community building, researched through in-depth interviews, textual analysis, or other methodology;
- A policy analysis;
- A business plan;
- A film, performance, essay collection, or other creative work;
- An innovative community organizing effort.

What links these disparate possibilities is that the specific research or creative effort is firmly grounded within a broader context that reflects the deep inquiry inherent in the SUS program. Additionally, amongst these varied formats, all theses include a written component that explains the purpose, motivation, academic contribution, theoretical grounding, and methods of your thesis in the context of relevant literature. Examples of recent theses can be found on the SUS website.

From inception to completion, a thesis is developed over a period of typically two to three semesters. It follows these general steps:

- Initial conception of the inquiry
- Developing a research plan/drafting the prospectus
- Building your committee
- Defending the prospectus
- IRB application and approval if needed
- Registering for thesis (SUS 699) credits
- Conducting the inquiry
- Writing up the outcomes
- Defending the thesis
- Submission to Graduate College
- Public presentation

Unlike most work done within the framework of classes, the thesis ultimately results in a publicly accessible document available through Cline Library. All theses are expected to fully reflect student skills and aspirations as well as the theme of the Sustainable Communities program.

More information about the thesis process is available at the Graduate College website at <https://nau.edu/graduate-college/thesis-and-dissertation/>. The “Thesis and Dissertation Committee Roadmap” is particularly helpful, and you should read it closely before beginning.

Conceiving the thesis

The first step in developing a thesis is to select a well-defined topic, issue, or problem that is interesting to you and socially important. Given that all theses are inquiry-based, meaning that they seek information, solutions, or knowledge through searching and questioning, you should start by thinking about something you and others need to know more about. Ask yourself:

- What dimensions of sustainable communities are you most interested in?
- What problems do you see that need to be addressed?
- What solutions are waiting to happen, or what methods of exploration are of interest to you?

The thesis represents a significant commitment of time and energy, so the topic should be closely tied to your experience and/or interests—in other words, you should be enthusiastic about it! It should grow naturally out of the coursework you’ve taken, both core classes and electives; for many students, theses also grow out of current or previous community engagement experience.

When exploring your topic, ask yourself:

- What are you going to inquire into? What do you want to learn through the thesis process?
- What is the social importance of the subject matter? Why is this topic worth working on? How is it relevant?
- Who will benefit from your work?

- Why are you choosing this subject? What are your motivations?

It is common for students to start with projects/questions that are too big to answer, and it is often difficult to narrow down a question so that is both meaningful to a wide audience and also specific enough that students can answer it with some authority at the end of their research. The process of discovering and landing upon the right scope/question is one of the most significant and important processes for a thesis. Students should expect to have wide-ranging conversations and engage in critical questioning with faculty around the scope of their thesis. It should be an enjoyable challenge and exciting set of discussions! Students are sometimes surprised by the length of this process, but it is normal and it is a part of what all masters students go through.

Building Your Committee

Selecting a thesis committee is one of the most important things you'll do en route to completing the SUS program. You may want to choose committee members with whom you've developed a relationship in class, who share an interest in your area of inquiry, or who have relevant professional or creative experience. Students usually choose a committee chair first, and then the other committee members. Here are a few guidelines:

- The chair of your committee should be a full-time faculty member. S/he does not need to be a SUS faculty member but should be familiar with the SUS program; often faculty affiliates serve in this role.
- For the remaining committee members, find faculty members who have research interests similar to yours. Each faculty member should bring a unique perspective, set of skills, experience with your chosen methodology, or other attributes to the committee; try to build a committee whose members' experience and interests complement one another. Your advisor and other faculty can help with this process, as can SUS faculty affiliates.
- If possible, work with committee members who know your work, whose feedback has benefited you in the past, and who you believe will be supportive as you work through a large and unique undertaking.
- Committees must have three or four members (including the chair). At least two, including the chair, must be full-time NAU faculty with some connection to the SUS program. One may be a non-NAU faculty member, or a non-faculty member with appropriate expertise. This role must be approved by your chair and the SUS coordinator.
- Be sure to establish working guidelines with your chair. Some will set deadlines for their students, while others want students to work independently. Some will serve as the final arbiter when committee members offer conflicting comments, while others want students to resolve those differences. Think carefully about how your work style reflects or differs from that of your chair. You can expect to

work quite closely with your chair in developing your research ideas, in writing your prospectus, in carrying out your inquiry, and in writing up your results.

- Establish the role each committee member will play. Some committee members may want to see chapters in progress, while others only want to see the final draft. Communicate clearly with each committee member to set expectations.

It is the student's responsibility to maintain communication with his or her committee. Students are encouraged to develop a timeline to completion that is approved by the committee. Students will need committee members to give them feedback in a timely fashion; they will also need to give their committee members sufficient time to respond to their written work.

- Students are responsible for maintaining (and adjusting) their own timelines in recognition that when they slip on deadlines, their end date must be adjusted. Students who miss a deadline cannot expect their chair or committee members to review the work faster to make up for the extra time they took. Students are responsible for how fast they do the work.
- Students are responsible for arranging committee meetings and individual faculty meetings as needed.
- Students should never hesitate to contact the chair or committee members with questions about any phase of the thesis research or writing process.
- As a general guideline, allot one week for your committee to review a chapter or prospectus less than 30 pages (double spaced) and two weeks to review a thesis or document longer than 30 pages (double spaced).

Developing a research plan and drafting the prospectus

The prospectus is meant to serve as a road map for you and your committee. The following outline is meant as a guide for developing your map. It is typical for the writing of the prospectus to be an iterative process in which you pass drafts back and forth to your committee chair, and possibly to committee members, before arriving at a version that is ready to be defended.

1. Research questions

This section lays out the core questions that you are trying to answer in this study. What do you want to know and what do you want to teach the reader? Articulating these questions clearly is a vital step in framing your research.

2. Description, purpose and significance of your work

This section provides a general overview of your proposed work, including:

- Describe what you intend to do, including information on "who, what, where, when, and how."
- State your purpose and your objectives.
- Explain how your work is related to the theme of the SUS program.

- Address the “so-what” question: Why is this effort important? Who is it important to? Why did you choose to work on it? Does it remedy weaknesses in existing structures? How is it relevant to an existing community?
- You should also address the question of your preparation to undertake this particular thesis: What is your background, expertise, and/or passion that prepares you to carry it out and complete it?

3. Literature review

In order to position your effort and to assure that you are not simply replicating work already done by another researcher, you need to provide an overview of the literature that you will draw on. This section should include:

- What has been written on your topic that is of particular relevance?
- How have people treated the problem you are now addressing?
- What have been the major shifts in thought or the trends in approaching the problem?
- How does your work contribute to the discussion? (e.g., does it extend or apply the discussion?)
- What have you already read and what do you still need to read in order to write your thesis?

4. Theoretical assumptions

Every research effort embodies some theoretical assumptions about how the world works or how people understand it. In this section you should clearly and honestly examine what assumptions underlie your work. For example, if you are writing about health care, you’ll want to make it clear how you understand the idea of health and health care. Are you an advocate of holistic health? That’s an assumption that guides your project; another way to talk about it is as a “frame.” You’ll want to name the thinkers and approaches that have influenced your approach, both to the particular question at hand and to the overarching topic. An approach to health care issues might, for example, assume both metaphysical holism and a feministic critique of power and hierarchy.

5. Methodology

Every inquiry requires a methodology, or a means of getting at the answers to your research questions. This section will show what methods you will use; a thesis can rely on one method, or on multiple methods. How will you go about finding the answers to your research questions? Will you interview people? Survey people? Analyze written documents? Develop a creative project? A curriculum? What is your outcome and how will you achieve it?

Note that if you are planning to do any work with human subjects, you must receive approval for your project from the NAU Institutional Review Board. This approval should be secured after approval of your prospectus, but in advance of your actual research.

Information and applications are on the web at <https://nau.edu/nau-research/research-safety-and-compliance/human-research-protection-program/>. Your chair and/or your SUS 604 instructor can help with this process.

6. Bibliography

In concert with your literature review and exploration of methods, you should develop a bibliography of relevant books, articles, websites, and other sources that you intend to read as part of your research and as you write your thesis. Consider developing a note-taking/quote-taking system as well as a system for collecting all bibliographical information that you will later need for endnotes or footnotes. You may want to use index cards that you file in a box, an on-going list in a notebook, or an electronic filing system. Just remember that it can be a bit of a nightmare to track down bibliographical information well after the fact!

7. Thesis committee/status/timeline

The prospectus serves as a roadmap for your entire thesis work, so it should clearly lay out the details of how you propose to proceed. This section should include:

- Which faculty members or outside experts are you considering for your thesis committee?
- What is the current status of your project?
- Develop a detailed timeline to completion of your thesis. Indicate when you expect to finish major components or chapters and when you expect to defend your work to your committee. Be sure to allot enough time to meet graduation deadlines.

Defending the prospectus

Once you have completed your prospectus, you need to defend it in a meeting with your committee members. You should schedule the meeting with your chair and other committee members after the chair agrees that your prospectus is at an appropriate stage of completion. Be sure to circulate your prospectus draft to your committee prior to the meeting, giving sufficient time so that members can review it closely. This meeting should be scheduled for up to two hours.

At the meeting, you will present your thesis plan to your committee. Committee members will likely have questions and/or feedback for you, and may ask you to make revisions to the prospectus document and/or overall plan. If they agree that the prospectus is sufficiently well developed, they will sign the electronic Prospectus Approval Form, which then needs to be submitted, along with the prospectus and any documented committee requests for revision, to the SUS office for the director's signature and filing.

Conducting the inquiry

Once you have successfully defended your prospectus, you are free to begin to carry out your inquiry. This process is necessarily highly individualized, and self-directed. You are responsible for ensuring that you accomplish your proposed work according to your timeline. You can ask for and receive guidance from your chair and committee members, but you are ultimately responsible for making decisions about methodology, logistics, and other issues. This includes the IRB process, which is a required step for most university projects that focus on human subjects. Be sure to allot sufficient time to conduct your inquiry. Through the process you should be in regular communication with your chair about your progress and any issues that come up.

Writing up the outcomes

A written concluding document that summarizes the work done, and lessons learned, is a vital element of every thesis. In some cases the written document is all that is turned in to the SUS program and Graduate College, as it comprises a summary of all the work you've done and the conclusions you've reached. In other cases the written document is turned in in conjunction with other work produced—a film, a recording of a community event, or some other creative effort. How such work is recorded and archived is a matter for negotiation between you, your chair, and the SUS program.

How to organize the written document is also a matter for negotiation between you and your chair and committee members, though the written part of a thesis often reflects the general structure of the prospectus. At a minimum, the document must:

- describe the overall work, including the problem to which it is a response, and its significance;
- be grounded in well-chosen and articulated theory;
- articulate your methodological process;
- have a clear thematic focus that you've tied to the program theme of good and sustainable communities;
- give readers a clear sense of both your starting point and what you've learned.

There is no particular length expectation for the written document, though there are general guidelines that have been set by the work of previous students. In general thesis writeups that comprehensively describe all the work done—i.e. that stand alone as a reflection of your research—tend to be at least 80 pages long (double-spaced as per Graduate College guidelines). Thesis writeups that accompany other expressions of work—such as a film or performance—tend to be at least 40 pages long.

The written document should be carefully structured using chapters and headings, and sub-headings as needed. All sourced material needs to be fully referenced according to a standard academic writing protocol; the most common protocol for SUS theses is APA, 7th edition, though you can negotiate with your committee if you'd like to use another

protocol. It's important to include full citations in all drafts that you share with your chair or committee, so that these reviewers can see where you're getting your information; this is also a good way to ensure that you are citing properly and not plagiarizing.

Though the written document you produce is intended to be a thorough record of your inquiry, keep in mind that writing the document is not stenography. In other words, you should be open to the process of writing itself constituting a process of discovery. For that reason, be open to writing multiple drafts and embracing significant revision as you write. The best theses are those that have been profoundly revised, as their writers learn a great deal during the writing process. Be sure to budget enough time for writing to allow this valuable process time to work.

Submission to Graduate College: Part I

NAU theses must follow certain formatting guidelines established by the Graduate College (see the links at <https://nau.edu/graduate-college/thesis-and-dissertation/>). You must submit your completed thesis document to the Graduate College for a formatting check no later than 10 days before your defense.

Defending the thesis

When your thesis is completed you will take part in an oral thesis defense. Similar to your prospectus defense, your chair will be the one who helps you know when your thesis has been revised enough and has reached readiness for defense. The oral thesis defense consists of two parts: a public presentation of your work and findings, and a closed session in which committee members will pose questions to you and assess your thesis. The defense culminates in a committee vote that determines whether your thesis is approved.

In order to prepare for your defense, work with your chair to inform the SUS office and director that you are ready to defend; the office staff can help you locate a physical room or virtual meeting space for the defense. The last day to defend is typically about two weeks before the end of the semester. You also need make your thesis work available to your committee members early enough so that they have ample time for review before the defense; two weeks is a common time frame, but you should negotiate this with your committee.

Defenses during the summer are not allowed without a specific exemption from Graduate College policy, because faculty members are not on contract then.

At the defense, you should expect to present about your project for about 20 to 30 minutes, addressing the following:

1. Offer a brief summary of your work. What did you do, and why?

2. Explain how your work relates to the SUS program theme, how it is interdisciplinary, and how it is connected to community.
3. Talk about the philosophy or theory that informs your work.
4. Explain your methods.
5. Explicate your results, and discuss the work's significance for the wider community.
6. Be reflective: explore what you've learned from your effort, and how you've grown from the experience.

Oral presentations are generally accompanied by slides (Powerpoint or Prezi). It's good to review your presentation outline with your committee chair before the presentation so that s/he can make suggestions about anything else that should be included.

After your presentation, the committee provides audience members with an opportunity to ask questions. Then the committee members ask you questions in a closed session (some chairs will invite other audience members to stay for this part if they wish). They may ask you to clarify or elaborate on your assumptions, your methods, your results, your ideas, and/or your written document. They may ask you for more details or examples. Be prepared to engage in a rigorous discussion with your committee, and to address your project's overall strengths, weaknesses, significance, and implications.

You will then be asked to leave the room while your committee evaluates your defense and your overall thesis. Committee members may approve the thesis as submitted, may approve it contingent on changes being made (the most common outcome), or may decide not to approve it. If the thesis is approved, they will (after congratulating you) complete the Oral Defense Approval Form Part I and return it to the SUS office for signatures and transmission to the Graduate College. You are responsible for making any changes suggested by your committee by the deadline agreed upon between your committee and the SUS office.

Submission to Graduate College: Part II

After your successful defense, and after completing any revisions requested by your committee, you'll upload your final document following the guidelines in the "ETD Submission" document (available at (<https://nau.edu/graduate-college/thesis-and-dissertation/>)), while your chair will send the signed Oral Defense Approval Form Part II to the Graduate College. The Graduate College sets deadlines for this process each semester and posts them online. See the document "ETD Information for Departments" at the Graduate College website (<https://nau.edu/graduate-college/thesis-and-dissertation/>) for more information.

Public presentation

All SUS students are required to give a public presentation of their work to the SUS and NAU community. Presentations by graduating students are typically scheduled for the Thursday evening before Commencement and include all theses completed during that semester; together, these presentations constitute a celebratory evening for friends, family, colleagues, and community members. Each presenting student is introduced by a member of their committee. You should expect to give about a ten-minute presentation about your work—basically a shorter version of the oral defense presentation. Do not plan to give the same presentation as during your defense; this one should be substantially shorter!

Graduating students are also strongly encouraged to take part in the formal hooding ceremony conducted by the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences. This takes place on the Friday or Saturday after the public presentations, and is a formal celebratory event at which your friends, family, and community members can celebrate your accomplishment.

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