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## **Best Practices in Coursework Master's Degrees Offered Via The Graduate School**

### Background

The Graduate School offers both Master of Arts (M.A.) and Master of Science (M.S.) degrees, as well as many designated professional master's degrees, such as the Master of Engineering and Master of Social Work degrees. The M.A. and M.S. degrees have historically been offered under the Plan A (thesis) and Plan B (paper/project) options. Designated professional master's degrees often do not include these options and may be offered instead with a "coursework" format.

Coursework master's degrees offer flexibility for professional individuals who are employed in the field in which they are seeking a degree and who may already be engaged in projects in their workplace. Such degrees respond well to the needs of these students by providing coursework that is directly related to the students' professional focus, without requiring non-course based components that do not always fit well with this professional orientation.

In recent years, The Graduate School has witnessed an increasing number of new M.A. and M.S. degrees proposed with a coursework format. At the same time, some established master's programs have replaced their Plan A or Plan B options (or both) with a coursework format for degree completion. The growth in coursework master's degrees has occurred across almost all disciplinary areas, prompting the need to recognize the coursework master's degree as an alternative structure for degree completion and to develop best practice guidelines with respect to such degrees.

### Current Graduate School Requirements for Completing a Coursework Master's Degree

Like other master's degrees offered via the Graduate School, coursework master's degrees require a minimum of 30 credits. However, they may not require a traditional minor or related field, or may not require any coursework outside the major field. Coursework master's degrees may require students to complete a culminating experience, such as a capstone course and/or paper. In some cases, this experience replaces the final examination for the degree. The Graduate School's requirements regarding time to degree, transfer of coursework, and enrolled student GPA apply to coursework master's degrees.

### Recommended Principles and Best Practices

Given the current variety of approaches to coursework master's degrees, The Graduate School offers the following principles and best practices to guide the development and delivery of such degrees. These principles and best practices are founded in part on the premise that collaborative student experiences result in enhanced learning and better outcomes for the student. They are not intended as requirements; however, they will serve as a standard in evaluating proposals for new coursework master's degrees offered via The Graduate School. Existing coursework master's degree programs are encouraged to adopt them.

1. In general, M.A. and M.S. degrees should exhibit the attributes traditionally associated with these degrees: They should offer the Plan A (thesis) and Plan B (project) options for degree completion, require 6 credits of coursework outside the major, and require a final examination (written or oral, or both) administered by a three-person committee. Compelling evidence should be presented to offer M.A. and M.S. degrees in a coursework format.
2. Admission requirements for coursework master's degrees should not be less rigorous than for more traditional master's degrees. Professional experience may serve as an appropriate and useful complement to other admissions standards.
3. Programs that offer a coursework master's degree in addition to the Plan A and/or Plan B options should advise students carefully before the students select a format for degree completion to ensure that the choice of option aligns with the students' academic and career plans. Advising should occur early, i.e., prior to matriculation or in the student's first semester. All students should select their preferred option for degree completion in a timely way, so as not to impede academic progress.
4. If the coursework degree is intended as a terminal master's degree (students may not continue from it to the Ph.D. degree), the program must make this clear in its advertising (recruitment brochure, program Web site, Catalog) and in the program's graduate student handbook. If the coursework degree may serve as a possible avenue to the Ph.D. degree in the same field (or a closely related field), the program must also clearly communicate this intent to students. In this circumstance, course requirements should be designed to facilitate subsequent Ph.D. study.
5. Each Policy and Review Council should determine whether master's programs within a Council's jurisdiction should use particular terminology to refer to a coursework master's degree. For example, the Engineering, Physical and Mathematical Sciences P&R Council uses "Plan C" to identify M.S. degrees offered with a coursework format. Other Councils may wish to adopt this term, but they are not required to do so. For consistency, The Graduate School will use the term "coursework master's" for all such degrees.
6. Advising should be the responsibility of the program's tenured or tenure-track faculty. Although the DGS may serve as the student's initial adviser, a faculty member whose interests align with those of the student should advise the student after the first semester. The DGS should assist the student in selecting an appropriate adviser. The assignment of an adviser rests on mutual agreement between the student and faculty member.
7. A cohort experience in the first semester, especially, may help to create a sense of community among students and provide support as they begin the program. This experience may include common coursework in the initial semester or year of the program, informal sessions to discuss course- or program-related matters outside of class, informal discussions with faculty about issues in the discipline, coffee hours, or other activities that bring first-year students together.
8. If the program offers degree opportunities in addition to a coursework master's degree, coursework students should be encouraged to participate in the broader activities of the

department or program (e.g., departmental seminars or colloquia). In order to facilitate these students' inclusion, activities should be scheduled at times when they can attend.

9. Coursework degrees should include a common introductory course (or courses) that provides a foundation for study in the field.

10. Coursework degrees should require a minimum number of credits outside the major. This work should be relevant to the student's professional goals and objectives, and ideally should encourage the student to look at his or her professional interests from a different lens.

11. Coursework degrees should require a paper or project, which may represent either individual or group work, or both. If a collaborative paper or project is required, each student must make a unique contribution that can be assessed as the student's individual work. (Collaborative problem-solving may be an especially relevant model for students pursuing coursework degrees, as it may reflect the environment in which the students work and live.) Students should be encouraged to identify their projects and papers early in their degree programs.

12. A culminating, or "capstone," experience should be required in the last semester or year to give the student an opportunity to synthesize what s/he has learned in program courses.

13. The student should make an oral presentation of a paper or project. In many cases, this will be part of the capstone experience.

14. The Graduate School's requirements regarding time to degree, transfer of coursework, and enrolled student GPA will apply unless exceptions are requested in the proposals for new coursework master's degree programs, or are proposed as changes to existing programs. Such proposals require review and approval as described in item 14., below.

15. Faculty of coursework master's degree programs should be mindful of the characteristics of an excellent graduate student experience, and should strive to incorporate these in the program. These characteristics are published on the Graduate School Web site, <http://www.grad.umn.edu/faculty-staff/governance/policies/ExcellentGraduateStudentExperience.pdf>.

16. Proposals for new coursework master's degree programs, or for changes in existing programs that will result in a coursework master's degree, require review by the relevant Policy and Review Council, Graduate School Executive Committee, Provost, and Board of Regents and are subject to the requirements of The Graduate School and Office of the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost.