

A woman with dark curly hair, wearing glasses and a white button-down shirt, is smiling and looking down at a document she is writing on. She is holding a pen in her right hand. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# Completing a Successful **Honors Thesis** in **Political Science**

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## **Introduction**

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**T**his booklet brings together years of experiences of advising students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst through the honors thesis and project process. I have written this in the hopes that it will help you have the most successful thesis or project experience that you can have. In these pages, I lay out the basics of the process, note some common challenges and pitfalls, and provide advice about how to make good choices now that will pay off later.

I believe that senior projects and theses can provide an excellent way for students to develop their intellect, skills, and work ethic in ways that are impossible in a normal college course. I also think that too often the possibilities of the honors thesis remain unrealized because of some combination of fear, poor planning, or confusion. Knowing more about the process can help you avoid those problems and get the most out of this process.

Make no mistake: undertaking this process requires a lot of hard work, some stress, and probably chasing some blind alleys. Yet time and again I have seen students not only produce work that is impressive but develop in ways that surprise themselves, becoming more capable and more confident and ready to take on the world.

The most important thing for you to remember is that you can accomplish what you set out to as long as you plan well, work hard, and maintain a good rapport with your committee. Whether you are a first-year student trying to plan the rest of your time at UMass or a senior panicking about how to catch up and fulfill your requirements, this guide will help you sort out what you need to do now in order to succeed later.

## What's a Thesis?

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**A**n honors thesis is a substantial piece of original, individual work on a topic you choose that you create, usually over two semesters during your senior year. At UMass, you can choose to create either a research *thesis*, in which you undertake research to answer a research question in a paper that will be 40 to 60 pages long, or a senior *project*, which represents an alternative capstone project of equivalent intensity such as a book of poetry, theatrical performance, business case study, or engineering project. Either way, you should anticipate spending an average of five to ten hours per week on the thesis or project during the course of your senior year—that's about 200 to 400 hours of work!

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An **honors thesis** is a substantial piece of original, individual work on a topic you choose that you create, usually over two semesters during your senior year.

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## Advantages of completing a thesis or project

A thesis or project provides the opportunity to work independently on a topic that interests *you*.

At some universities, a thesis has long been expected of everyone or almost everyone; at others, a thesis is something that students can choose to undertake. Universities increasingly require senior theses because completing them is a challenge that can help students grow and develop skills much further than any individual college class allows.

No matter what career path you intend to follow after graduation, writing a thesis or completing a project can help you. If you intend to work directly after graduation, a thesis or project can also help you master skills that can make you more competitive on the job market. Showing that you can

work independently can show employers that you are reliable, ambitious, and prepared for the workplace. It's one thing to say that you've read about how the Internet is changing campaigning, and something else to say that you've run rigorous tests about how different social-media outreach campaigns affect Gen Z voter registration. You might choose a thesis topic that is substantively related to your intended career or one that will allow you to show off—or develop—analytical skills.

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Design a thesis or project that you will find **personally and professionally rewarding**.

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If you're thinking about graduate school, law school, or other post-graduate study, a thesis shows admissions committees that you are enhancing your academic skills like researching and writing. You might consider choosing a research topic related to your graduate school plans. If you plan on earning a master's degree in public policy, for instance, you might examine

changes in a government agency. Students considering Ph.D. study should particularly discuss how their research topic might fit into their graduate-school plans.

Fewer students majoring in Political Science undertake senior projects, but more should consider doing so. Developing a substantial and original piece of work that may not be a piece of research can serve as a major part of your portfolio. A project can make connections across the curriculum or apply academic findings to the real world, while taking forms that could range from a podcast to managing a specific community outreach project for a group to assisting in revising a local government's policies and procedures. Consider whether such a project would be of greater benefit for you than the traditional thesis.

Whatever you do after you finish, it's important to choose a topic, an adviser, and an approach that you will find rewarding and sustainable. Planning will not only help you

write a better thesis—it will make the entire process more rewarding and more tolerable.

## **Theses differ from class assignments**

One point that's important to address early on is that a thesis involves original research. That might sound familiar to you, especially if you've written one or several "research papers" for courses during your time at UMass. When we talk about "research" in this context, though, we mean something a little bit different.

The research that goes into a thesis should be original. A research paper for a course might summarize, critique, or compare findings that other people have written. You will do that as part of your thesis, but only as part—specially, as part of the literature review. You will engage with what other people have written not because that is the "research" we mean (although it is a *form* of research). Rather, learning what others have argued and tested will help you craft an original test.

That original research can involve

- Experiments that test whether a given treatment produces a desired outcome or not (for instance, whether playing scary music under a political commercial attacking a candidate stimulates negative evaluations of the target more effectively than the text alone)
- Studying what factors explain why governments sign agreements to lower greenhouse gas emissions
- Interviewing women who hold prominent statewide political office to see what experiences shaped their desire to run for elected positions

- Using archives and other historical documents to reconstruct how political campaigns of the past employed nativist rhetoric
- Exploring how social networks change in response to housing policy shifts
- Analyzing whether authoritarian or democratic countries are more effective at reducing infant mortality
- Arguing whether integralist approaches to governance are consonant with democratic values

Those are all possible thesis topics (and, in fact, some of them are ones that I have seen undergraduates carry out). You will note that they involve the creation of an original argument (and, frequently, the collection of original data or the original analysis of existing datasets). That level of sustained, original effort distinguishes this form of research from a course assignment.

## **Common challenges**

For many students, a thesis or project represents their first truly independent piece of work at a large scale. The timeline of a thesis—from eight to twelve months—and the amount of labor that each stage requires can seem daunting. Furthermore, there are a lot of requirements and deadlines to keep straight, and keeping organized can prove a challenge.

In some ways, this is just restating the obvious: completing a thesis or project is a big, independent piece of work. It's meant to be. Much of the value from the experience comes from exactly that combination of self-direction and workload. Still, it's unsurprising that, at some point, most people who attempt these projects feel overwhelmed.

You can overcome these challenges and produce excellent work. Almost all students who attempt this process eventually do. You can make the road smoother and the task more manageable with planning, preparation, and keeping a level head. In particular, you can plan for success by taking an intentional approach to choosing your coursework strategically, developing relationships with faculty members, and reflecting on what motivates you to learn more about a subject. You can prepare by ensuring that you are developing skills inside and outside of the classroom that will help you with your thesis and beyond. By exposing yourself to a wide range of experiences and influences, you will grow and develop in ways that enable you to produce richer, more polished work. Finally, remembering that this process is supposed to be challenging can help you rise above the frustrations and difficulties while finding ways to manage those problems.

Ultimately, being challenged to move beyond what is familiar is the only way we can learn. The most important point to bear in mind is that, even though there are many requirements and regulations surrounding the thesis or project, this is a challenge that you set for yourself. You, not your adviser, the department, or the university, are asking yourself to grow and meet a higher standard of work independently. After all, this is optional—you can always choose to decline the challenge, and that's fine. What the university and the department can provide you are the resources and the safe environment in which to learn.

By accepting this challenge, you commit yourself to growth and development that will prove rewarding in the long term. Your aspirations provide the criteria by which you will measure your success. Recognizing that these challenges are healthy and part of the learning process will make them more tolerable and keep you in the growth mindset necessary to accomplish interesting and profound work.

## Overview of the Process

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**E**ven though people frequently talk about honors theses as if there were only one way to do it, there are many options. Specifically, in the Political Science major, there are three pathways for you to follow to complete a thesis or project:

- Independently contracted thesis or project
- Thesis seminar (499C/D)
- Hybrid (700-level seminar and 499T)

The first way is the **independently contracted** route. In this version, you identify an **adviser**, who is a faculty sponsor who agrees to chair a committee, and later a second faculty member who will agree to serve on the committee. They provide guidance and feedback on your work as it develops. Normally, this includes weekly meetings of 30 minutes (or biweekly meetings of about an hour), as well as submitting drafts for feedback. At the end of the process, you formally defend your thesis in a meeting that lasts somewhere between 30 and 90 minutes.

This is called an independently contracted option because you will develop a contract with your committee that describes your topic, the approach you will take to investigate your topic, and how you will be graded on your work. That contract will be reviewed by the Honors Program Director in your major and then again by the Academic Standards Committee in the Commonwealth Honors College to ensure that it meets the CHC requirements and that it is feasible. If you are planning to pursue a *project* rather than a thesis, it is likely that you will pursue this path.

The second involves a **thesis seminar**. In a seminar, you take two semesters of coursework with other students and a professor who oversees everyone's work. Usually, these

seminars will have a theme that unites everyone's interests and that will serve as a framework for the theses that students will write. This runs like an ordinary course, except that you work throughout the entire year with the same cohort of students. Frequently, the first half of the year works as a seminar in which you jointly read and discuss materials that cover a given topic area, and in the second semester the course serves as a workshop for revising and finishing your thesis. Note that this option does not involve a second committee member—the faculty member leading this effort

The third option involves a **hybrid approach**. In this version, you take a graduate seminar (700-level) in one semester. These are challenging seminars meant for doctoral students that intensively delve into a particular topic. In the second semester, you write a thesis as part of an independently contracted course with a faculty adviser, building on the material you covered during the graduate seminar. Enrolling in a 700-level seminar requires the consent of the faculty member leading the course, so the most logical plan would be to arrange this in a manner similar to what you would pursue for an independently contracted course: finding a faculty adviser and developing a plan for the entire year.

## **Pros and cons of each approach**

Independent courses require more planning and coordination on your part, but they also allow you to work on a topic that you choose and to develop a 1-on-1 relationship with a faculty member. This is the traditional model, and it is one that rewards students who know what they want to study and have the patience and discipline to complete work independently. The principal downsides include the challenges of finding a faculty member to supervise your work, working without a peer group to share feedback and

support, and lacking the structure that a course provides. Many students find that it is tempting to take a week off here or there from their independent work—and then find to their horror that they are well behind where they need to be to complete on time.

Seminar courses relieve you of much of the coordination that you would have to do in an independent course. You will also get to work with other students, and having a community of colleagues can help make the process much easier. The downside is that the range of topics you can pursue will be much smaller. Furthermore, many or all thesis seminars offered in your senior year may be offered outside of your major, and some people find it hard to adjust to other disciplines' expectations or practices. Moreover, this may limit how your thesis can help you pursue other career or academic goals. One additional advantage is that a seminar course offered in political science will count toward your major requirements for 200-level and above coursework.

The advantages of the hybrid route combine those of the independent and seminar options. The upsides of having a seminar is that it will introduce you to foundational and cutting-edge research, while also enabling you to stay on course thanks to the structure a course provides. It also involves the advantages of the independent thesis option, since you will be ultimately pursuing a topic that particularly interests you. Given that it is a doctoral seminar, you will also be exposed to a much higher quality of work than you would likely otherwise encounter. The downsides similarly combine the downsides of the independently contracted and the seminar option. You would be limited both by what 700-level seminars are being offered (and which faculty members are offering them) and face the same challenges in finding a faculty member to work with. Consequently, this is the rarest option. For someone interested in pursuing a Ph.D. or

otherwise honing their skills at the highest level, however, this may be the optimal solution.

The decision is up to you. Many students find the seminar solution to be best for them. Even if you choose that route, though, much of the advice in this guide will be helpful. You should still be thinking about potential thesis topics before you enroll in a thesis seminar, for instance. That early investment will pay off as you develop your thesis topic during the course.

## **Timelines**

The ideal timeline for undertaking a thesis or project for someone who intends to complete one in their senior year would run approximately like this:

- *Fall of junior year:* Begin seriously contemplating topics. Complete a skills inventory to see what skills you possess that could be useful for completing a thesis or project and what you will need to develop. Sign up for courses to develop additional skills and subject matter expertise. Either register for or complete an Undergraduate Research Engagement Program (UREP) or independent study opportunity to learn more about how research works. Consider applying for a Commonwealth Honors College Honors Research Assistant Fellowship as a way to develop a relationship (and get paid to do so).
- *February of junior year:* Prune the list of potential topics or projects to two or three. Craft pitch paragraphs for thesis topics. Research faculty members' expertise and develop a tentative list of potential thesis advisers. Arrange a meeting with the Honors Program Director to review options and topics. Search whether upcoming thesis seminars and graduate seminars might support

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- *March of junior year:* Meet with potential faculty advisers and/or faculty leading seminars to find a good match. Refine thesis and project ideas based on feedback. Register for 499C/D seminar or 700-level seminar if choosing the seminar or hybrid route.
- *April/May of junior year:* If pursuing independently contracted route, draft 499Y thesis contract with faculty adviser. Submit for review and approval.
- *Summer of junior year.* Read and prepare for thesis or project. Keep a notebook of ideas and questions.
- *Fall semester of senior year.* If taking a seminar or hybrid option, attend course and complete required assignments. If pursuing an independently contracted option, meet regularly with faculty adviser to develop thesis and discuss ideas. By October, identify a second committee member who will serve with the faculty adviser and judge whether the independently contracted thesis or project is satisfactory. Submit 499T or 499P contract in late October/November. Apply for CHC research grants. Register to take part in the Undergraduate Research Conference.
- *Spring semester of senior year.* If completing a seminar option, follow timelines and requirements laid out by the seminar faculty member. If following a hybrid or independently contracted option, craft thesis or make substantial progress on project before Spring Break. Have a first draft available for committee member review around Spring Break. Make revisions in the first half of April and send for a second round of revisions in late April. Around April 1, schedule a defense date for about the last day of classes. Participate in Undergraduate Research Conference. And then—defend!

Not everyone will follow this timeline, but it should give you an idea of how involved this process is. Just laying out these

dates demonstrates the importance of organization and working steadily on this project.

You may be reading this and already be behind the timeline. That's okay (unless it's October of your senior year, in which case, I hate to say it, you likely will not complete a thesis or project without superhuman effort). That just means that you should begin working through these steps as quickly as possible to make sure you do not lose any more time.

## **Alternative timelines**

The “ideal” timeline will not work for everyone. Maybe you will be studying abroad during the fall or spring of your senior year. Maybe you will graduate at the end of the fall semester of your senior year—or maybe you want to graduate in three years (or five) instead of four. Perhaps you have faced some personal hardship or other difficulty that means you simply could not be around during the “ideal” timeline. Note that many students, for instance, wind up submitting the 499Y (first half) contract for their independently contracted thesis or project over the summer or even in early September of the fall of their senior year.

There are alternatives available to you.

First, it is possible to complete a “senior” thesis during your junior year. You could, for instance, register for a 499C/D course in your junior year and simply complete the project during that year. Similarly, you could complete an independently contracted or hybrid route during the junior year. You would then be able to study abroad during your final year, graduate early, or simply take additional coursework during your final year. If you are interested in pursuing a Ph.D. program, this might be an attractive option as well as you could then follow your thesis work by attempting to refine and publish an article based on your thesis findings. Be aware, though, that faculty members may

reasonably probe you to make sure you can actually complete this project, so you should be extra careful to plan.

Alternatively, you could complete an independently contracted thesis beginning in the spring and finishing in the fall (e.g. spring of junior year, fall of senior year). (A hybrid option with a spring semester seminar and a fall independently contracted semester would work the same way.) In many ways, this option might prove superior to the traditional timeline. For one, it would grant you several additional months to work on the project over the summer, which should produce a much better final project. Another advantage of this path, like the junior-year option, is that it would allow you to complete (or almost complete) a thesis by the fall of your senior year, when applications to graduate school and law school are due. Similarly, you would be in much better shape to submit (with your adviser's support) to conferences such as the Midwest Political Science Association annual meeting or the Pi Sigma Alpha (political science honors society) undergraduate research conferences. There are some downsides. Faculty may be unavailable during the summer months, so this option might place a premium on being organized. Similarly, a demanding internship or summer-abroad session during the summer might interrupt progress during the summer and leave your project behind when you return to it in the fall. Careful and honest planning should be able to mitigate those problems, however.

Finally, in an emergency, there is a provision by which a thesis may be completed in a single semester with a six- or eight-credit hour independently contracted course. Speaking frankly, I do not recommend this unless substantial preparation has already been made and unless the entire committee is fully aware of the challenges in completing a thesis or project on an accelerated timeline.

## Preparing Before Senior Year

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**A**lthough Honors theses and projects are often called “senior” theses, it’s a good idea to lay a foundation before your senior year. A successful thesis or project requires three elements:

- An interesting, feasible, and specific topic
- A supportive relationship between the thesis committee and student
- An approach (or “methodology”) for carrying out the work

It’s possible to do all of this in a year—or even, in an emergency, in a single semester. Still, completing this on a normal timescale is a challenge, and the earlier you begin, the better shape you will be in.

### Making strategic choices before senior year

From the moment you step foot on campus, you should begin thinking about your thesis. That might seem overly dramatic. To be clear, I don’t mean you should be spending *every moment* thinking about your thesis. You should, however, have it in the back of your mind when you’re making other decisions, like registering for courses.

When you’re choosing your courses each semester, you can make decisions that can make it easier for you to move toward the thesis stage.

- Think about the *substance* of courses that are being offered. Can you choose one that relates to what you might want to write a thesis about? Is there one available about something that you can try out to see if you might find a thesis topic? Could you add an

Independent Studies Honors 1-credit course to a non-Honors class to develop an idea related to a potential thesis or project idea?

- Consider how the *skills* the course will impart fits into your overall trajectory. For instance, writing a thesis usually requires applying some form of methodological expertise. Learning those skills could involve taking a course on how to run experiments, on how to conduct ethnographic interviews, or on basic statistics. Taking a course that touches on methods might have a better marginal return than taking a second or third course in some substantive area.
- Imagine how a course could develop your *relationship*

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Wendy Kopp's senior thesis at Princeton University became the basis for the Teach for America program.

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with professors who might be thesis advisers or committee members. Taking smaller courses with professors who do research in areas related to topics you're considering for your thesis can be valuable. As we'll talk about later, you want to have relationships with a few professors so that you can ask them to be a part of your thesis experience. One of the best ways to develop those relationships is by taking seminar and other small-enrollment courses that let professors get to know you—and let you get to know professors.

This process doesn't have to stop with choosing courses. Course assignments and readings can be a part of your preparation for the thesis, too. You can choose final paper topics that allow you to try out ideas related to your thesis, for example. Again, the point isn't that you have to make *every* decision to advance your thesis years in advance, but that you have a lot more opportunities than you might think to lay the groundwork for a successful thesis or project long before senior year.

## Seeking out relevant experiences

Students planning to write a thesis or create a project often stumble on what they would like to write about. Some of this results from shyness about what they are really interested or an uncertainty that what they value really “counts” for a project—that only what they have encountered in their coursework in college or in high school is a valid topic for a thesis. Breaking out of this mindset and embracing a richer, deeper, and broader understanding of the study of politics is one advantage of undertaking a thesis—as is developing the confidence in yourself and your ideas that lets you push the boundaries of research and of conversations.

Politics is all around us. That means that everyone, all the time, witnesses political phenomena—and everyone has a wealth of life experiences that they can draw upon to form a thesis topic. That means that thesis and project preparation can come not just from your classes but from co- and extra-curricular activities and from outside work as well.

Reading and living widely can help you understand how to turn observations about the real world into research or other projects. In particular, you can

- Pursue *research opportunities* through programs like UREP, independent study, or the Commonwealth Honors College Honors Research Fellowship program. The best way to learn how to research is to apprentice yourself with mentors who can show you what the research enterprise is like. Even as a novice member of a research team, you’ll see how a research question is translated into theory generation and testing, data-gathering, and analyzing results. And the experience may help you develop a relationship with a professor who might serve as an adviser.

- Turn *internship* and *work opportunities* into grist for your thesis or project. If you have the chance to work for a member of Congress or the state legislature, for instance, that might inform your thesis about legislative staffers. If you have a work-study job, you might want to investigate why the federal work-study program was created or how participating in the work-study program affects students' views about politics. You can even propose a project that would explain how to reform or expand it. (Teach For America began as a senior thesis project—maybe your project can have the same effect.)
- Use *extracurricular activities* to broaden your horizons. Joining the Model United Nations club can give you a better understanding of international politics and help you learn more about potential thesis topics. So, for that matter, could being a part of intercollegiate or intramural sports—Professor Sharrow's interest in sports and politics derives partly from her time as a Division I athlete, for instance.

## Learning the skills you will need

One major difference between a course assignment and a thesis or project is that the former exists in a closed environment where the skills and knowledge you require are or will be provided to you. The assignments that you have completed for courses are much more restricted and limited than a thesis or project. In general, faculty members do not assume that you have any skills or knowledge outside of what you have learned in a course (or its prerequisites) to complete an assignment for a class. By contrast, when you are planning a thesis or a project, you may—in fact, you almost certainly *will*—identify that there are some skills that you will need to complete a thesis or project that you do not

already possess. This will likely even be the case if you pursue the hybrid or seminar options.

Some of these skills are relatively narrow and technical and the investments correspondingly modest. For example, you will likely find it useful to take a workshop in using tools such as Microsoft Word, Google Docs, and Zotero (a specialized piece of software used for compiling bibliographies that is enormously useful for long research projects such as a thesis). Investing an hour or two in workshops about these resources may pay enormous dividends. The library normally hosts several workshops per semester on these programs, and learning them before or during the first semester of your thesis will be most useful.

Other skills are more involved. If you are considering a thesis that will involve the statistical analysis of data, for example, then you will learn to need some combination of statistics, econometrics, and software such as R, Python, or Stata that is capable of analyzing data. Specialized applications of data analysis, like text analysis, require additional training on top of those basics. Similarly, if you plan to pursue a project, you might need to learn a range of techniques—a podcast might involve audio editing software, learning how to record audio, interviewing, scripting, and so on. Designing an experiment or a survey similarly involves a number of specialized skills and content knowledge.

These are not skills that you can pick up from a single two-hour workshop. Mastering them will likely involve taking coursework, spending a lot of time practicing and revising, and seeking out advice over a longer period of time. That means it's all the more important to have a plan to identify those skills that you will need to pick up and take steps to develop them. The sooner you identify a topic, the quicker you can master the skills you need to carry out your work.

## **Developing a Topic**

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**A** good topic should be specific, interesting, feasible, and theoretically motivated. What does this mean? This section will explore those questions. First, though, I want to mention that this section is mostly dedicated to people who are thinking about writing a traditional research thesis rather than undertaking a project. That's mostly because a thesis is much better defined than a project, which can, of course, be more or less anything. Still, if you intend to undertake a project, thinking about exactly what you want to do, why you want to do it, and how you want to do it will benefit you immensely. Those are the same tasks that someone writing a traditional thesis will go through and which this section covers.

### **Specific**

You need a specific topic for your thesis. A specific topic is one that gets beyond generalities to something narrow enough that it can actually be studied in a year.

Making your topic narrow enough to study will take a long time. Take a famous puzzle in political science: Why do people vote? On a cost-benefit analysis, choosing to engage in the costly act of voting (it takes time and effort to vote) is irrational because it's unlikely that any individual vote will be the decisive one. If the result will be the same if you don't vote, there's no reason for you to turn out.

This is a big topic that has sparked a lot of research over the decades. But you are not going to make an original contribution to a debate this big—or at least is unlikely that you will do so – in an undergraduate thesis. Fortunately, all that you need to do is break off one chunk of this puzzle into a size that you can address. You might want to ask, “why are

college students less likely to vote than other young adults?” Or “why does anyone vote in student-government elections?” (After all, the rewards from voting in student-government elections are really low compared to voting in real-world elections!)

Those topics are starting to get more specific. That means it's more likely that you will be able to get the evidence necessary to answer those questions convincingly. Answering a smaller question can be a big contribution to settling larger debates. If we learn that students with more social ties to candidates vote in student-government elections, for instance, that suggests that there are different forms of private returns that voters reap from casting a ballot beyond the ability to sway election outcomes.

## Interesting

A good topic will also be interesting.

What does it mean for a research topic to be interesting? There's a little bit of subjectivity. This is a little subjective, but that is part of the challenge. What's interesting to you may not be interesting to someone else, after all. Still, we can make clear what interesting means. One easy rule of thumb is that interesting topic is one that someone else will understand is worthy of your time. You want to choose a topic that isn't *just* interesting to you and to no one else. Of course, the most important person beside yourself to convince that what you are studying is interesting is a potential faculty adviser. If nobody wants to work with you on your project, or if describing it seems to put them to sleep, it's time to ditch it or rethink it.

There are many different ways to come up with an interesting puzzle. One is to take an example of a debate or a topic that's present in current political debates. By definition, people are interested in it if they think it's something the government

should or should not do, or if they'll vote for or against a candidate depending on what someone promises to do. Another is to look for in during puzzles that have attracted attention for years or decades. (Hint: your classes are full of these major debates and controversies!) Studying why people vote in elections is one of those enduring puzzles; similarly, why countries decide to go to war or why they decide to restrict trade are other examples of enduring puzzles.

Once you've found an interesting area, of course, you need to make sure that your angle on this will result in a feasible and specific approach. That's where you want to make sure that you can clearly describe why your feasible and specific project remains connected to some larger, interesting debate. You can work with your advisor to refine your ideas until they really pop.

Even though you want to have a topic that interests your committee and other people, though, remember: *you* are the person writing the thesis. If you don't care much about the topic, not only will your work show that you weren't invested in it but you'll have a bad time writing it. Keep working until you find a topic that interests *you* and keeps you motivated to do your best work.

## **Feasible**

A *feasible* topic is one that can successfully deliver a convincing answer to your interesting question with the resources and effort available to you. If you're interested in understanding why students vote in student government elections, for instance, you *could* choose to study turnout in student government elections at the National University of Mongolia. It will probably be more feasible to do it nearer to Amherst, though.

Good research isn't just about minimizing costs, though. It's about developing a research design to answer the question

you pose as well as you can given resource constraints. You might decide that comparing why students vote in campus elections at UMass and at Smith—or throughout all of the Five Colleges—will give you variation on factors like campus size or student social ties that could affect your findings. In that case, it might be feasible to do a more complicated design that could give you better results than just studying UMass students.

## **Theoretically motivated**

A great thesis will also be motivated by theory. Political science revolves around generating, testing, and applying theory. Your introductory courses should introduce you to different kinds of theories. International relations, for instance, is often defined by theories like realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Other parts of the discipline feature different theories. By the time you move into your 200- and 300-level courses, you should have been exposed to many different theories.

You want to find a way to hook your thesis into one or more of these theories. You can do that in many ways. You can find a new way to measure some concept that's important to testing those theories. You can apply an existing theory to a new domain to which it hasn't yet been applied. You can test the contending predictions of two or more theories to see which best explains the data. Or you can seek to amend a theory in an area in which it doesn't yet provide a satisfactory answer.

Tying your work back into theory will make it easier for you to find something interesting, because theory inherently enables you to make larger claims about the world. It will also help you find a specific topic, because theoretical thinking lets you decide which factors are relevant to your core question and which are not. It similarly helps you

identify a feasible research design by enabling you to judge what is essential and what is not.

Projects, by the way, may also be motivated by theory. You might want to demonstrate how applying certain findings could work in the real world, or to explain theories and findings in a creative or accessible way.

## **The pitch paragraph: bringing it all together**

You will bring all of these elements together in crafting your “pitch paragraph”. This is exactly what it sounds like: a paragraph (or two), not more than 250 words, in which you describe what you will study, why it is interesting and meaningful, which conversations or debates it connects to, how you will carry out your work, and what you and others will learn from (or otherwise benefit from) having the project completed.

Writing a good pitch paragraph results from time and revision. You should begin by coming up with a list of topics that you think might interest you (a good way to do this is to keep a Google Doc or other form of notebook where you can jot down ideas as they come to you over months and years). Then, ruthlessly choose the top several (5 or 7) ideas to pursue further. Start writing pitch paragraphs for each of those, and then leave them aside for a day or two so that you can come back to them fresh later. Then, re-read and evaluate them. In doing so, you will winnow the field, as some of these ideas that sound attractive on the first go-round will reveal their faults to you. You may discard or revise your ideas as this process of iterating between draft and re-reading continues, but it is likely that you will end up, naturally, with between 1 and 3 possible pitch paragraphs.

At that point, it is time for you to begin recruiting a committee. And the good news is that you will already have material to send in an email, because you’ve crafted pitch

paragraphs that will perfectly slot into an email that you'll send to potential advisers. Because these paragraphs will be revised and honed, they'll serve as the basis for a good conversation with potential advisers—and that means you will be in good shape to proceed expeditiously to the application stage.

## Deciding on an Approach

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**D**eveloping an idea for a thesis or project is **only the first step.** Turning your ideas into reality requires you to decide on *how* you will do that. In this section, I briefly review some terms and broad approaches you should know. This section will mostly prove useful for students completing a research thesis in any mode (seminar, hybrid, or independent), although students who are pursuing a project may find the general ideas helpful.

### Different ways of conducting “research”

“Research” can mean many things. For a basic term paper or “research paper”, it mostly means looking up and summarizing other people’s work. Advanced versions may involve critiquing or comparing findings, but the generic undergraduate experience of “research” in the first two years of college mostly relies upon “search”.

Research at a more advanced level involves original explorations into the unknown or deep critique of existing work that is so fundamental that it makes an original contribution. For *empirical* research, this might involve the testing of an original explanation against existing data, the collection of new data to test an existing thesis, the creation of an original re-analysis of existing data comparing competing hypotheses, or some combination of all of those (although for an undergraduate thesis one “original” contribution is sufficient). For *normative* research, this involves the crafting of an original claim or argument or the reinterpretation of existing texts and arguments in a novel way. Regardless of whether this research is empirical or normative, consulting existing arguments and data or texts

forms only the first step in a long (and iterative) process that aims to produce something original.

Advanced empirical research is conventionally divided into subcategories based upon the *substantive focus* and *method* of the work. Many researchers investigate specific topics and questions, such as democratization, the causes of war, or the behavior of members in the United States Congress. Others employ specific categories of tools, such as historical analysis, statistical methodologies, or experiments. Every research project involves a substantive focus and at least one method. Thus, a project on democratization in Tunisia and another on congressional fundraising in the 2020 election may have little to do with each other substantively, but both could employ the same method (such as experiments, the analysis of texts, or survey analysis). Similarly, two researchers approaching a project about how fundraising influences the behavior of members of Congress could share a substantive focus but employ different methodologies (for instance, interviews and network analysis).

Choosing a substantive area on which to focus is a relatively straightforward task, and it tends to be the easier of the two. Methods decisions, however, tend to be more challenging, not least because attitudes toward methods can be produced by a mixture of unfamiliarity, worry about the costs involved, and uncertainty regarding what a methodological choice really means. Yet the two are deeply linked. If you choose to study how voters in Tunisia have changed over the past ten years, for instance, your potential range of methods will likely be smaller than an undergraduate asking the same question about the United States simply because of the likely infeasibility of visiting Tunis and other cities, learning the language and culture, and so on relative to undertaking the same tasks in the United States.

Learning a methodological skill, such as the analysis of datasets using R and regression analysis or the use of

historical archives and creating meaning from different documentary and material evidence, is essential to undertaking a research thesis project. Every choice of method entails advantages and disadvantages because all methods have different strengths and limitations. Deciding what you want to know is inextricably linked to what you can research and what you can credibly claim to know.

## **Deciding how you will conduct your research**

The key, then, is to make the choice that is right for you and for your project.

Some students shy away from anything that seems too “math-y”, like statistics or programming. Often, I am convinced, this is because they have had bad experiences with mathematics education or because they feel they may fail. Over the course of several years, however, I have become convinced that most advanced political science students are capable of learning far more data science concepts than they may believe, especially with formal training and assistance. Similarly, many students may show disdain for more interpretive or “soft” (as non-mathematical approaches) are sometimes called, believing that they are not as rigorous. This is more a prejudice than an analysis, however; a lack of rigor is not connected to using software anymore than using a computer absolves someone of the need to make interpretive choices.

Overcoming these biases entails learning more about different skills. Approaching different advisers and asking about what forms of methodological training different projects might entail, or how different methodological approaches might affect your ability to carry out your project, is a great idea. And if you already have an idea about what methodology you want to pursue, you should work with a faculty member who can complement your interests.

## **Recruiting a Committee**

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**I**ndependent theses and projects, as well as hybrid options, require two faculty members to serve on your committee: an adviser (or “chair”) and a committee member. The adviser should be the faculty member with which you will work most closely; the committee member will assist and offer feedback in addition to the adviser. Together, the committee gives you feedback on your thesis or project, decides when your work will be ready to defend, and, ultimately, grades your paper.

Finding a supportive committee with whom you can work well is a big part of the thesis process. You should begin working to find a committee in your junior year, but you can make connections that will help this process even before then.

### **What to look for in an adviser**

Generally speaking, the adviser should be the faculty member with which you have the deepest and best relationship. The adviser must be a UMass faculty member. If you are doing a departmental honors thesis, the adviser also must be appointed in the Political Science department. (Consult the Honors program director or a CHC adviser for guidance about which path you’re on and what that means for your specific requirements).

You want to make sure that a potential chair can be a good fit for the research topic you’re interested in studying. Research can be specialized in ways that might surprise you. It might make sense that an expert in Russian cyberwarfare policy, for instance, may not know much about Argentine trade policy, but it might surprise you that someone who knows a lot about the U.S. Supreme Court may not know very much

about a topic that seems related, like the American presidency. In general, the closer you are to the projects that a faculty member has worked on or is working on the likelier you are to make a good match.

## **Finding an adviser**

You should begin finding an adviser during your junior year—ideally, no later than by Spring Break of your junior year if you plan to write a thesis in your senior year. (If you plan to study abroad during the spring semester of your junior year, you might want to begin even earlier.)

Create a list of potential chairs by thinking about professors whose courses you've taken and in whose courses you've done well—not just by getting a grade of “A” or “A-” but also with whom you've gotten along well. Having done research with a professor is also usually sufficient to judge whether they will be a good fit. This is why you want to be strategic in finding courses and even in inventing opportunities to work with instructors.

If none of your professors seem like a good fit, or even if they do, it is a good idea to continue to do some research. Fortunately, almost all faculty members maintain up-to-date Web pages (sometimes more than one, with different information on each) and so this is not a difficult task.

To learn more about a faculty member's research areas, take a look at their faculty Web pages to see what areas of research they are currently engaged in. Often, there will be a description about the faculty member's area of research, and sometimes even an entire page. (If the faculty member has a link to a separate personal Web page, click that link—there will usually be much more detail posted there.)

You can then use this information to go to Google Scholar or the library's Discover page to look up the most recent couple

of articles the faculty member has published to learn more about exactly what they are working on. Skimming a faculty member's work can reveal a lot about what they think about a given issue, where their research fits into to broader theoretical conversations, and the methodologies they use to conduct their research.

This might seem like a lot of work, but remember: the relationship you develop with this faculty member is the most important single factor in how well your thesis will turn out. Spending time up front to find a good match can save everyone a lot of time in the end. If you get stuck trying to find names, it's okay to ask the Honors program director or an adviser for some suggestions.

## **Meeting with potential advisers**

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Look at **faculty Web pages** to learn about their research interests and see if they could be a good match for your project.

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Once you've found a potential adviser or two, it's time to email them to make an appointment during their office hours. You should introduce yourself, remind the professor of how you know each other (if you do), and briefly describe the two or three topics that you are thinking about for your thesis. Be clear from the beginning why you're asking them, and suggest how you think their research profile fits in with

what you think you might be interested in researching for your thesis or project. Ask for 15 or 30 minutes to talk about the possibility of their serving on your committee.

You may have to approach two or three faculty members to find one who will be a good fit as your adviser. That's fine—and that's why you start early. Then, together, you can move on to finding the second member of the committee.

One note: being an adviser or committee member takes a lot of time, and it's basically uncompensated work. Sometimes,

you may approach a faculty member about serving in either role only to find that they decline to serve, or that someone you'd hoped would be an adviser can only serve as a committee member instead. Don't take it personally, because it probably isn't personal. If you run into major problems finding an adviser, it's perfectly all right to ask an adviser or the Honors program director for advice.

## **Finding a committee member**

The second member of your committee plays an important role as well. This committee member should help complement your thesis adviser's strengths by adding new ones of their own. You and the adviser should work together to find a second member who will be appropriate.

In general, the requirements for serve as a committee member are less restrictive than to serve as an adviser. Indeed, any permanent faculty member at a Five Colleges department *may* be eligible to serve in this role. (Any UMass professor will almost certainly be qualified.)

The process for finding a committee member is similar to that for finding an adviser, except that you should make sure to develop your list of potential committee members in collaboration with the adviser. (You don't want to end up on a committee in which the adviser and the committee member don't get along!)

As you find a committee member, you should ensure that you, the adviser, and your second member are crystal clear about what roles each member of the committee will play. Some committee members take a decidedly backseat approach, only providing quality assurance and perhaps some comments on a draft or two of the thesis. Others are more like full partners with the chair. And still others may call the shots on some aspect of the thesis or project—such as methodology or theory—but have limited input in other

areas. Discussing expectations early and setting up clear lines of responsibility can avoid painful choices and situations later on.

*In theory*, you should have a second committee member chosen before you submit your application for 499Y credit before the semester you begin your thesis. That's a really good idea, but it's okay if you don't nail this down until midway through that semester in advance of submitting a 499T/P application. That's particularly okay if you don't know exactly what your thesis or project will be and you need time to work with your adviser to narrow down your topic before you can even decide who would be a good member.

## Registering for a Thesis or Project

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**C**ompleting an independently contracted thesis involves submitting two halves of a contract for review and approval by your faculty adviser, the Honors Program Director for the department in which you are registered, and the Academic Standards Committee of the Commonwealth Honors College. This process is meant to mimic how new courses are created because, in a real sense, this is the syllabus for your independent study 499Y/T or 499Y/P thesis or project.

This section mostly pertains to students following the hybrid or independently contracted route, although seminar students may find the general ideas to be helpful.

### Filling in the 499Y (First Half) Application

To begin working on your thesis, you start with Part I of the application available on the CHC PATHS Web site. This is due before the start of the semester in which you will begin officially working on your thesis. As mentioned earlier, you can, of course, begin the research long before—in a class project, in an internship, through UREP, or in an Independent Study course. (Your final thesis or project needs to be original but it can certainly cumulate from earlier efforts!).

You only need to turn in Part I of your honors thesis application by the deadline listed on the site. Make sure that you get it in by then! For students beginning their thesis work in the Fall semester, the deadline is usually in mid-August; given that faculty members may be hard to reach during the summer, you should try to get as much done in the Spring semester as possible. It is *possible* to submit later

but there is a hard limit, so make sure you submit as early as you can.

Part I of the thesis application is both a proposal and a contract. As a proposal, it lays out the elements of your project so that other faculty members can review what you will be doing. They are looking to make sure that the project is feasible and specific but also to make sure that it conforms with University guidelines. Among the most important of those guidelines is compliance with human-subjects research. If you plan to involve living human beings in your research in any way, you should have a conversation with your adviser about how to comply with University policies. Your application *must* address human subjects guidelines and policies if you plan to conduct experiments, interviews, or other research involving living humans.

Part I of the thesis application also lays out what you and your faculty adviser will do. Make sure to follow the structure exactly and answer every part of the questions laid out in the application. (See [the CHC Web site for more details](#).) You should address:

- A description of the *topic* of your thesis. If you are completing a research thesis, you should describe the puzzle you will be trying to solve, how this research topic connects into theoretical debates, why the topic matters, and how your proposed research design will allow you to make an original contribution to this topic. For a project, the same general advice applies: be as specific and as concrete as you can be so that someone who knows nothing about political science or your specific topic can still read it and understand it. Explain in detail the importance of your work, what it can tell us about the world, and what it has to do with political science. Don't be afraid if you don't know exactly where things are going yet—this is the beginning of the road, and everyone knows that. Still, be as specific as you can.

- A plan for *communications* with your faculty adviser. Meeting at least a total of an hour in every two week period is a minimum. You should also specify that you will email the adviser with a memorandum summarizing what you discussed last time, what you have done since you last met, what remains to be done, and what new questions or topics have arisen that requires your adviser's input. Take this section seriously and talk with your adviser about what they expect—the clearer you both are regarding your expectations, the better the process will be.
- A *reading list* or bibliography. You should be as specific as possible; don't just say that you'll read "books about World War I", for instance. Give specific examples including bibliographic information and describe why you have chosen these books or articles. Ideally, this list should be about a page long and have a good mix of serious books, peer-reviewed articles, and (if appropriate) ideas about databases, archives, or other resources you can use to find additional material. You can always add to or change this list, but the people reviewing your application want to know that you and your adviser have put some thought into this.
- A discussion of *methodology* appropriate to your thesis. Make sure that you have discussed with your faculty adviser what methodological training you will need. This could be as extensive as a separate course on statistics or experiments and taking IRB training, or it could mean that you will read an article or two about methodology and discuss the topic with your adviser. Whatever it is, write at least a paragraph explaining and justifying your choice.
- A *timeline* about when you will complete assignments and parts of the thesis project. This should be, again, as specific as possible. Work with your adviser to develop a

### **Note About Research Involving Living People**

The application includes a discussion of “specialized training”. The most important specialized training you should be aware of is that involving human subjects research.

Research that involves living people—even just interviewing them—carries special ethical and legal obligations. Before you begin any such research, you will likely be required to undergo review by parts of the University that ensure that your research will not harm research subjects or jeopardize you, your adviser, or the University. This is a well-established process and many students have completed these steps successfully, but it is one that you should be aware of before beginning your research.

**For more about University policies involving human-subjects research**, see <https://www.UMass.edu/research/guidance/student-researchers-and-advisors> and <https://www.UMass.edu/research/guidance/student-handbook-guide-conducting-human-subject-research> .

realistic timeline that includes some information about how your work will be assessed. You **must** have an assignment due before the end of the “Withdrawal Period” (not the Add/Drop period). Be sure to include time for your faculty member to grade this and give you feedback. The point of this is not just to have a meaningless requirement but to give you and your adviser a clear moment to assess whether the relationship is working out. And, again, it is

recommended that you have some work product, such as article summaries or a reflection paper, due at each meeting with your adviser.

- You will also be asked about when you will choose your second committee member. It is, again, best practices for you to be detailed about this—especially about what you are looking for in this second committee member, how you will work with them, and what they will bring to your project. The point of this is, again, to make sure that you are thinking and planning carefully. Being clear about your expectations—and discussing this fully with your adviser—will help you find a second committee member that will optimally assist your work.

The completed Part I proposal should be anywhere from about 5 to 12 double-spaced pages long, perhaps longer if you have already done preliminary work. The most important element of a good proposal isn't length, however, but the care that you have put into thinking about how you will make the best use of your time to create the most impressive final project possible.

You and your adviser should take this process seriously. This is a contract equivalent to a syllabus and it entails expectations about how both of you will perform your roles. Having full discussions about every part of the application is an important part of your development as someone capable of independent work and navigating professional situations. Bear in mind: if you do this poorly, you should expect to have the application returned to you to be redone.

Once you and your thesis adviser have discussed the application fully, finish your draft and submit it via CHC PATHS. It will then go to departmental and CHC representatives for review. All reviews must be complete before your registration in 499Y is processed. If you're asked to complete revisions as part of this process, don't worry—

just work through them as best you can (and make sure to consult with your adviser before you re-submit anything). Once approved, the 499Y registration will be added to your course schedule.

## **Filling in the 499P/T (Second Half) Application**

The good news is that Part II is mostly an elaboration of Part I. Once you've figured out how to write a good Part I, you are well on your way to writing Part II. Much of your first semester should be spent working on drafting the proposal you will submit in Part II.

Still, there are some differences. In general, your Part II application should be substantially longer. If the Part I target length is about 5 to 12 pages, the Part II should run about 10 to 30 pages. Unlike the Part I application, note that this will be a document that you upload, not a form that you fill in. Despite this, you should format your application to include clear headings and make sure that everything is as well organized as possible. A good guide is to model your proposal after the Part I headings. Given the length of the document, you should probably also include an executive summary on the first page.

For students completing a research thesis, much of the new length will come from your literature review (which you should have spent the first semester writing). This should much more clearly situate your original research within a larger conversation. In writing this section, you should be able to demonstrate exactly how your research will fit into and make a contribution to what others have said and done.

The Part II proposal should also include new material. Review what you have done over the course of the first semester and indicate any major changes or challenges from what you discussed in your Part I proposal. You should be clear about what remains to be done, and concretely specify

what you will do in order to complete them. Discuss the roles that your adviser and second committee member will be playing in the upcoming semester. And include a similarly detailed timeline. This is a good time to schedule a date for your defense, by the way, rather than saving that to the end.

Students completing a project face a similar task. Your description of your project should also be substantially longer and more detailed. By the time you submit the Part II application, you should have substantially refined your vision for the project and the way you will realize it.

## **A Note About Workload**

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**S**tudents who pursue honors theses or projects tend to be ambitious, driven, and high-achieving. Unused to taking “no” for an answer, they routinely seek out challenges in their studies and extracurriculars. Those habits frequently serve them well.

Unfortunately, those habits can also lead to problems when high-achieving students confront the challenge of a thesis or project.

A well-conceived, well-executed, and worthwhile thesis or project should be the most challenging academic endeavor you undertake during college. It’s also likely that you will be busy with a number of other transitions and challenges during the year in which you complete this process—from personal relationships to law school applications to a natural desire to spend time with friends as college draws to a close.

And, as hard as it may be to believe now, over more than a decade of working with undergraduates I have noticed that even the most dedicated and ambitious senior loses much of their motivation for academic pursuits around Spring Break in their senior year. (Spending most of Spring Break finishing a thesis can make it a less restorative time than usual.)

As you register for courses in your senior year, carefully weigh your priorities. This is not the time to pursue course overloads that you do not need to graduate, or to add a new extracurricular activity that will require another 20 hours per week on top of a full course load. Rather, this is the time to pare back your commitments so that you can focus on developing yourself while maintaining the time to have a healthy balance between schoolwork and other responsibilities. In other words: take “no” for an answer.

## Conclusion: You *Can* Do It

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**T**he guiding idea of this booklet is that you really can produce an excellent thesis or project—better than you might even expect.

Don't worry too much if you can't execute all of the recommendations in this guide perfectly. Nobody follows a painless path to complete such a big project. The important thing is that you start from where you are and do the best you can within *your* limits.

You *can* write a successful thesis or design an impressive project. The more preparation and effort you put into the project, the likelier your project will be to go as well as you can imagine it. We hope this guide has given you some ideas about how to orient yourself for success.

In the next few pages, we present interviews with students who were in your shoes a few years ago. They talk about how they succeeded, what the process was like for them, and some challenges they faced along the way.

## **Success Stories: Emily Stetson '17**

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When I started brainstorming thesis topics, I decided it was important for my work to have implications for the work I planned to do post-graduation, and/or in my extra curricular work at the time. In my case, I did a lot of work with College Democrats and was looking into careers in political campaigns, so I started developing a topic around youth political and civic engagement (or lack thereof).

My initial reaction to finding an adviser was to just pick someone in my department with experience in my topic, so I picked an American Politics professor I had during my Freshman year who had written on the subject.

However, I wasn't particularly close with that professor, and found it hard to coordinate and work with them. I later opted to change my committee chair to a professor whom I had built a stronger working relationship with, and whom I had increased access to because I was also taking my second class with them. I kept my original committee chair on as a second reader.

For anyone looking into doing a thesis, and even for networking in general, I would encourage them to start getting to know professors specializing in their areas of interest now. It will save them additional trial and error in the future.

After narrowing my thesis topic, I ended up using network theory to look at the demographics I was interested in. I took a networks class alongside the second semester of my thesis, but I wish I had done it (and learned R/Stata) much earlier on in my academic career.

I also had to learn how to properly search academic databases— and in hindsight, I wish I had used the UMass Library resources more effectively by talking to my

Department's librarian and requesting assistance with existing search tools.

By the end of my first semester on the project, I realized this topic wasn't narrow enough and there wasn't a lot of new takeaways I could make without more time and resources. My topic then shifted from "why are young people averse to voting" to "how do college students who are already politically activated engage with their peers?" Suddenly I had this hyper-localized topic, and very few existing resources.

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“I asked for a lot of help... doing so revealed additional resources I wouldn't have originally thought to look for.”

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I ended up using data from Campus Pulse (the UMass Registered Student Organization website) to collect membership information. These data had their own problems (i.e. incomplete data, membership lists with hidden or missing members), but it still allowed me to draw unique insights regarding how students interacted with each other in their extra curricular activities.

I also asked for a lot of help. Towards the beginning of my thesis, I had been hesitant to ask for help, but doing so revealed a great many additional resources I wouldn't have initially thought to look for (i.e. R workshops, reading suggestions).

My work in academia had direct and immediate impacts on the work I was doing in politics and organizing outside academia. My particular topic also helped contextualize my own experiences in civic engagement, compare my experiences with my peers, and help me determine what I wanted to pursue at the end of my academic career.

## **Success Stories: Anthony Rentsch '19**

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As an honors student, I had heard about writing a thesis early on during my time at UMass but didn't think of it too seriously until the end of my junior year. By that time, I had been fortunate enough to do research, through UREP, for two semesters with Professor Brian Schaffner, who studied elections and public opinion. I found that my background as a political science and statistics student lent itself to enjoying this type of research so I wanted to do a thesis project that built off the things I had learned doing research with Professor Schaffner.

The focus of my project was likely voter modeling, which is a fancy way of saying the process by which pre-election pollsters decide which respondents in a poll will vote and which ones won't and adjust their predictions accordingly. The project fell right at the intersection of political science (survey research, elections, voter psychology) and statistics (data wrangling, building statistical models, data visualization) and the topic was being actively discussed by political scientists and commentators. This had both good and bad parts. On one hand, I was often overwhelmed by the amount of research and discussion to read. But, it also meant that I was doing things in class that applied to my thesis project and that there were always resources to references if I got stuck or confused by something; that combination makes for a great environment to learn!

I was fortunate enough to have worked with Professor Schaffner for a year prior to my thesis, so he served as one advisor. But I needed a second committee member, too, so I asked Professor Justin Gross. I had taken a class with him about quantitative analysis in political science and set up a meeting with him to talk about my project. He was very

willing to meet with me and provided me with some ideas of his own for the project, and agreed to be an advisor for it.

Finding all of the background reading I needed for this project was a big task. Some of it I found on my own by searching Google Scholar and the UMass library—actually I had one important book requested from Amherst College and I could pick it up at DuBois and renewed it each month all year. More stuff I found by talking with Professor Schaffner about what I was interested in and what I thought I needed to learn about and he would point me toward articles and give me other possible avenues to explore too. And I didn't find it all at once! It's a myth that you go through a "literature review" section and then you're done reading—I realized what I needed to learn about as my project progressed and did additional reading sporadically throughout the year.

As with any project this size, there were numerous challenges. At the beginning, I struggled a lot with defining the scope of the project. I wanted to do a lot more than was feasible to do in one year. I often felt unsure if I was reading the right research to lead me to what I wanted to know about. I discovered issues with my data and my analysis regularly. I got lost putting together my final manuscript. The thing that helped me the most was holding weekly meetings with

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"The thing that helped me the most was holding weekly meetings in which I produced a memo of what I had done in the last week"

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Professor Schaffner in which I was to produce a memo of what I had done in the last week with at least some concrete progress—a summary of something I read, some charts from my analysis, a portion of writing, an outline of my next step; it varied week to week. But these memos forced me to stay on track and allowed Professor Schaffner to help me through problems I encountered because I didn't let them compile by not telling him about them regularly. At times I reached out

to other people too to ask for help. Sometimes I just had to walk away for a day or two and revisit the issue later.

One really specific issue I recall is that I realized halfway through my analysis that one of the survey questions I relied heavily on was not available for over half of my data. I thought I would have to discard half of my sample because of this and got really distressed really quickly. After a few days, I emailed Professor Schaffner and my former manager from an internship to detail the problem and ask for help and then stepped away from the project for a day or two. Both took the time to look into the issue and provide me with encouraging and helpful feedback that made me realize there was a workaround and restored my confidence in my project.

In the end, I was able to complete the project on time and was happy with the result. While the final result was something I was proud of, the process of defining, studying and completing a research project of this magnitude has been so helpful. I got so much practice researching and defending my ideas. I got to translate all of the acquired knowledge into a poster and explain it to others at the Undergraduate Research Conference. Those alone are incredibly useful skills for a person to have. It's also been a talking point for graduate school applications and job interviews and I gained a ton of knowledge about a specific subject and feel comfortable talking with other scholars who do related work which is a rewarding feeling.

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