The International Relations MA Thesis Option

A Masters’ thesis is a work of original research on a topic in international relations. Theses are generally longer than capstone projects (although this need not necessarily be the case), and are written as an independent project under the supervision of a thesis advisor and committee, rather than within the structure of a course that meets weekly. They emphasize research rather than policy conclusions. They should be between 12,000 and 20,000 words in length, and should be built around a clear research question and an appropriate research methodology.

The Thesis Committee

Students must find a thesis advisor before beginning the project. The advisor should be a faculty member who has expertise in the relevant area of scholarship. The advisor should also be a member of the IR program faculty. If the student wishes to work with an advisor who is not program faculty for reasons of expertise, the choice should be approved by the IR program director. The student should also choose a second reader, in consultation with the advisor. Note that faculty are not obligated to work on theses – it is up to the student to convince the faculty member that the project is both viable and worthwhile.

The Proposal

Students need the approval of the IR program in order to choose the thesis option. In order to get this approval, the student must defend a thesis proposal. Proposals should be between one and two thousand words in length, and should include the question, a brief literature review, and suggested methodology. It should be developed in consultation with the advisor. The advisor and second reader must approve the both the written proposal and an oral defense of the proposal. The oral defense must happen no later than December 1 of the students third semester (fifth semester in the case of part-time students) so that the student can still enroll in the capstone course if the defense is not successful.

The Thesis

Students should work closely with their advisors. Theses written without regular consultation rarely work out well. The University has a set of specific rules about thesis formats and submission. Students should consult these rules prior to writing the thesis, to avoid format problems later on. Completed theses must be defended before a committee consisting of the advisor, the second reader, and a third reader who should be chosen in consultation with the thesis advisor. The committee may pass the thesis, pass the thesis subject to specified revisions, or fail the thesis. The University requires that defended and revised theses be submitted by April 10 for a June degree date, by December 1 for a December degree date, and by August 1 for an August degree date. Since substantial revisions may be required, students should plan on defending well ahead of these dates.