HONORS PROGRAM
SENIOR PROJECT
ADVISOR GUIDELINES

PREFACE:

These guidelines are intended to assist faculty acting as advisors to Honors Program students engaged in Senior Projects. The document parallels another provided to students and the language in both documents is similar. While they cover most areas of interest and importance to students and faculty, they almost certainly do not address every problem an individual student or faculty member may encounter in the process of conceiving, executing, and completing a senior project. Faculty should feel free to talk or correspond with the program’s director with any problems or questions (Scott.Linneman@wwu.edu, X3446).

OVERVIEW:

The Senior Project serves as the student’s “capstone” experience, synthesizing what the student has done in the major (typically) and the Honors Program, though sometimes it is undertaken in the student’s minor or some other area. In any case, it should be a clearly focused effort, approaching professional level work, either in the student’s major, or in some cases, in the minor or an allied area. The term, Senior Project, is vague, and for a reason. The program encourages students to think about what they might do for a senior experience rather than what they must do. While the project need not be a long paper, there must be a “product,” i.e., something tangible, at the conclusion of the work, but that product may take many forms: anything from a thesis to a performance, or from a painting to a music CD, though obviously well done, may qualify as a legitimate senior project.

GETTING STARTED--FINDING AN ADVISOR:

The first step in the process is the student’s, to find an advisor, someone who will supervise the project and act as the student’s mentor. Generally, this will be a faculty member in the major, but as noted above, but there are numerous exceptions. For example, a student in the College of Business and Economics once had a supervisor in the Physics Department who helped her learn a language. The student’s major was international business, and the advisor knew the language (Punjabi) the student needed to learn for business purposes. While this case is unusual, it is by no means unexamplified, and it illustrates the sorts of connections students can make in their projects. In most cases, the advisor will be someone with whom the student has worked a good deal in the major, and consequently will be familiar with the student’s progress through the university. The program encourages students to approach their advisors as early as possible in the process--Honors recommends that they make initial contact with this person about the Senior Project not later than the second quarter of the junior year, but in some cases it may not be possible to get started so early. In fact, most students begin earlier, and it is common for students in the natural sciences to be engaged in Senior Project work as early as the sophomore year, e.g., in research
groups in a laboratory. In any case, students should be thinking about the Senior Project by the junior year and making overtures to their mentors as soon as possible.

Advisors should understand that the project demands some time and effort from the faculty member: be certain that you have the expertise, time and energy to take on the extra work.

**DEFINING THE PROJECT:**

Ultimately, the Senior Project, the timing of its beginning and completion, the shape of the final product, and the amount of work required, are the result of a negotiation between the student and the advisor. As noted above, there are no formulas and no specified model the student must follow, but as a general rule, students should assume that the project must satisfy the following criteria: in the advisor’s judgment, it must be an appropriate academic exercise, i.e., it must be something valuable to a person majoring in the discipline; it must be worth the amount of credit the student will receive, either in Honors or through the major department; and, from the student’s standpoint, it must be something the student can reasonably accomplish. For example, it would be unreasonable to expect a geology major to spend six months at a remote site, or to demand that a theater major spend two quarters in New York with a theater company. On the other hand, the program strongly encourages students to take advantage of off-campus internships, foreign study opportunities, and a variety of other options that present themselves, e.g., competitive fellowships. These often present excellent experiences to serve as the basis of the Senior Project. Students have undertaken projects which involved field work everywhere from eastern Washington to China to the South Pacific.

Beyond these rather loose requirements, the advisor and the student are free to work out a project that meets the advisor’s standards and the student’s needs. In defining the project, the advisor and the student should establish a fairly precise set of expectations—what shape will the final product will take? What work will be done and on what schedule? Will it require special equipment? Will there be travel involved? Will it be difficult to gain access to specific sources or resources? Both the advisor and the student should think about possible difficulties that may arise from a particular project. Honors may be able to assist in overcoming some of the problems that arise, e.g., modest support for travel or help with the purchase of specialized equipment, but the student should avoid projects which present difficulties whose remedies are beyond the student’s immediate control.

Above all, the program encourages students, and the advisor as well, certainly, to think in broad and innovative terms in doing senior projects. For many disciplines, a long paper is the most appropriate form, but a number of other things have also satisfied the Senior Project requirement. Within the recent past students have given performances, produced exhibits, and presented recitals as senior projects. Others have done translations of works in a host of languages—Punjabi, French, Chinese and German, for instance. Illustrations for a book, an album (the student wrote all the music and lyrics, and did all the performances and the technical production), adaptations and installations of computer programs, paintings (by a history major), and preparations of liturgies have also been highly successful senior projects.
Once the student has gone through the process of definition and established a schedule for the project, the student then drafts an abstract which describes the process and the final product, which goes to the faculty advisor and the Honors Program. The abstract is a prospectus, not a contract. It should represent the best estimate of what the student hopes to accomplish within the given period of time. It is possible that some of the details will change before completion of the work. The abstract should be no more than five hundred words (two typewritten pages) and should be written in plain English, free of jargon or highly specialized disciplinary vocabulary. There is no timetable for the submission of the abstract, but it should come to the faculty advisor and the director as soon as is practically possible.

STAYING ON SCHEDULE:

The amount and frequency of contact between the student and the advisor will vary, depending on the nature of the project. In the sciences, where most students work on year-long or multiyear research undertakings directly with a faculty member, there will be regular communication between the student and the advisor, perhaps on a daily basis. On other projects, the contact may be less frequent. **It is the student’s responsibility to establish and maintain regular communication with the faculty advisor.** The student should also give the Honors Program director some idea of progress on the project, but a meeting during the duration of the project is normally sufficient. Again, the primary relationship is between the student and the advisor.

SPECIFIC RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE FACULTY ADVISOR:

The faculty advisor provides oversight, guidance, and often, structure for the project, and the program hopes that the faculty member and the student establish a genuine mentoring relationship. They should meet as often as necessary to make certain that the student is making adequate progress toward completion of the project within the time both expect. **The faculty advisor establishes those standards for the senior project that the student must meet. The primary relationship in the senior project is between the faculty advisor and the student. The Honors Program plays a secondary role.**

PUBLIC PRESENTATION:

All projects must be presented and defended in a public forum at which the faculty advisor presides. The presentation is not as formal as a thesis defense, but the student should expect to answer questions about the formulation of the project, the process of its completion, and above all, to respond to queries about the methods and conclusions of the project. The earlier in the term the student finishes the project, the better. As every faculty member knows, schedules become tight and work piles up near the end of a quarter.

The public presentation often draws a fairly large audience--there are often more than sixty people at a presentation---and it is entirely appropriate to invite fellow students, faculty, friends, and family members, especially parents. The program encourages students to invite their parents, and they attend frequently; their presence always adds to the occasion. The size of audiences at presentations in the last week or so of a term is considerably smaller than at those that occur earlier. After the presentation, the advisor and the director may ask for revisions of the project.
Of course, requests for changes are confined almost exclusively to written projects. It is difficult, indeed virtually impossible to require changes to a performance or a painting.

The student must submit a final copy to the advisor for approval, then the final version of the Senior Project must be submitted in electronic form to honors@wwu.edu. Wilson Library will ask students to sign a release form, which allows the use of the material for research or other appropriate purposes. From there, it goes on deposit in Wilson Library’s CEDAR electronic archive, where it will be available to the public. The release form is available in the Honors Center, Old Main 330. If for any reason, the project should not be made available to the public, e.g., it is under consideration for publication, the project contains proprietary material, the program will make arrangements to have the project protected from enquiries.

QUESTIONS:

If you have questions, call the Honors Office at (360) 650-3034 or the director (360) 650-3446. In any case, don’t let questions go unanswered.