OVERVIEW:

The following document has been prepared to assist students with everything from the formulation to the completion of an Honors Senior Project. Its tone is informal and familiar and assumes that by the time a student has reached this stage of an academic career that highly formal, prescriptive language is unnecessary.

The first question students generally have about the Senior Project is simply, what is it? There is no simple answer. It may be wise for you to think about it in two distinct but complimentary ways. First, it should serve as a sort of “capstone” experience, synthesizing what you have done in your entire education, including but not limited to your work in the major and in Honors. Second, it should be a clearly focused effort, approaching professional level work, either in your major, or in some cases, in your minor or an allied area. The term, Senior Project, is vague, and for a reason. The term “Senior Thesis” is easily available, but it is one the program deliberately has avoided. The program encourages students to think about what they might do for a senior experience rather than what they must do. While the project must be “product oriented,” i.e., there must be something tangible at the end of the process, it may be a long paper, that is a thesis, but it may also take several other forms, e.g., a recital, a painting, an album, a bound book, all of which have been quite successful senior projects.

GETTING STARTED--FINDING AN ADVISOR:

The first step in the process is to find an advisor, someone who will supervise the project and act as your mentor. Generally, this will be someone in your major, but there are often exceptions. For example, a student in the College of Business and Economics once had a supervisor in the Physics Department who helped her to learn a language. The student was in international business, and the advisor knew the language (Punjabi) the student needed to learn for business purposes. While this case is atypical, it is not by any means unexampled, and it illustrates the sorts of connections you can make in your own project.

In most cases, your advisor will be someone with whom you have worked a good deal, usually in your major, and consequently will be someone who is familiar with your progress through the university. You should approach this person early in the process--Honors recommends that you make initial contact with the faculty member about the Senior Project not later than the third quarter of your junior year, but it may not always be possible to get started so early. Much more often, students are at work on the project earlier than this. In any case, you should be thinking about the Senior Project by this time and making an overture to your mentor as soon as possible. The project demands some effort from your faculty advisor, and so you will need to make certain that the person has the time and energy to take on the extra work. Honors recommends that you provide your advisor with the guidelines for faculty supervisors---also available in the Honors Office and on-line---to let that person know about the process of definition, work, and completion of the Senior Project.

Only tenured or tenure-track faculty may serve as advisors on Senior Projects, i.e., only those individuals holding the ranks of Professor, Associate Professor, or Assistant Professor. Faculty
members with the word “instructor” in their academic ranks are not eligible to act in this capacity.

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 you must follow, but as a general rule, you should assume that your project must satisfy the following criteria: in your advisor’s judgment, it must be an appropriate academic exercise, i.e., it must be something valuable to a person majoring in your discipline or in some other academic or professional area; it must be worth the amount of credit you will receive, either in Honors, through your major department, or some other academic area; and, from your standpoint, it must be something you can reasonably accomplish--if you are a geology major, Honors cannot require you to spend six months at a remote site, or if you are a theater major, the program can’t demand that you spend two quarters in New York with a theater company. On the other hand, if these or similar opportunities present themselves, by all means think about ways in which might incorporate these experiences into your Senior Project.

The occasion for meaningful off campus work is very frequently open to Honors students, and you should think seriously about turning that experience into the Senior Project. Students have undertaken projects that involved field work everywhere from eastern Washington to China to the South Pacific---internships and other off-campus educational experiences often become Senior Projects. Sometimes more than one advisor will be involved in such work, and from Honors’ standpoint, this is an entirely acceptable, indeed a very good, arrangement.

Beyond these rather loose requirements, you and your advisor are free to create a project that meets the advisor’s standards and your needs. In defining the project, you and the advisor 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? Think about possible difficulties that may arise from a particular project. Honors may be able to assist in overcoming some of the problems that occur, e.g., modest support for travel or help with the purchase of specialized equipment, but you should avoid projects which present difficulties whose remedies are far beyond your immediate control.

Above all, the program encourages students 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 past several years, 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, the creation of a museum display, the creation and binding of a book, and the preparation of a liturgy have also been highly successful Senior Projects.

Once you have gone through the process of definition and established a schedule for the project, you must then draft an abstract that describes the project’s process and the final product, which you then
provide to the Honors Program Office. Keep in mind that the abstract is a prospectus not a contract. It should represent your best estimate of what you hope to accomplish, within the given period of time, and with what final product. It is possible that some of the details will change before you complete the work, and, for example, projects that involve work with human subjects frequently end differently than the student and/or faculty member had presumed. 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 be submitted to the program 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 faculty, 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. You should also give the Honors Program director some idea of your progress on the project, but a meeting once during the time you are undertaking the work is normally sufficient. Again, the primary relationship is between the student and the advisor.

PUBLIC PRESENTATION:

All projects must be presented and defended in a public forum. This may be a specially scheduled event or a regular occasion, e.g., Chemistry’s regular seminar. The presentation is not as formal as a thesis defense, but you should expect to answer questions about the formulation of the project, the process of its completion, and above all, queries about the methods and conclusions of your project. The earlier in the term you finish the project and schedule the presentation/defense, the better. Schedules become tight and work piles up near the end of a quarter. The public presentations often draw fairly large audiences and it is entirely appropriate to invite fellow students, faculty, friends and family members—it is unusual for some family member not to be present at this event. The program especially encourages students to invite their parents, and they attend frequently—family members’ 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 minor revisions of the project. Of course, requests for changes are confined almost exclusively to written projects. It is difficult to require changes to a performance or a painting.

Scheduling for the project’s public presentation and defense is done through the Honors Office, (360) 650-3034, honors@wwu.edu.

The final version of the Senior Project must be submitted in electronic form to honors@wwu.edu. Wilson Library will ask you to sign a release form, by which you agree to allow use of your 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. Of course, those who consult your project and cite it are expected to acknowledge your project as a source for their own work. 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.