



MA/MS in Sustainability Studies

HANDBOOK

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I. INTRODUCTION

The standards set forth in this handbook represent the requirements for the completion of the MA and MS in Sustainability Studies. All graduate students are expected to familiarize themselves with the standards for the degree they have chosen and be prepared to meet each requirement as they progress through the program. This Handbook may be changed during students' degree completion. Students should check for new editions of the handbook as they complete their degree. The Sustainability Studies TRACS site also contains many useful resources for students.

The degree is flexible in its curriculum to allow students to develop career paths that respond to their interests, career goals, and skills. The degree requires a core of three courses: Sustainability 5301 (Sustainability Seminar), Philosophy 5323 (Environmental Ethics), and one course in research methods to be chosen between a portfolio that emphasizes quantitative or qualitative skills. Note that some research methods courses have prerequisites (for example, SOCI 5308, Quantitative Research Methods, requires a statistics class and knowledge of SPSS). Students may choose between a Master of Arts or a Master of Science degree. Each student, with the guidance of a faculty mentor, will design an individualized course of study reflecting individual career goals and life aspirations. The course of study will determine whether the degree plan is appropriately an MA or an MS program.

The MA in Sustainability Studies is designed for students inclined toward the humanities, arts, communication, urban or regional planning, or related fields. The MS in Sustainability Studies is designed for students inclined toward social sciences, natural sciences, economics, policy, ethics or related fields. To reflect the interdisciplinarity of the program, student background, student aspirations, and the variety of professional paths open to sustainability experts, students will choose—in consultation with their mentor and committee—to write a thesis or to complete a professional project as the final product of their course of studies.

II. ADMISSION TO THE PROGRAM

Applicants should refer to the Graduate College webpages (<http://www.gradcollege.txstate.edu/>) for information on application requirements.

III. DEGREE OUTLINE/AUDIT

The Graduate College prepares a degree outline/audit that is available to students. Degree templates are available on the Sustainability Studies Tracs site.

IV. THE ROLE OF THE MENTOR

Each student in the Sustainability Studies program will identify a faculty mentor at the beginning of the student's second semester, if not earlier. The student's mentor assists in developing the course-of-study, ensures that students are taking the best classes to enhance the degree's link to the student's career plans, and is a resource throughout the student's time in the Sustainability program. Students and mentors should examine degree templates on the Tracs site and contact the sociology department's graduate advisor with any questions about appropriate coursework. It is the student's responsibility to check in with her or his mentor each semester and ensure that she or he is taking the correct courses. *Typically*

(there are exceptions), the mentor is the thesis or professional project supervisor (i.e., the thesis committee chair or project committee chair) and the organizer of the student's oral comprehensive exams. The mentor helps the student to choose the comprehensive exam committee.

V. NON-THESIS PROFESSIONAL REPORT AND MA/MS THESIS GUIDELINES AND POLICIES

A. EXPECTATIONS

Expectations for completed theses and professional project reports are higher than those expectations in graduate classes. Students will receive suggestions, recommendations, and criticism about their writing and ideas. The chair and committee requires a week or more to read and make suggestions on each draft. Drafts submitted to the chair and committee must be proofread carefully. Students cannot defend their thesis or professional project report until it is approved by the committee chair and committee members.

Theses and professional projects require students to interact with many groups in order to achieve their goals and objectives. Students are expected to be professional, respectful, civil, and mature in their interactions with faculty, staff, and students, and, when applicable, respondents, site supervisors, agency staff, and clients. Successful completion of the professional project or thesis is the student's responsibility. Students must identify and meet all deadlines and administrative work (e.g., signatures needed) related to the project and the defense. Deadlines are available on the Graduate College website.

Any graduate student receiving supervision for the professional project or a thesis must be registered for the appropriate course during that semester:

Students in the **non-thesis** track will take SUST 5398 (Professional Project). Students in the **thesis** track will take a minimum of 6 credit hours of thesis courses. Typically, this means enrolling in SUST 5399A and then SUST 5399B. In some instances, such as when a student needs additional time to complete a thesis or when the research project requires extended time, students may enroll in SUST 5199B, SUST 5299B, or SUST 5399B. Students should not take 5399A and 5399B at the same time but there are some exceptions to this guideline (check with the graduate advisor in sociology). Typically, 5399A is used for completing the thesis proposal, getting IRB approval (if applicable) and beginning data collection and analysis. 5399B is for completing the thesis, the thesis report, and defending the thesis.

B. SELECTION OF THE THESIS OR PROFESSIONAL PROJECT (EXIT EXAM) COMMITTEE

To begin the thesis or professional project process, each student should consult with his or her mentor, committee chair (who is typically-but not always-the mentor), and committee members. Refer to the professional project or thesis checklists available on the Tracs site. *The thesis committee* consists of three faculty members: The chair (typically, the student's mentor) should be someone whose area of specialization is related to the thesis topic. Students can find areas of specialization on the faculty webpages, faculty CVs, faculty profiles (see <http://faculty.txstate.edu/>), and/or ask faculty about their other areas of interest. The thesis committee chair can provide possible

recommendations for the two other committee members. Students are strongly encouraged to select committee members from two or more departments so that the committee is interdisciplinary.

The professional project/exit exam committee consists of three faculty members: The committee chair (typically, the student's mentor) and two other faculty members. The committee chair can provide recommendations for possible committee members. Students are strongly encouraged to select committee members from two or more departments.

C. NON-THESIS PROFESSIONAL PROJECT GUIDELINES

The MS/MA non-thesis program culminates in a professional project. The objective of the professional project is for students to develop an applied project and/or policy analysis that focuses on, for example, how to make an organization, group, and/or agency more sustainable. The specific nature of the project will vary depending on the mentor, committee, and students' career goals. However, each project should help the student answer the following question: How and why should a group of people (e.g. policy makers, organizational leaders, educators, agency staff, and/or non-profit organization members) become more sustainable? Some examples of professional projects include:

- Developing and implementing a plan for a university to set up recycling bins at stadiums
- Developing and implementing a plan for an airport to set up recycling bins
- Organizing a community event
- Organizing a workshop or workshops for concerned citizens or leaders in the community
- Working with a city council to propose a ban on Styrofoam
- Developing a new and innovative way to create items (e.g. furniture) from sustainable products
- Helping an organization or business to become more sustainable
- Completing a graduate-level internship that is related to sustainability with a business, agency, or non-profit organization

The culminating report for the student's faculty committee should be a detailed discussion about what the student did for his or her professional project. It should include a substantial literature review of peer-reviewed articles. When possible, the student should incorporate interdisciplinary theories, concepts, and empirical literature on sustainability as they apply to the particular topic of the project. While there are no minimum page requirements or number of references, the report should be a sophisticated discussion that demonstrates the students' understanding and application of his or her coursework. Such a discussion is nearly impossible to do in less than 15 pages and with fewer than 20 references. The report will be uploaded by the Director of Graduate Programs in Sociology to the Sustainability Studies Tracs site for other students and faculty to read. Refer to the Tracs site for examples of student reports.

Grade policy for SUST 5398 (Professional Project course): If the student does not successfully complete the professional project, report and/or defense, the supervising faculty member may opt to assign an Incomplete to the student's semester grade. The student will not be able to graduate and must complete the requirements of SUST 5398 in the subsequent semester and apply for graduation. The student will NOT need to enroll in SUST 5398 in the subsequent semester and while completing the requirements of the Incomplete grade. Taking an Incomplete may affect students' eligibility for financial aid and/or GA positions. It is the student's responsibility to identify the consequences of receiving an

Incomplete for financial aid and/or GA positions. Students should check with appropriate offices on campus (e.g., the Director of Graduate Programs in Sociology, the Financial Aid office, etc.) to determine how their eligibility for financial aid and/or GA positions will be affected by an Incomplete in SUST 5398.

D. THESIS GUIDELINES

The thesis is a major research project based on a gap in the scholarly literature in sustainability studies. Students choose thesis topics based on their areas of interest in sustainability studies and by identifying a significant empirical or theoretical gap in the academic literature. The thesis must reflect a graduate level understanding of the topic, as well as the ability to communicate that understanding on paper.

RESEARCH COMPLIANCE: Texas State University is committed to research integrity. This means holding ourselves to high standards of research ethics, and complying with mandated review of some research. Students must consult with their committee chair regarding i) human subjects review and the IRB application process, and ii) research on animals and the IACUC process. Many theses require IRB review for approval or exemption, or IACUC review and approval. Students must plan for the time required for IRB or IACUC application review. They must ask their thesis committee chair to read and approve all documents required for the IRB or IACUC application. Students should NOT send anything to the IRB or IACUC without prior approval from the thesis committee chair. Students must complete the online CITI Program for students before they can submit applications to the IRB for approval.

THESIS PROPOSAL: Students must write a thesis proposal. The proposal describes the proposed thesis study in detail. The committee chair will determine whether the project is appropriate for a master's thesis. Thesis proposals typically include the following items but these components vary by discipline; confirm the requirements of the thesis proposal with your thesis chair.

1. An introduction and rationale: Introduce the topic and explain why it is important to study. What is the significance of the study? What is the rationale for conducting this research? Students should not discuss why the topic is important to *them*; instead, they shall emphasize the scholarly relevance.
2. A literature review: What do sustainability scholars already know about this topic? This section summarizes most of the relevant previous studies, as they relate to the topic. It should define all central concepts and identify the gap in the literature. It should discuss how the proposed study fills that gap.
3. Theoretical framework(s): This section should describe the theoretical background of the main question. It will discuss the main theories that are relevant to the study. (Note: This document is a proposal; the theories employed in the completed thesis might change.)
4. A description of research questions or hypotheses and rationale.
5. A proposed methodology: Students must apply what have learned in methods courses to their study design. This section must discuss the proposed method and why this method is appropriate for the research questions or hypotheses.

6. A proposed and realistic timeline
7. A bibliography (Use the format preferred by your thesis committee chair, e.g., APA, ASA)
8. Appendices (if applicable), e.g., qualitative interview guide, survey instrument, etc.

After the committee chair approves the proposal, the student must

1. Submit the proposal to the committee members. After the committee approves the proposal, the student must complete the thesis proposal form (available on the Graduate College site under “Forms”) and collect signatures.
2. Submit the thesis proposal with IRB or IACUC approval or exemption (if applicable) and thesis proposal form with the committee signatures to the sociology department’s graduate program office administrator for approval. If approved, the graduate director in sociology will forward the thesis and the proposal form to the sociology department chair for his or her signature. The office staff will forward the signed and completed form and proposal to the Dean of the Graduate College for approval.

E. THE DEFENSE AND COMPREHENSIVE (EXIT) EXAMINATION: THESIS AND PROFESSIONAL PROJECT

If the committee chair approves the thesis or professional project report, then the student may send the thesis or report to the committee and set up the defense.

The student should consult with the committee chair and committee about the defense. Typically, the student introduces her or himself and discusses the main issues in the thesis or professional project in a 15-20 minute presentation. The presentation should outline the major ideas in the project. The defense is also considered an oral exit exam. The committee and other faculty present will ask questions about the thesis or professional project topics, specifically, and sustainability studies, generally. The comprehensive/exit exam will cover the thesis or report, as well as the student’s mastery of interdisciplinary theories and research in sustainability studies.

Before the defense, students must

- 1) Contact the sociology graduate programs administrator (sociograd@txstate.edu) to inform him or her about the upcoming defense. Then, find a time when all committee members can meet and reserve a room for the defense. Your committee chair may be able to assist in reserving a departmental/program conference room.
- 2) Send copies of the thesis or professional report to the committee and confirm the date, time, and place of the defense. Give the completed, polished, and formatted (per Graduate College formatting requirements) thesis or report to the committee at least 1-2 weeks (check with your committee chair) before the defense date.
- 3) Check the Graduate College deadlines and plan carefully. Note that professional projects are “in house”; thus, *professional project defense dates* may be scheduled later than *thesis defense dates* listed

on the Graduate College webpage. The professional project defense should be scheduled at least 7-10 days prior to comprehensive exam deadlines listed on the Graduate College website (see <https://www.gradcollege.txstate.edu/students/deadlines.html>).

4) Study previous course notes and materials in order to prepare for questions during the defense.

The day of the defense, students must:

- 1) Arrive early. Ask an office staff member to assist with computer set-up if needed.
- 2) Confirm that the committee chair will take the student's forms with committee signatures to the graduate advisor's office in the sociology department after the defense. The committee will sign the form if the student has successfully defended.

After the defense, students must:

- 1) Complete revisions to the thesis or practicum and send the final document to the committee chair for his or her final approval.
- 2) Confirm the correct format. The **thesis** must follow the correct Graduate College format exactly (http://www.gradcollege.txstate.edu/Thes-Diss_Info). Details about confirming format, etc. are the student's responsibility. Attend Graduate College Shop Talks about the thesis process. Be aware of graduate school deadlines (located on the Graduate College website). Correspond with the Graduate College about formatting questions.

The professional project report format will be determined by the professional project committee chair. It should include a title page, abstract, table of contents, and bibliography. Refer to the Tracs site for examples of previous students' reports.

3) Theses must be submitted electronically to the Graduate College before the deadline.

Professional project reports must be submitted electronically to the graduate advisor in sociology. The professional project report *should not* be sent to the Graduate College.

4) Complete the online exit interview and alumni contact information for the sociology department.

5) Celebrate this fine accomplishment.

F. APPEAL PROCESS

Should a student take issue with the committee's decision on the comprehensive exam, the following process should be employed to appeal that decision.

1. The student must notify the members of the committee in writing within 7 working days of the decision that the student requests the committee to reconsider its decision. The student should identify specific points or issues to be reconsidered by the committee.

2. The committee has 7 working days after receiving the request to respond to the student in writing.
3. If no satisfactory conclusion can be reached at this level, the student may appeal in writing to the Sustainability Studies Advisory Council.
4. The Council has 7 working days after receiving the request to respond to the student in writing.

Students found guilty of academic dishonesty are subject to the disciplinary action specified in the Texas State Student Handbook (<http://www.dos.txstate.edu/handbook.html>) and in the University's Honor Code (<http://www.txstate.edu/effective/upps/upps-07-10-01.html>). The TRACS site contains numerous resources on avoiding plagiarism. Unintentional plagiarism has the same consequences as intentional plagiarism.

VI. DEADLINES

It is the student's responsibility to adhere to all Graduate College deadlines. For **deadlines**, consult the Graduate College webpage for the semester in which you plan to graduate (<http://www.gradcollege.txstate.edu/deadlines.html>). **There are no exceptions to these deadlines.**