Thesis/Dissertation Development

Depending on the type of study you are doing (case law analysis, historical literature review or empirical research) it will take 1 – 1½ years to complete a thesis, and 2-3 years, possibly more, to complete a dissertation. It is best to start the project as soon as possible in your program of study and to continuously work on it a few hours per week.

Step 1 - Decide on a topic. Topics are usually found while taking a class. You read something or hear something in lecture that you want to look into further. You may see a problem/issue/process at the court you serve that you want to look at to resolve/improve. There may have been something from law school that was of interest and is justice related as well.

Step 2 – After you find a topic that interests you, you need to do some preliminary research – review literature out there on the topic to see how others have studied it and what their results were. If the topic has been studied a lot, you will need to find a different way to approach/study. Your thesis/dissertation should result in new knowledge about the topic or at least add to what scholars already know.

Step 3 - Prepare a 3-5 page outline of the topic – the problem, the question you want to answer, why the questions needs to be asked (benefits), what’s been learned from preliminary research, and how you plan to study it. As you start your research you will find there are other questions of interest you’d like to look at as well. Although it can be a challenge, you want to keep your research focused very narrowly on the question you are addressing. Getting on bunny trails changes your focus and makes the process longer. You can consider those other questions in future research.

Step 4 - Submit outline to the Program Director for approval of the topic and assistance identifying potential committee members. For the Master’s committee you need one UNR member to serve as chair, one NJC/NCJFCJ member based on major (vitae will be needed), one additional member from UNR, NJC, NCJFCJ or another university with proven knowledge in the field (if not UNR faculty, vitae will be needed), and a UNR faculty member to serve as the Graduate School Representative. Should your additional member be a UNR faculty member, they can serve as both a member and Graduate School Representative. For the Ph.D. committee you need two members from UNR, one will serve as chair and the other will serve as the Graduate School Representative, one NJC/NCJFCJ member (vitae will be needed), and two additional members from UNR, NJC, NCJFCJ or another university with proven knowledge in the field (if not UNR faculty, vitae will be needed). Your committee will review and approve drafts of your prospectus and then your thesis/dissertation, making comments, asking questions, giving you options to think about or look into all in an effort to build a strong and valuable project. Committee comments on drafts are sent to the committee chair who will review and share with the student along with any guidance needed concerning those comments.

If you find that you are having some writing issues, or your committee recommends receiving assistance with writing, the Program has a Thesis Writing Consultant available to help you over the writing hurdles.

Step 5, Part 1 - Develop your outline into a prospectus. The prospectus is a more detailed proposal of how you plan to study the topic. It should be 7-10 pages and include: an expanded introduction to the problem, what the literature you reviewed had to say, the question (very clearly stated) to be answered, why your research question is important (benefit), the hypotheses or expected findings (declarative statements of relationship between variables that come from the research question and the rational
basis for the hypotheses or statements), the methods that will be used to study the topic (design, participants (if any), setting, variables and measures, procedures which may include a comparison (court v court, state v state, service v service), the data analysis plan (type of analysis you plan to use), and how you plan to show the comparisons of interest.

Part 2 – In most cases should you chose to conduct an empirical study (survey, interview with subjects), after the prospectus has been approved you will need to take the Human Subject Protection training (CITI), then submit a human subject’s protocol. This protocol, whether it is deemed exempt or not, will explain how you will protect the safety and welfare of the subjects with whom you come in contact. If you are going to analyze secondary data that contains subject identifiers, you must demonstrate how you will protect the identity of the subjects, and you will more than likely receive an expedited review. If the secondary data contains no identifiers, you will more than likely be exempt from review. Judicial Studies staff can assist with this process, if needed.

Part 3 - When your committee has approved your prospectus, complete a Program of Study form (you can obtain course information through your MyNevada account or contact the JS Program), obtain signatures of committee members (you can fax or send electronically to members with signed forms being faxed or sent electronically directly to JS Program), and return to the JS Program for final approval, signature and submission to the Graduate School.

Step 6 – Get it done! Continue working with your committee chair and committee, sending them drafts of your work as it’s completed. As you conduct your research conclusions can be drawn from the data and these conclusions will be written into the summary/conclusion and recommendations sections at the end of our paper as well as the abstract. Present preliminary findings clearly and be sure any charts, graphs, tables are understandable and reflect what has been written.

Please keep in mind the pagination requirements: double space throughout (including before and after headings), 1”-top and right margins, 1 ½” left margin, and 1 ¼” bottom margin. Type should be no smaller that 12 pitch. Sequence of pages: Title page (not numbered), copyright page (not numbered), committee page (not numbered), abstract (Roman numeral i), dedication or acknowledgement (optional – continue roman numerals), table of contents (continue Roman numerals), body of document (begin Arabic numbering and continue through end of document), bibliography, table of cases. Page numbers should appear at top right of page. Example of pages can be found on the UNR Graduate School website, www.unr.edu/grad/forms under either Thesis Filing Guidelines or Dissertation Filing Guidelines. Citations of other peoples work used/referred to, even if paraphrased, should be done in an APA format. You can use either end notes or footnotes.

Step 7 – Final product and defense. When the committee has approved your thesis/dissertation you will need to submit the final version to the JS program to run through SafeAssign (plagiarism scan). If the document passes you must complete and obtain signatures on a Notice of Completion form and the Final Approval Form (you can fax or send electronically to members with signed forms being faxed or sent electronically directly to JS Program), and submit the bidding fee (payable to the Board of Regents). You will upload the final approved document and complete the UMI copyright agreement form. The above forms (minus the UMI form) are submitted to the JS Program for final review, signature and submission to the Graduate School.
It is up to the committee chair whether a thesis will need to have a final formal defense, but it is required for the dissertation. Your committee will be familiar with your work, but you will need to verbally explain, answer questions and defend your work. Be sure you understand every aspect.

It is recommended that you obtain a copy of Dissertation and Thesis from Start to Finish, by Cone and Foster. It is a step by step look at the thesis/dissertation process. It is slanted toward empirical research, but is extremely beneficial for non-empirical work.

The JS Program offers a Thesis Writing Orientation every summer that students are highly encourage to attend. The orientation is an introduction to the writing process and students often start the outline for their project during the session. The orientation may be repeated if necessary.