**University of Florida**
**College of Journalism and Communications**
**Department of Public Relations**

# General Guidelines for "Project in Lieu of Thesis"

**Originally developed by Dr. Linda Hon**
**Revised by Dr. Juan-Carlos Molleda and Dr. Linda Hon**

## *Getting Started*

The need for projects typically arises from some professional issue, problem, or opportunity an organization, group, or a particular industry is facing or is likely to face. A project may explore a creative topic. Among potential projects are: campaign plans, communication audits, traditional or interactive media kits, Web site or other online resources, crisis or risk communication plans, corporate social responsibility policies and programs, a multicultural program, or an analysis of the public relations landscape/environment of a given country in the world, etc. This must be an individually completed project.

The focus of your project may come from your own interest in this issue, problem, opportunity, or topic. The project also might involve as the result of a shared interest with a client/sponsor whom you have worked with your internship, an initiative or request of an organization or group within the industry or community, or one you or your committee members have solicited cooperation from specifically for the project.

The major criteria for evaluating the efficacy of your proposed idea are usefulness and relevance to a particular organization or group. Implicit here is the expectation that the project meets professional, ethical and/or technical standards and is feasible.

## *Graduate Seminar and Meetings with your Committee*

To facilitate the project process, a graduate seminar (MMC 6973 Project Research and Design)[1] will be offered in the fall semester at the beginning of the student's second year in the master's program. The objective of the seminar will be to have a committee assembled and your project proposal defended by the end of the term. You are responsible for selecting the chair of the committee and two additional committee members among the Department of Public Relations' or College's graduate faculty who will assist in guiding and judging the projects.

You must have a pre-proposal completed before you can enroll in the course. The idea of offering this course in fall is with the intention that you have everything pretty much done except for completing the project and defense left for spring. The instructor of record will supplement these general guidelines with a set of specific expectations, rules and regulations, and deadlines in a course syllabus or individual meetings.

All of the components of your proposal and final project are completed through informal and formal consultation with your instructor of record, chair, and committee, as needed. When you develop a tentative idea and complete some initial library or secondary research (usually a preliminary review of trade and academic literature or organizational materials) related to your idea most likely at the

[1] Please see attached sample syllabus from similar course offered in 2000.

beginning of spring the semester or before, you should begin talking to faculty to identify and achieve the commitment of faculty members who are supportive of the project's idea and methodology and have the expertise or interest needed to provide you additional advice. Your chair assumes the role of adviser until you have completed all your degree requirements.

At the point when you and your chair believe you are ready to begin work on the actual project, you should call a proposal meeting with your full committee (and client-sponsor, if applicable) to make sure all expectations are clear and agreed upon. At the conclusion of this meeting, prepare a memorandum about what was discussed and agreed to and distribute this to your committee members (and client-sponsor, if applicable). At the bottom of the memo, provide a specific date at which you will begin to work on the project and an estimated date of completion in the absence of communication from your other two committee members about further revisions required.

## ***Writing the Proposal and Project***

The following is a tentative outline, but versions may vary slightly depending on expectations of the instructor, student, and committee members.

### *Chapter 1 – Purpose and Need*

This chapter defines the focus of your project in relation to purpose and need. You must clearly articulate what the issue, problem, opportunity, or topic is and why the project is either needed by the profession, organization, and/or industry. To complete this chapter, you should analyze the situation surrounding the issue, problem, opportunity, or topic by gathering information from sources such as:

- Meeting with clients, sponsors, and other stakeholders (i.e., involved or affected publics).
- Reviewing relevant trade and/or academic literature, which may include:
  - Formal academic or applied research articles
  - Historical archives
  - Trade and professional literature
  - Media articles
  - Records of organizations and people involved—transcripts of interviews, legislative hearings, program descriptions and examples, administrative reports and memoranda, and online communications such as Web sites, listservs, and news and discussion groups
- Gathering information from experts on the issue, problem, opportunity, or topic as well as other stakeholders.
- Conducting site visits relevant to the project idea to obtain real-world sense of the context and to talk with and/or observe people involved in the issue, problem, opportunity, or topic.

### *Chapter 2 – Review of the Literature*

This chapter synthesizes the secondary research you have located relevant to your project idea. The literature review, however, does more that just summarize. You must critique and analyze what is known and not known about the project idea. This goal is to present a conceptual framework that logically substantiates the need for your project and generates the questions that will be addressed.

### *Chapter 3—Methodology*

This chapter explains and justifies the need and appropriateness of conducting primary formative research for the planning and execution (if applicable) of the project, and outlines the steps involved in the design and presentation of the primary research itself.

In some cases, the primary research may be original analysis of secondary/archival evidence beyond that reviewed in Chapter 2. For most professional projects, though, other social science methods—survey, experiment, content analysis, focus group, interviews, observation, participant observation—are needed. No matter what methodology you employ, you must explain the details of the method and justify why the method you choose is the most appropriate for planning and designing your project. To justify the methodology you discuss advantages, disadvantages, and how the disadvantages were overcome or accounted for. To explain the methodology you address:

- Procedures and instrumentations must be approved by the UF Institutional review Board
- Description of research design—(e.g., one-shot, quasi-experimental, experimental, or as appropriate for qualitative, quantitative or historical design).
- Description of population and description of and justification for type of sample used or method for selecting units of observation.
    - Internal validity
    - External validity
- Development of instrument or method for gathering observations (e.g., questionnaire, coding categories for content analysis, moderator guide for a focus group, interview guide, recording forms for observation).
    - Reliability and validity of instrument or method (or as appropriate for qualitative and historical instruments and methods)
- Administration of instrument or method for making observations (e.g., survey, experiment, content analysis, focus group, interviews, observation, participant observation)
- Data coding on entering and cleaning or editing.
- Description of data analysis
    - Statistical analysis and tests performed
    - Identification of themes/categories (or as appropriate for qualitative or historical research) and illustration of key findings
- Results
    - The results of your primary formative research should allow you for further fleshing out the conceptual framework for the project by answering questions such as the following: (1) what is the goal of the project? (what is the expected outcomes), (2) who are the primary and secondary publics?, (3) what are the main points, key messages, or themes to be communicated?, and (4) how will the effectiveness of the project be measured?
    - In some cases, the primary formative research you may involve a pilot test or pre-test of the project itself or some of its main components

- Interpretations or discussions and conclusions
- Chapter 3 also outlines the methodology of the project (i.e., plan for the design and presentation of the project). Here it is critical that you, your committee, and any client/sponsor involved have negotiated and agreed to in writing at least the following:
    - Timeline—which activities must be performed and when completion is expected
    - Budget—dollar figures for equipment, supplies, and technical assistance needed

- Funding—who is responsible for payment of expenses
- Description of the final form of the project. This must detail what you actually will present to the committee and client/sponsor in your project defense (i.e., written, oral, visual, audio, multimedia) and in what format the project will be permanently available. Also, in planning for the final form of the project, you must address: (1) what technical/production/hands-on aspects of the project you are responsible for and what can be contracted out; (2) legal issues such as copyright, use of trademarks, distribution of royalties; and (3) use of proprietary information from clients, sponsors.

***Chapter 4—Project Presentation***

The form that this chapter takes varies depending upon the nature of the project—e.g., campaign plans, communication audits, traditional or interactive media kits, Web site or other online resources, crisis or risk communication plans, corporate social responsibility policies and programs, a multicultural program, or an analysis to the public relations landscape/environment of a given country in the world, etc. If the project does not have a written component that can be presented in Chapter 4, it should be clear to the reader where the project is available and how to access it.

***Finishing***

- You should expect to finish your project in the spring semester. You will register for the project in lieu of thesis during both fall and spring.
- The defense is scheduled when the project has been completed successfully. Even if nothing goes wrong (and things often do), a quality project takes dedication and full-time investment from inception to graduate school clearance. If you fail to complete the project successfully on time, you may have to register for project in lieu of thesis during the following semester.
- Do not expect your chair or committee members to edit your work. Before turning in any drafts or mock-ups, you should carefully proof your work.
- Leave time for the chair to examine your completed project thoroughly at least twice before giving it to your committee members. Don’t expect to submit the completed project for the first time to the chair and defend it in the same or following week. Also, it is customary to give the completed project to committee members at least a week before the defense.
- It’s the student responsibility to schedule with the three committee members the defense, to reserve a room for the defense, and to bring the signature page and the examination form to the defense.
- Be prepared for revisions after the defense. You can expedite clearance by the graduate school by letting the staff examine a draft if the written portion of your project and all supporting materials before you defend.
- It is customary to provide your chair and committee members with a copy of the final version of the project and all supporting materials.