Overview
The honors thesis is a long-standing tradition in honors programs and colleges, including the Lee Honors College at Western Michigan University. An honors thesis is defined as an original work of scholarship or creative activity completed by an undergraduate honors student. The honors thesis is required to graduate from the Lee Honors College. The thesis should reflect the academic standards of the field of study, and must be approved by a full-time WMU faculty (the honors thesis committee chair) and at least one additional committee member with significant expertise in the area of study or a closely related discipline. Examples of honors theses include senior engineering design projects, creative works of fiction, original documentaries, novel educational curricula, original performances or works of art, and traditional research papers. Visit our online collection in ScholarWorks to view samples of recent theses and a list of titles going back 40 years.

The honors thesis experience is intended to provide you with an opportunity to hone pertinent skills and knowledge in your major field of study, or in another area of significant interest to you, under the close guidance of content experts. The honors thesis culminates in a capstone project that reflects the expertise you have gained by completion of the thesis project. It is intended to provide you with an opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge and skills developed during your undergraduate studies at WMU. Students typically find that completion of an honors thesis is viewed quite favorably by professional and graduate school admission committees, as well as by prospective employers.

Steps and Timeline:
Step one: Selecting a thesis topic (by the beginning of junior year)
It is never too early to begin thinking about a thesis topic! Ideally, the thesis topic should be chosen by the beginning of the junior year. Most students find this step to be the most difficult, so do not worry if you are struggling to select a topic. Remember that the thesis topic does not have to be within your major program of study. To find a topic, reflect on courses, topics in courses and experiences (e.g. study abroad, field experiences, internships) that you have found to be especially interesting and engaging. Explore these ideas with some additional reading and conversations with other students, staff and faculty. Your preliminary research on the topic should include some background reading of textbooks, published papers or other scholarly (peer-reviewed) materials. You should aim to find a topic that really appeals to you; your preliminary reading and conversations may suggest some areas that are prime for additional research. Do not worry if your ideas are still a bit nebulous when you proceed to step two.

Step two: Choosing your thesis committee chair (in your junior year)
Once you have settled on a preliminary topic, the next step is to identify a thesis committee chair (also sometimes referred to as the thesis mentor or advisor). Ideally, the thesis chair will have significant expertise not just in your general program of study, but in an area closely related to the topic you have chosen for your honors thesis. Note that the thesis chair must be a full-time
faculty member at WMU. There are many ways to find a thesis chair. If you choose a topic based on a course you took at WMU, make an appointment with the course instructor to discuss your idea. Even if the instructor is unable to serve as your thesis chair, they might be able to suggest a faculty member who is available and who has expertise closely related to your topic. If you do not already know the person they recommend to be your thesis chair, ask your instructor if they would be willing to introduce you to that person. Another good idea is to check the web to see if there are faculty at WMU with expertise closely related to your chosen topic. Most faculty identify their specific areas of expertise on their faculty departmental websites. If you find someone with appropriate expertise, you can introduce yourself to them through a “cold” phone call or email, or you might ask a faculty or graduate student you already know to do an introduction for you. Another option is to contact the LHC academic advisors or dean to see if they can help you find an appropriate honors thesis chair or introduce you to a faculty member you found by searching on the web. Hint: Faculty will be the most receptive to students who are professional and well prepared. Make sure that your first contact, whether by email, phone or an in-person appointment, leaves a good impression. Of course, you must be on time for your appointment, and if you must reschedule, do so early. Do not be a no-show! You should demonstrate that you have done a little preliminary research on your topic, by reading some textbooks, peer-reviewed articles or other scholarly materials. You should be able to articulate what interests you about this area of scholarship and why you would like to pursue an honors thesis related to it. The more prepared you are, and enthusiastic about your potential project, the more likely a busy faculty member will want to take the time to become your thesis chair! Also, be open-minded in your discussions. It may be that your topic will be difficult to research, or that there is already a great deal of work that has been done in that area. A potential thesis chair might suggest some other ideas for a thesis topic – listen to these and consider them carefully, but do make sure that you settle on a topic that is interesting to you, as well as to your thesis chair. You might also bring a copy of the “letter to thesis mentors” found here:

http://www.wmich.edu/honors/academics/forms

which provides some info about the thesis process, especially if you work with a faculty member who has not previously chaired a thesis committee.

**Step three: Filing your thesis declaration form (in your junior year)**

Ideally, you should file this form at least three semesters before you intend to graduate. You can find it here:

http://www.wmich.edu/honors/academics/forms

You will need to fill in your proposed thesis topic, a general description of the work to be done and have your thesis chair sign the form. If you decide to change topics, thesis mentors, or date of graduation, you can simply fill in a new or amended form. Your thesis declaration form will be approved or rejected by the LHC Dean. Rejection usually occurs for one of three reasons: (1) incomplete form, (2) proposed thesis chair is not a full-time WMU faculty or (3) thesis topic is not sufficiently scholarly. You will be informed of the reason for rejection, and are encouraged to make an appointment to come in to the LHC if you need more information.

Note that if your project involves research involving people or animals, you must contact the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at (269) 387-8293. This is vital to the approval of your thesis. If you write a thesis that needs HSIRB approval, and you have not received it before you begin your research, the study is invalid and the thesis must be destroyed. This is a federal
regulation, not one of the University or the honors college. Only HSIRB can determine whether approval is required, and only HSIRB can grant approval for research that involves people or animals. If there is any question that your proposed research might need HSIRB approval, you should check with your thesis chair, an LHC advisor or directly contact the HSIRB before you proceed with your work. [http://www.wmich.edu/research/compliance/hsirb/undergrad-info.html](http://www.wmich.edu/research/compliance/hsirb/undergrad-info.html)

**Step four: Choosing your thesis committee (in your junior year)**

In addition to the honors thesis chair, you must select at least one additional expert to serve on your committee, although it is highly recommended that you select at least two committee members in addition to your thesis chair. The committee members need not be WMU faculty, but should have expertise relevant to your topic of study. The committee could include faculty from the same or another department or college at WMU; faculty from another institution; graduate students; WMU staff; or members of the broader community. Note that your committee may NOT be comprised only of a faculty member and a graduate student who is advised by that faculty member. In that case, you would need to select an additional committee member who does not work in the research group of your thesis chair.

You should consult with your thesis chair regarding possible members of your thesis committee soon after you choose a thesis topic. Ideally, your committee members will meet with you before you begin work on the thesis so that they may give you advice and ideas regarding your proposed work. It is a good idea to arrange an initial meeting with your chair and committee in which you present a brief thesis proposal. This need not be formal, although your committee will likely appreciate it if you provide them with a one- or two-page summary of your proposed work a few days before the meeting. This will allow them time to consider your proposal and offer you valuable guidance. Use your initial committee meeting to get feedback about your topic, and to put together a preliminary timeline for your work. This will help you to get started on your project, and to get insight into what constitutes an appropriate timeline for the proposed work. Once you get started on your project, you should send periodic updates on your progress to your full committee and should also consider scheduling regular meetings with them. You should definitely have regularly scheduled meetings with your thesis chair.

**Step five: Filing your thesis defense certificate request form (at least one month before thesis defense)**

Once you have decided on a thesis defense date (see step six), you should file your thesis defense certificate form, which you can find here: [http://www.wmich.edu/honors/academics/forms](http://www.wmich.edu/honors/academics/forms)

This form must be filed at least 30 days before your thesis defense, but turning it in sooner is highly recommended. This form should include your final thesis title, as you would like it to appear on graduation materials, your intended date of graduation, the date you will defend your thesis, and names/contact info for all of your committee members. We strongly encourage all students to defend during Thesis Celebration Days, which are held in the honors college at the end of each fall and spring semester. Theses defended during these days (and only during these days) will be judged and will be eligible for best thesis presentation prizes. The defense certificate form will be used by LHC staff to record your thesis title for graduation, to advertise
your thesis defense and to generate a packet of materials for your thesis committee. You should pick up your packet at the LHC before the defense.

**Step six: Defending your thesis (before you graduate)**

You have completed your project and have written up your findings. Well done - you are almost finished! We recommend that you defend your thesis at least one semester before you intend to graduate. You MUST complete your defense before you graduate, or you will not graduate from the Lee Honors College.

You should make sure that your whole committee has a final version of your written thesis at least a week before your defense (preferably two), so that they have plenty of time to review it. You should plan for your defense to take 1-2 hours. Most are completed within one hour, but some committees prefer to have a longer time – check with your thesis committee in advance. The defense consists of three parts: (1) an oral presentation of your work, open to the public, (2) a public question and answer session and (3) a closed-door oral examination with your thesis committee. The oral presentation typically consists of a 15-20 minute overview of your thesis work. In the sciences, social sciences, business and education this is generally a PowerPoint presentation including a description of the motivation for your work, a summary of related work, the approach you used, the results obtained, your conclusions and their significance. In the humanities, this might include a reading from your original paper. Engineering and the fine arts are typically handled a little differently (see below). After you complete your presentation, allow 5-15 minutes for questions from the public audience. After this period, your committee (at a minimum, your thesis chair and one committee must be present for the exam) will conduct a closed door oral defense. Many students are very worried about the oral exam – don’t be! For most students, this is an opportunity to have an in-depth discussion with your committee about the work you have completed. View it as a chance to show off your knowledge, discuss what you might have done differently in retrospect and what you would do if you were to continue this project, for example, as a graduate student. Many students actually report that they enjoyed the oral exam and the chance to discuss their project and findings in detail with their committee.

Engineering Students: CEAS students typically use their senior design project as the honors thesis. In this case, the presentation given at the College of Engineering and Applied Sciences Senior Design Day will serve as a substitute for the oral defense of the thesis described above. CEAS students may present their work at the Thesis Celebration to compete for best thesis prizes. In this case, the committee does not need to be present and no oral examination follows the presentation.

Fine Arts Students: CFA students typically complete a senior recital, performance or exhibition in lieu of an oral thesis defense. CFA students should consult with LHC staff about the Music Celebration and opportunities to exhibit original artwork in the LHC facility. CFA students may wish to present an overview of their work during the Thesis Celebration to compete for a best thesis prize. See an LHC advisor for details.

**Step seven: Turning in your final, approved thesis**

After your successful thesis defense, your committee may recommend some revisions to your written thesis. You have until 30 days after you graduate to turn in your final, revised and
approved thesis. The thesis should be submitted electronically as a PDF file, together with all of
the information in the thesis packet you receive after turning in your defense certificate request
form (i.e., ScholarWorks agreement, signed defense certificate, evaluation rubrics). Ask your
thesis committee members to turn in the evaluation rubrics you will receive in your thesis packet.

Note: For some students (especially in CEAS), research conducted for the honors thesis contains
proprietary information that cannot be released to the general public. In that case, the final thesis
should be submitted to the Dean of the LHC for approval, and a short abstract should be included
for general dissemination. Likewise, CFA students who complete performances that cannot be
recorded or reproduced due to copyright restrictions, the Dean of the LHC should be informed.
These students should plan to turn in a write-up detailing their experience, the context or history
of their performance (e.g. liner notes) or other relevant information in lieu of the recorded
performance. Please see an LHC advisor for details.

**Frequently Asked Questions:**

**Why should I do an honors thesis?**
The honors thesis is intended to give you an opportunity to complete your own authentic
scholarly or creative work. This is different from a typical “school assignment” because you
choose the topic, design and carry out the project, and make all decisions regarding the work.
Your thesis chair serves as an advisor and consultant, rather than dictating the work to be done to
you. Although this may seem daunting, it is a great opportunity for you to develop and improve
skills related to your intended profession, or in an area of significant interest to you, with the
close guidance of a dedicated team of experts -your thesis chair and committee. This experience
should help you to get into your chosen professional or graduate school, find a job, and excel in
your chosen profession. Many employers and admissions committees hold the honors thesis in
high regard. It is also a tangible example you can offer to demonstrate your skills and talents.
Some students even use the honors thesis as the basis for work they will continue in graduate
school, business, or future employment.

**How long will it take to complete my thesis?**
This depends entirely on you and your committee. In general, it will take at least a semester of
dedicated work to complete your thesis. However, many students work on the thesis over a
longer period, sometimes a year or more. For this reason, we highly recommend that you begin
working on the thesis in your junior year.

**I’m afraid to get started and as a result have been procrastinating. What should I do?**
For most students, getting started is the hardest part of doing an honors thesis! See the steps
above and concentrate on completing them one at a time, rather than allowing yourself to get
bogged down worrying about all the steps at once. If you are really stuck, come in to the LHC
and discuss your concerns with an advisor. Many students find it helpful to write out a tentative
timeline for completing each step.

**I heard that the thesis is supposed to be at least 50 pages (or 100 pages or 200 pages…) long. Is this true?**
No! There are no requirements regarding the length of your thesis. The thesis length is dictated
by the professional norms of your particular field of study. Ask your thesis committee what they
think is reasonable. In most cases, the written thesis is 20-40 pages long. Don’t worry about trying to reach a particular length, however. Quality, not quantity, is what matters in an honors thesis.

Does the thesis need to be completed in my major program of study?
No, you may complete a thesis in any area of interest to you.

What can I expect from my thesis chair?
Your thesis chair should be willing to meet with you and should help you to refine ideas for your project and should give you substantive feedback on your progress in a timely manner. The chair should treat you as an advisee, or a collaborator, not as an employee or a student completing a specific class assignment. Your thesis chair should help you to identify clear milestones, deadlines and due dates for your project.

What can I do to make sure I have a productive relationship with my thesis chair?
You should plan to meet with your thesis chair often. We recommend setting up regularly scheduled meetings (once a week, bimonthly or at least once a month). Of course, you should show up for these meetings and be prepared for them. You should do your best to meet deadlines that you and your thesis chair set for your project. If you get stuck, you should ask questions and let your thesis chair know that you are having difficulties – this is not the time to cancel meetings and avoid making eye contact with your thesis chair when you run into them at Biggby’s. You should think creatively and be proactive, recognizing that this is not just another class assignment – it’s your thesis! It is up to you to define the project and to be an active participant in the work. You should also take advantage of your whole committee – seek their expert guidance and feedback along the way, not just when it is time to turn in the final thesis.

What’s the Deal with HNRS 4990?
At present, HNRS 4990 does not count as an honors class and is not required. However, you may wish to take HNRS 4990: Honors College Thesis to formalize your relationship with the thesis chair, to get additional WMU credit or simply as a way to formally dedicate time in your schedule to your thesis project. If you choose to take HNRS 4990, you and your thesis chair should fill out the form you can find here:
http://www.wmich.edu/honors/academics/forms
sign it, and turn it in to Debra Gambino or Anthony Helms, who will enroll you in the course.