A Guide to the Senior Honors Thesis

Department of Economics
Macalester College

Spring 2005

Introduction

The Honors Program enables seniors with demonstrated ability to engage in independent work that culminates in a project of exceptionally high quality. In most cases, this project is an honor thesis produced within the student’s chosen major. Students in the Honors Program are invited to special events during the fall and spring semesters, have bound copies of their honors thesis added to the library collection, and are recognized as an honors student at graduation and on the official student transcript.

The objective of this document is to address questions that student frequently ask about writing an honors thesis in economics.

How do I get admitted to the Honors Program?

Admission to the Honors Program is determined jointly by the Dean of Academic Programs and the Economics Department. Admission is based on three criteria: 1) a cumulative GPA of 3.30 or higher, 2) completion of the core courses for the economics major (econometrics, intermediate microeconomics, and intermediate macroeconomics) by the start of the senior year, and 3) submission of an acceptable honors project proposal to the department. Proposals are due on the last day of spring semester classes during the student’s junior year. Students who do not complete the core courses prior to their senior year or submit a proposal after the deadline may be considered for admission to the Honors Program, but must demonstrate superior academic performance and submit an exceptional proposal.

Honors proposals must include: a) a brief summary of the relevant literature, b) a statement of the question(s) to be addressed, and c) a bibliography. An Economics Department faculty member must sponsor the proposal and it is the student’s responsibility to seek out a faculty member for this purpose. After reviewing proposals and academic records, the Economics Department and Dean of Academic Programs will determine which students to admit. Students graduating in December should submit a proposal at the end of the fall semester one year prior to graduation.

Why should I write an honors thesis?

We have asked our students to reflect upon the experience of writing an honors thesis and tell us what it has meant to them. This is what they say:

- Flexing your intellectual muscles —The honors project experience provides many opportunities to apply the economic tools you've developed over three years. You gain a better understanding of how everything fits together. More importantly, however, you gain a more intimate knowledge of a particular field or branch of economics. This gives you a much deeper appreciation for the complexity of economic problems and policy issues in general. This is important because you will learn to treat simple explanations of real-world phenomena with a little more
skepticism. You start to appreciate the fact that many problems require deep, deep thinking and recognition of the many unknowns and much uncertainty.

- **Accomplishment**—There is no better feeling than submitting three copies of your completed thesis to the Academic Programs Office. You feel an immense sense of pride and accomplishment. You will be glad you didn't listen to that evil voice in your head that said, “Give it up. It’s not worth it. You have better things to do.”

- **Landing a Good Job**—The honors project acts as a signal to potential employers that you are special—that you have done something above and beyond the average student. Anybody can show up to class, do the homework, study a little bit, and get decent grades. The honors project demonstrates that you can get stuff done on your own, without someone constantly telling you what to do and without the threat of a bad grade to motivate you. If you are fortunate enough to get an interview, then your project will provide many opportunities to prove how great you are—even for jobs that are totally unrelated. When asked "So, what type of quantitative skills do you have?" you can answer, “I did an honors project that used econometric analysis to examine the effect of X on Y in A, B, and C,” or "I derived an analytical formula that related Y to A, B and C.” Simply having the coursework is not necessarily enough, since classes are often long on theory and short on application. My current job wasn’t the first time that my thesis helped me during an interview. After graduating from Mac I worked for Wells Fargo for nine months. When I gave my two weeks notice, my supervisor told me that when I discussed the thesis during my initial interview she figured I wouldn’t stay with them for long because I would eventually go for a better job. She was right.

- **Getting into a Good Graduate School**—As with potential employers, an honors project signals to admissions committees that you are special. Publications arising from honors project work can also be beneficial. Professors that know you well give better recommendation letters. This is HUGE. You think you know your professors well now? Remembering somebody's name is not the same as knowing how they think, how hard they work, what their intellectual strengths and weaknesses are. I count my relationship with my honors advisor as one of the primary reasons why I got a great job out of college and why I got into a highly competitive graduate program.

- **Doing Well in Graduate School**—One of the most difficult parts of Ph.D. programs is making the transition to the third year when students have to wean themselves off of coursework, textbooks, and an exogenously provided schedule, and do things on their own. This includes formulating a research question, doing the background research, coming up with a methodological approach, and everything else. Those with experience in this realm will find the third year much more comfortable.

Thanks to Soren Anderson ’01, third-year Ph.D. student in economics at the University of Michigan, and Bruno Coelho ’04, consultant at Analysis Group in San Francisco, for sharing their thoughts on writing an honors thesis.

It is important to note that our students have been very successful in various honors thesis competitions in recent years including those sponsored by the Minnesota Economic Association,
Midwest Economic Association and Ohio State University. What a better way to convince prospective employers and graduates schools of your potential than to win one of these prizes.

What does an honors thesis look like?
Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to read one or two theses written by our alumni. Your advisor can direct you to past theses that are related to your topic. Theses are available in the library and the Economics Department.

One feature that good honors theses have in common is that they address interesting questions. The questions should be interesting to you because curiosity is a key factor that motivates you throughout the senior year. Moreover, the questions should be of interest to broader academic or policy communities to insure that your work is relevant.

Another common feature of good honor theses is that they ask answerable questions. That is, questions that an undergraduate student, with limited time and resources, can address in a satisfactory manner by the end of their senior year. With this in mind, it is important that students limit the scope of their research so that the project is manageable.

Historically, honors theses in the Economics Department have taken two general forms. The first, and by far most common model, is to write a thesis that is empirical in nature and relies heavily on econometrics. These theses usually attempt to extend the existing empirical literature by using a new or updated data set and/or econometric techniques. In some cases, the data set has been a crucial ingredient for the student writing an exceptional, award-winning thesis. For example, a few years ago one of our students obtained money from the Dean of Academic Programs so he could fly to San Francisco and obtain data on airline fares from a professor at University of California at Berkeley. Using this data, he was able to provide strong evidence that Northwest Airlines was a monopolist in certain markets. This student went on to win the Minnesota Economics Association honors thesis prize and become a professional pilot.

The other model, which is followed less frequently, is to write a philosophical or policy oriented thesis. These theses are more interdisciplinary in nature and their common structure is not easy to describe. A few years ago a student wrote a joint Economics and Philosophy Department honors thesis that examined legal issues. Rather than econometrics, this student used case studies to address his questions.

To give you a sense of topics examined by your predecessors, here are some past thesis titles:

- “Justice and Efficiency Reconsidered: An Organizational Analysis,” Jason Coulter, 1992

Despite their heterogeneous nature, good honors theses have several common elements:
a) An introduction that clearly states the questions to be addressed, inspires the reader to read on, and provides a “road map” of what is to follow.
b) A concise survey of the existing literature and a clear statement of how the thesis adds to this literature.
c) Proper use of empirical and theoretical methodologies.
d) A thorough and honest presentation of the results, buttressed with well-organized and user-friendly graphs and tables.
e) A conclusion that summarizes the findings, draws broader implications, discusses short falls of the research and possible future extensions.

**How do I find a good thesis topic?**

Topics related to your background or career interests are good because you can draw upon your existing knowledge and innate curiosity to sustain you through the process. It is probably not a coincidence that the Macalester student who won the Minnesota Economic Association prize for his honors thesis on the airline industry was passionate about becoming a pilot. For similar reasons, it is common for international students to focus on development topics.

Your previous course work might be a good source for research questions. Which of your courses was most interesting? Can your professor recommend good areas for research and additional readings? Could your metrics paper evolve into a senior thesis? Have you read a recent article in The Economist that raises interesting questions? Perhaps one of the best places to search for topics is the National Bureau of Economic Web Site (www.nber.org). If you are interested in international finance, for example, you can download working papers in this area by going to “working papers” and selecting “international finance.” This is just one example. There are many websites that can be valuable to you in this process and don’t forget the search engines supported by the library (EconLit, Worldcat, etc.)

An important point in the research process occurs when you find the Holy Grail—that one paper or book that inspires you to say, “This is what I want to do!” Once you find the Holy Grail, you can use its references as a guide for further reading. Moreover, you can use the Social Science Citation Index to find papers that have cited the Holy Grail since its publication.

**What role does my advisor play?**

It is important that you select a good advisor. Do you and your potential advisor have a good working relationship? Do they possess expertise relevant to your topic? Will they have time to work with you? A good advisor will serve as your taskmaster (demand that you meet specific deadlines), consultant (lend their expertise and provide feedback) and cheerleader.

A thesis committee is composed of your advisor and a first and second reader. You should bring your first and second readers on board as soon as possible. If you wait until the end to involve them, you run the risk that there will not be enough time to address issues they raise about your work. At the latest, the first reader must sign on before you present your work to the department at the end of the fall semester. Two of the three thesis committee members must be on the Economics Department faculty.

**Does the thesis fulfill my capstone requirement?**

You can fulfill the capstone requirement with the honors thesis if: a) the thesis is approved by your committee, and b) you give an oral defense by the last Monday in April. To free up time to
work on the thesis, students often take a four-credit independent study course during the spring semester. If the thesis is not approved, this course can earn capstone credit.

**What is plagiarism?**

Plagiarism is the use of someone else’s work without giving proper acknowledgment. It can take several forms. Flagrant plagiarism is when the writer makes use of or copies someone else’s work without citing or acknowledging the original source. A more subtle form occurs when the writer properly cites the original source, but fails to indicate that a passage or paragraph is a direct quotation or extended paraphrase of the source. You may quote as much as you want, but must do it using accepted practices, i.e., using quotation marks or indentation. Both forms of plagiarism are unacceptable.

When working on your thesis you will probably receive assistance from several individuals. That’s great! However, you need to make sure that you are not receiving so much assistance that the final product is not your own. Moreover, you should acknowledge the assistance of others on a separate page at the beginning of the thesis.

**What are the important dates?**

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Last day of spring classes (junior year)</td>
<td>Honors proposals due</td>
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<tr>
<td>Last day of spring finals</td>
<td>Department notifies students about their status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall semester (senior year)</td>
<td>Begin work in earnest; Meet regularly with advisor</td>
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<td>Early December</td>
<td>Present informal seminar to department</td>
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<tr>
<td>Last day of fall classes</td>
<td>Hand in literature review &amp; preliminary work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Last day of fall finals</td>
<td>Department notifies students about their status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second to last week in April</td>
<td>Thesis presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early May</td>
<td>Final draft of thesis due at Dean of Students Office</td>
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**Where can I get more information?**

For more information about the economics honors thesis, contact Pete Ferderer at 696-6093 or ferderer@macalester.edu. For information about Macalester College’s Honors Program, go to: http://www.macalester.edu/academicprograms/honors.html.