Senior Year Program 2016-2017

Think of your senior year program as a connected whole. The central elements are:

1. The Senior Colloquium, taken in the fall;
2. A sustained investigation culminating in the form of either a Senior Thesis or a Senior Project.

Senior Thesis Proposal:

This should contain (1) the tentative title of the proposed thesis; (2) the name of the thesis advisor; and (3) a brief statement of the central problem of the thesis and the general approach the student plans to employ. The proposal need be no longer than one or two pages. It must be e-mailed to the CSS Administrative Assistant as an attached file no later than Wednesday, September 7th at 2 PM.

Senior Project Proposal:

If you plan to undertake a senior project instead of a Senior Thesis, this project must have a coherent theme and plan. Such a project is constructed of elements of coursework and/or independent study. It should include a substantial amount of critical writing that brings out the scope and coherence of the project; this normally takes the form of an individual research tutorial. Occasionally, and with prior approval of the relevant instructor and the CSS co-chairs, a senior project may also be completed as part of the requirement of an advanced seminar (usually in a social science or related discipline) culminating in a longer research paper. In either case, your project proposal should list the relevant course(s) to be taken and the general nature of the writing to be done. It should present a short (one-page) statement on the focus of the project and the relationship between the written work and the course(s). If an advisor has been lined up for an individual tutorial, this information should also be included.

For projects being completed in the fall semester, the proposal must be e-mailed to the CSS Administrative Assistant as an attached file no later than Wednesday, September 7th, at 2 PM. For projects being completed in the Spring Semester, a preliminary proposal must be e-mailed to the CSS Administrative Assistant by Wednesday, September 7th at 2 PM, and the final proposal (including the name of the advisor) by Monday, January 30th at 2 PM. All senior projects must be approved by the co-chairs.

Thesis Workshops:

In October, a series of thesis workshops will be held. Each student will make a brief presentation of his or her thesis proposal, expanding on the workshop paper that will be distributed in advance to all interested participants. Thesis workshop papers are due to CSS Administrative Assistant as e-mail attachments no later than five days before the first scheduled session of the workshops (the first workshop will be scheduled no earlier than the second week of October and no later than the first week in November). The thesis workshop paper, five to seven pages in length, should provide: (1) a detailed statement of the problem to be examined, together with (2) an explanation of its significance and (3) an account of the proposed methods of inquiry. It should also describe the research materials to be used and give a capsule bibliography. One or both CSS co-chairs, the student's thesis adviser, and all CSS seniors attend the workshop. Other interested faculty, CSS tutors, and students are encouraged to participate. The workshops are designed to inform the CSS community about the project, to stimulate interdisciplinary critique and defense of the proposal, and to provide the thesis writer with wide-ranging advice at an early stage. These workshops have proved extremely useful to everyone involved.

Attendance at these workshops is mandatory for ALL Seniors.
Important Deadlines:

- **Wednesday, September 7:** By this date, let the Co-Chairs know, via an email to Martha:
  - Whether you are doing a Senior Thesis or a Senior Project.
  - The name of your Senior Thesis or Senior Project advisor.
  - The tentative title of your Senior Thesis or Senior Project.
  - And, if a Senior Project, the semester you will be doing the Senior Project (Fall or Spring).
  - Also:
    - If you are doing a Senior Thesis, you must enroll in CSS 409 for the Fall Semester.
    - If you are doing a Fall Senior Project, you must enroll in CSS 401 for the Fall Semester.
    - For both those doing a Senior Thesis and those doing a Fall Senior Project, you must also email a 1-page proposal (250 words) about your research by this same date, Wednesday, September 7.

- **Mid October through Early November:** Thesis workshops will begin no earlier than the second week in October and no later than the first week in November. Workshop papers will be due to the CSS Administrative Assistant by e-mail attachment at least **five days before** the first scheduled workshop session.

- **Friday, December 2:** A rough draft of a substantial portion of the thesis (probably one full chapter) should be ready for initial evaluation by your Senior Thesis advisor.

- **Friday, December 9:** Fall Senior Projects are due.

- **Thursday, January 26:** A second substantial portion of thesis draft (for instance, another full chapter) must be submitted to your supervisor. It should be accompanied by outlines of the remainder of the thesis, and a brief statement of the research (if any) that remains to be done. At this time the co-chairs and advisor evaluate whether or not the thesis is progressing satisfactorily. If the progress made to date does not point to success, the student will switch to a senior project (see thesis guidelines below).

- **Monday, January 30:** Spring Semester Senior Project proposals are due to the CSS Administrative Assistant by e-mail.

- **Wednesday, February 8:** By this date,
  - If you are doing a Senior Thesis, you must enroll in CSS 410 for the Spring Semester.
  - If you are doing a Spring Senior Project, you must enroll in CSS 402 for the Spring Semester.

- **Wednesday, April 19:** Honors theses are due at Honors College by 4:00 p.m., to be electronically submitted through the Student Portfolio.

- **Wednesday, May 10:** Spring Semester Senior Projects are due. This includes Senior Projects from students who began a Senior Thesis but opted to complete it as a senior project instead.

You are personally responsible for meeting these deadlines.
CSS Senior Thesis Workshop Schedule

Location: 4th Floor PAC, CSS Lounge

Time: Workshops usually begin at 7:00 p.m.; they do not go beyond 10:00 p.m.

Dates: To Be Announced by the end of September

Thesis Guidelines 2016-2017

An acceptable thesis in the College of Social Studies must present an original line of argument, which may include a critical synthesis of the literature. An essay that provides only synopses of various writings in an area, however skillfully executed, does not constitute a senior thesis. An original undergraduate thesis is one in which the student has made the ideas in the work his or her own by placing them within his or her own framework. A thesis must also develop and present evidence appropriate to the type of question it seeks to answer.

The thesis must be carried out under the supervision of a faculty member who is sufficiently knowledgeable about the field to provide proper guidance and direction and who is able to devote adequate time to it. The College expects thesis students to meet with their thesis advisor regularly—normally, once weekly when classes are in session—until completion. Since a thesis represents a significant investment of time by both the student and the advisor, only those projects should be undertaken for which the student has adequate preparation and resources.

Theses will be evaluated by readers appointed by the College. Readers will serve under conditions of anonymity. The procedures for appointing these readers are as follows:

   a. Early in the second semester, a co-chair will consult each thesis advisor to get a description of the thesis and the names of possible readers. One reader must be a CSS core faculty member, and the second reader must be from outside the CSS.

   b. CSS core faculty members will be asked which theses they would be willing to read.

   c. In February, the co-chairs will allocate readers to these.

CSS students will not be permitted to continue with their theses into the second semester unless satisfactory progress has been made by the beginning of the term. Thesis advisors will be asked if their students have completed a significant body of writing (the equivalent of one chapter) and have developed an outline of the work as a whole by no later than the last day of classes in the first semester. Advisors of students who have not met this requirement will be contacted within the first few days of the second semester. If they are still not in compliance, their thesis will be converted to a senior project. Since such a student will have received an “X” for the fall tutorial (normally CSS 409), the student and the thesis (now project) advisor have two options. If they determine that the senior project essay can be completed by the end of the fourth week of the second semester, the fall tutorial (CSS 409) will be changed to CSS 407, and the project advisor will submit a grade for that class when the essay is completed. If they determine that completing the essay will require more than four weeks, the student will register for CSS 408, and the project advisor will submit a grade for it by the end of the spring semester while the X will remain on the transcript for CSS 409 indefinitely.
The following is a statement prepared by Richard Adelstein in April, 2001; it offers valuable reflections and insights on the experience of writing a senior thesis. It is reproduced here with a few minor editorial changes.

**Thinking About Theses**

**Richard Adelstein**

Seniors are submitting their completed honors theses this week, and professors are gearing up to read and evaluate them next week, so this seems a good moment to get you thinking about whether you might want to write a thesis next year, and what such a project entails. Let me help get you started by offering some informal thoughts on what you might expect from the experience as your senior year proceeds.

The thesis year is not congruent with the academic year, even though it has the same summer vacation. It runs from April to April, and if you begin now by trying to articulate a reasonably clear idea of what you'd like to write about, you'll reap the dividends a year from now. Perhaps you have a question or problem in some area of the social studies, broadly defined, that has intrigued you for a while and about which you'd like to learn more, or perhaps you've taken a course that you particularly enjoyed and would like to pursue some of the issues raised there in greater depth. Whatever the source of this initial interest, if you have some ideas about a thesis project, seek out a member of the faculty, inside the CSS or out, whose interests lie close to your own (this is frequently a professor you've had in a course, but it need not be) to discuss these ideas and explore whether you and the professor can enter into a cordial and productive working relationship. Now (well, maybe after next week, when this year's thesis reading is done) is the time to be making these preliminary inquiries of potential advisors. Most professors enjoy supervising honors theses -- after all, it's a chance to work closely with highly motivated students on interesting research, and for us older folk, it doesn't get much better than that -- and will be happy to sign on to your project if there's a good match of interests and personalities. Early in September is generally not too late to create this relationship, but if you wait till then, you run the risk that the advisor's dance card will be full, and that he or she won't be able to take on another advisee.

Don't worry if your ideas are not yet fully formed, or if you can't yet articulate anything beyond a general area in which your thesis topic might lie -- this is par for the course at this stage. Find a professor whose area of expertise is in or near your general area of interest and talk to him or her about the field and your own ideas. Informal brainstorming of this sort often leads to excellent projects, and gives both sides a chance to size one another up and see whether the relationship is likely to be a smooth one. Be open to suggestions from the professors you speak with and allow yourself to be moved from one topic to another within your general area of interest -- the profs are all experienced researchers, aware of problems or pitfalls that you might not anticipate and perhaps able to see more clearly than you can at this stage what is possible and what is not. As I'll suggest below, negotiation of this sort goes on continuously until the thesis is done, and it's wise to accustom yourself to it right at the start.

Once you've secured the services of a suitable advisor, late in the spring of your junior year or very early in the fall, the next step is to register for the senior thesis tutorial (CSS 409) under the advisor's supervision in the fall. You may not preregister for CSS 409 but you simply add it during the fall drop-add period. If the work goes as planned and the thesis is continued into the spring semester, students receive a grade of "X" for CSS 409 (that is, a placeholder grade for work not yet completed) and register for a second thesis tutorial, CSS 410, in the spring. Candidates for honors must complete their theses by the second week in April (see above!), a date set by the Honors College, not the CSS. In a very few cases, thesis writers choose not to submit their work for consideration for honors, or fail to complete the work by the Honors College deadline; these students have until the end of the spring semester to complete their work, and while they cannot graduate with honors, they do receive full credit with a grade (given by the advisor) for each of the two thesis tutorials. Students who do submit their
work for honors have it evaluated by a committee that includes their advisor and two other professors, one a CSS core faculty member and the other from outside the CSS. These evaluations determine whether the thesis will receive Honors, High Honors or no honors. The honors designation is independent of the grades given by the advisor in CSS 409 and 410; honors candidates receive both the honors designation and the tutorial grades.

If you aren't able to secure the agreement of an advisor before you leave for the summer, try at least to have one or two on tap who will be willing to consider the question further in September. Your advisor may suggest some reading for the summer, but then again, he or she may not. Sometimes such summer work is fruitful, sometimes not, sometimes it's enjoyable, sometimes not, but in general it's not essential. The senior year is quite long enough for your research, if you work steadily and conscientiously. But whatever the state of your work at the end of the summer, your advisor will want you to get off to a quick start in the fall. So at the very start of the semester, he or she may well ask you to prepare a short research prospectus (roughly five to seven pages) that lays out the questions you hope to investigate and the research strategy you will use to address them. Be prepared for a request of this kind -- it's yet another reason to begin thinking seriously about your project before your junior year ends.

Once these organizational details are taken care of, the actual work of scholarly research begins. This will almost certainly be very different from anything you've ever done in school before, a long, intense experience filled with pleasure, anxiety, satisfaction, frustration, despair, elation and a thousand other emotions that tumble on one another throughout the year, so it's good to try to be prepared for it. Perhaps the first thing to say is that the thesis year almost always lasts longer than your initial enthusiasm for your topic. No matter how fired up you are in September, in February, when the days are cold and short and it feels like you've been working on this thing forever with no light at the end of the tunnel, you will almost certainly hit an emotional low point that puts your project in some peril. If you started the year with a topic area in which you had a "reasonable" interest, such that the initial reading was sort of interesting and the thesis work itself not too bad, then your thesis is likely to crash in the February trough -- tepid enthusiasm in September, or even strong enthusiasm that doesn't anticipate the trials of the thesis winter, will be fully drained by the first day of the spring semester. The lesson from this is not to start a thesis in September unless you're really excited about the topic area, and have a deep and genuine intellectual curiosity about it. Only this kind of "supercharged" enthusiasm about the subject and the prospect of the research itself will be enough to sustain your project through the dark days of February, and even in this case, the enthusiasm of September will likely turn to something less in midstream, with the excitement and pressure created by the deadline serving as the major forces pushing you through to the end. I certainly don't mean to suggest that the thesis experience is a bleak one; for most people it isn't, and the rewards are wonderful. But I do mean to say that a thesis is not a casual undertaking, as one might take a course just to get a taste of the subject matter. It's a project that requires lots of hard, lonely work, lots of self-discipline, and a toughness of mind and spirit that can overcome the obstacles that will inevitably crop up as you work. Most of us can't summon the energy to complete such a project without a very strong initial motivation to know more about the subject. Just thinking that it would be nice to graduate with honors is generally not enough. If you're sure that you've got the requisite enthusiasm for the project, and the strong desire to see the project through to completion, by all means go for it. But if you don't, think very hard before you start.

Let's suppose now that you've passed this first internal hurdle, and are sure that you're sufficiently fired up about your topic area now that you'll be able to push your thesis through to a successful conclusion a year from now. What's it like to actually write a thesis? One thing that seniors are often surprised by is that serious scholarship is, in the nature of things, an exercise in continuous uncertainty. By this I mean that, even though you are an undergraduate and thus not likely to produce a piece of truly original scholarship of the kind that more experienced researchers are expected to produce, you are writing about questions that no one has ever written about in the particular way that you are writing about them. So there's no "answer" to be found in a book in the library, or even in your advisor's
A thesis is not a problem to be solved, so that you know you're done when you get the answer and it all checks out; it's more like clearing a path in a forest that no one has ever traversed before. Indeed, not only will you be unsure about the "answer," you are almost certain to be unsure about the question until the two or three weeks before the thesis is due. This is because, for every scholarly researcher, young or old, research begins with a topic area rather than with a real topic. Today, for example, you might suppose that you can write a thesis about topic X, devoting twenty pages to "subquestion" X1, fifteen to X2, another twenty to X3, and so on till you've got a thesis. But not long after you begin work on subquestion X1, it will become clear to you that, in order to do a decent job on X1 and treat it in the depth it deserves, you'll have to consider a range of "subquestions" X11, X12, and so on. And perhaps subquestion X11 requires some investigation of even finer questions, X111, X112, etc. By the time you've covered all the relevant bases for the initial subquestion X1, you've written 120 pages and it's April 5th, so that your thesis has turned out not to be about X at all, but about a (very small) part of X, a part that you thought in September that you could treat adequately in ten or twenty pages. Similarly, of course, with X2 and X3 and so forth. Every thesis topic area X, that is, contains many, many potentially superior honors theses within it, and one of the major tasks of the thesis project is to identify this needle of a thesis topic in the haystack of the topic area and confine your writing to an adequate treatment of the needle without trying to expand the thesis beyond what the time you have for it will allow and without losing your interest in the topic as you "zoom in" from the big area X to the tiny plot of ground that ultimately comprises your thesis. Along the way, there is a series of painful choices to be made -- "I'm interested in X1 and X2, but here it is the first of December and I've barely scratched the surface of X1; now I've got to abandon X2 for the duration of the thesis, simply turning away from the readings and the questions relating to X2 until the thesis is done." Writing a thesis, in this sense, is like peeling an onion. It's a continual process of narrowing your focus down, putting some interesting questions aside because you must pursue others in greater depth. As a result, until almost the very end, you can't really say just what your actual thesis topic is. Instead, your topic area simply becomes smaller and smaller until all that's left is what in retrospect turned out to be a finely delineated topic for which the thesis that you've actually written is the appropriate vehicle. This sort of continuous uncertainty -- your inability to say what the title of your thesis will be until it's done -- is very hard on everyone's psyche. Be prepared, but by all means don't despair.

One final set of thoughts. Different people work in different ways. Some students need a lot of structure in the form of specific assignments of work and clear deadlines, and some don't. Some advisors are "hands on," and take the task of supervising more literally than other, more "laissez-faire" advisors do. It's important that you and your advisor are on the same page in this respect. If you need the structure of a schedule and deadlines, make sure your advisor is willing to do his or her part in creating it; if you chafe under such close supervision, find an advisor who will let you organize your work on your own. But if you take the latter course (as, for example, I would), remember that the responsibility for kicking yourself in the behind and getting the work actually done is completely yours. The danger is that, without the pressure of deadlines or regular meetings with your advisor, you will simply let the work slide through the fall semester. You are, after all, taking a thesis course, CSS 409. But it's a course without a syllabus, without class meetings or homework or tests or due dates. You, and only you, determine when you will work, and when you won't. If you have the foresight and the self-discipline to set aside twelve or fifteen hours every week (the time you'd have to spend each week on a regular course) during which you commit yourself to concentrate on your thesis work, you will be at an enormous advantage, and the spring semester will be tolerable, even enjoyable, as the work proceeds toward its conclusion. But if the lack of direct supervision leads you to find a reason or excuse not to work this week or next ("It's only October, my thesis isn't due for six months, no one will notice if I skip the three hours of reading I'd planned for this afternoon and go catch some rays"), so that your work has not progressed very much past the first layer of two of the onion by Christmas, you're in trouble. A serious thesis takes serious, continuous, concentrated work over an extended period of time. You've
almost certainly never done anything like it. Promise yourself that you'll do it right, and then put that promise first on your list of priorities for your senior year.

Sounds like a prison sentence, doesn't it? In some ways, I suppose, it is, but it's worth it. As you respond to the many challenges, intellectual and emotional, of the year, you learn a great deal about yourself. You learn a lot about something you're interested in as well, you have a strong shot at graduating with honors, and you have the satisfaction of doing a hard job well. There's nothing quite like that last feeling. And there's nothing that comes close to the period between April 10 and Commencement for people who have completed an Senior Thesis -- trust me, it's the absolute zenith of your life. Your college work is done (I know, you've got a course or two to finish, but that's a piece of cake for experienced seniors in the spring). So you have nothing more that has to be done in order to graduate. And until you graduate, you have no opportunity to do the next thing in your life, so there's no reason to feel guilty for not doing that next thing now. You thus have six weeks when the last thing in your life is done (and done well) and the next thing in your life can't yet begin. The sun is out, the weather is warming up, you're the master of your undergraduate domain, and the only responsibility you have is to live long enough to shake President Roth's hand when he gives you your diploma. There's nothing like it -- ask (next week!) any senior you know who's just finished an Senior Thesis. You'll never forget it.