Writing an undergraduate honors thesis can be a very rewarding experience, and a special intellectual capstone to your college career. Working closely with a faculty mentor, honors thesis students engage in original research, taking on the challenge of asking interesting questions, discerning the best ways to find answers to those questions, engaging with a community of scholarship, presenting one’s findings in a substantial written document and defending these findings before a faculty panel. For those contemplating graduate school, this process gives majors a real sense of what it is like to be a professional political scientist. Even if you are not looking to go into academia as a career, the honors thesis process can help you develop and hone skills that will translate well in any work you pursue beyond Wheaton.

Students interested in pursuing an honors thesis in the Political Science Department should begin thinking about a research topic by at least the beginning of her or his junior year. The research project may be an extension of work done in our Introduction to Research Methods (POLS 200) course, research conducted in another political science course, or a completely new question you would like to explore. Having taken POLS 200 prior to one’s junior year is not a prerequisite to do an honors thesis in the department, but it is strongly recommended, and will prove immensely helpful to writing your honors thesis research proposal and successfully tackling this challenge. In all cases, it will be useful to consult with department faculty as you begin the process, and as you think about whom you might ask to serve as the thesis project’s primary advisor.

Process, Requirements and Deadlines

1. In order to be eligible to apply to do an honors thesis in the Department, students must have a GPA of 3.50 or better in major and a GPA of 3.33 or better in all courses through the Fall semester of junior year. Awarding of final departmental honors is also contingent upon maintaining these GPA benchmarks through graduation.

2. Interested students must submit a research proposal to the Political Science Department no later than April 5 in the Spring semester of her or his junior year. The research proposal should be approximately 8-10 typed pages and should follow the research proposal guidelines listed below.

3. Department faculty will convene as a committee to review and assess all candidates’ research proposals, and make decisions on which candidates will be invited to go forward to the next stage of the honors thesis process. These decisions will announced before the end of the academic year, upon which time successful proposal candidates should meet with her or his primary thesis advisor to coordinate a work schedule and establish deadlines for the completion of various stages of the research and writing. Students will then have the opportunity to utilize the summer break before senior year to immerse themselves in the literature or literatures germane to their project, conduct field work or other foundational work.

4. During her or his senior year, the thesis student must register for Individual Research (POLS 500) both in the Fall and Spring semesters. These registered thesis hours are beyond the ten courses already required for the major. It is also expected that during the thesis student’s senior year, she or
he will for at least one semester take POLS 500 as part of a normal four course load (i.e., not as a course overload). In general, no one-semester thesis projects will be approved by the Department.

5. In consultation with the thesis advisor, thesis students should select a faculty committee consisting of the thesis advisor, one or two other members of the department, and at least one member from another department by the end of the Fall semester. The student is responsible for keeping all faculty members on the committee informed of progress on the thesis.

6. All thesis students must complete and turn in to their advisor a draft of at least half of the thesis during the final week of the Fall semester. The thesis advisor will make a decision as to whether the student should continue with the second semester of thesis work. If it is decided that the thesis work is not to be continued, students may have the option of converting POLS 500 to an Independent Research course (POLS 499).

7. The faculty thesis committee will conduct the oral examination on the thesis no later than final exam week of the Spring semester. In order to make this a reality, the scheduling of the thesis examination should be done in close consultation with all members of the committee, well in advance of the proposed defense date. At a minimum, the student is responsible for providing each member of the committee with a copy of the thesis one week before the oral examination.

8. The examining committee will determine the final grade for the two semesters of individual research and the thesis. The grade shall be based on the thesis, the oral examination, the student’s general knowledge in the major, and the extent of her or his initiative and independence in carrying out the project.

9. Students should follow the Registrar’s guidelines regarding due dates and format for completion and submission of the final copies of the thesis.

Research Proposal Guidelines

The proposal should be approximately 8-10 typed pages and should contain the following information:

1. A clear, concise statement of the general topic.

2. The question (or questions) that you will answer in the thesis or the hypothesis that you will test, along with a statement about why these questions are important or interesting.

3. A statement of how you intend to carry out the research, what kind of data you will gather to answer your research questions, the source of the data, any problems that you anticipate in gathering the data or accessing appropriate sources. In other words, you need to show that you have thought, in some detail, about how you are going to conduct the research.

4. A brief discussion of what you expect you will find once you conduct the research, and a general outline of how you intend to develop your topic in the thesis.

5. A working bibliography of sources that you have or intent to consult for the project. While this does not have to be a complete bibliography, it must be extensive enough to indicate your familiarity with the resources in this area.