

Departmental Policy Regarding the Election of Plan I or Plan II for M.S. Students

As part of the concluding activities of 502, all first year graduate students will make a formal election between Plan I (Thesis) and Plan II (Professional Project). Election of the Thesis or Professional Project can happen at anytime during a student's first year, but a formal decision must happen by the end of a student's first year.

After the formal election between Plan I and Plan II at the conclusion of 502, a student will not be allowed to switch to the other Plan without the consent of the student's advisor. The student must re-file their Plan of Study at the time he/she changes Plans. And where a student does not have an advisor, the student may not switch between Plans until a new advisor is identified, and their consent to the switch obtained.

The expectations for a Thesis project under Plan I and the expectations for a Professional Project under Plan II are substantially similar in many ways. It is expected that both types of projects will involve a roughly equivalent amount of time commitment, effort, independent thought, and creativity. For both types of project there will be a substantial expectation that the student will use the project at a minimum to demonstrate written mastery over both:

1. A substantial academic literature, and
2. A specific research/analytic methodology that will be applied in a rigorous manner to a relevant data set.

In both cases, the student must implement legitimate geographic methods, write a document describing project results, and present the research orally as part of the "master's exam."

The differences between a Thesis and a Professional Project lie in their purpose, structure, and design. A thesis is a sophisticated document that describes the results of an original research project that was designed and implemented independently by the student, usually over the course of a year or more. A well-designed thesis contributes new knowledge to the discipline of geography and will be of a quality that it can typically be published in an academic journal with minor modifications. A Thesis is an essential document for students looking to pursue a PhD, but can also be an impressive credential for those seeking work in the private or governmental sectors.

A Professional Project that is designed by the student's faculty committee as part of the student's work for Geography 597. A Professional Project is an applied project, focusing on a specific area of expertise or inquiry that the student has identified as professionally relevant. The Professional Project is completed in a single semester, with faculty feedback at several points before the final presentation. While there is no set format for a Plan II Professional Project, the expectation is that on the whole the combined work to demonstrate mastery over academic literature, data gathering and/or analysis, and application of valid methodologies should be the equivalent in rigor and effort to that expected of a Plan I Thesis. As part of Geography 597, a student will be expected to schedule a proposal defense by which time the student will:

- A. Present to their committee a specific area of expertise or inquiry that will be the focus of the Professional Project, and
- B. Present to their committee a relevant literature or set of academic/professional literatures relevant to the project.

The committee will then discuss the parameters for an appropriate Professional Project and then present the student with that project, including relevant progress deadlines including deadlines for final submission of the project and an oral defense of the project.