

Graduate Culminating Experience Guidelines

Approved by Graduate Council

February 2026

The culminating experience is typical in master's programs as an opportunity for students to demonstrate their mastery of the discipline as well as their ability to integrate learning from their coursework, internships, lab, and fieldwork. At CSUSB, each department chooses its own culminating experience that ranges from a written or oral exam, thesis, dissertation, project, professional paper, or creative work. Often students are given a choice to select a culminating activity that best fits their skills and interests.

The culminating experience is normally completed when students have finished all of their coursework. However, in some circumstances, when programs have significant clinical or internship requirements at the end of the program, the culminating experience may be completed after students have finished their academic coursework.

Graduate students should consult with their graduate coordinator for advising on their culminating experience options within their discipline. It is also highly recommended that each graduate student carefully review the requirements for their program in the University Catalog.

Comprehensive Examinations. Each program that offers the comprehensive examination for the master's degree shall implement and maintain in writing explicit guidelines that address both content and procedures relating to the examination. All comprehensive examinations must conform to the following requirement of Title 5, i.e., "A comprehensive examination is an assessment of the student's ability to integrate the knowledge of the area, show critical and independent thinking, and demonstrate mastery of the subject matter. The results of the examination provide evidence of independent thinking, appropriate organization, critical analysis, and accuracy of documentation. A record of the examination questions and responses shall be maintained in accordance with the records retention policy of the California State University."

Students must fulfill all department/division requirements for the written and/or oral comprehensive examinations. Such requirements include, but are not limited to, the date and time for the comprehensive examinations, length of testing, topics covered, and the number of questions for the comprehensive examinations.

Students whose program requires a comprehensive examination must declare to their major department/division, at least one semester in advance, their intent to take it, obtain department/division permission, and register for the appropriate comprehensive

examination course in their major discipline. Students must consult with their program advisor regarding specific requirements for the comprehensive examination. Those who do not pass the comprehensive examination must fulfill any department, division, and/or college requirements for subsequent enrollments in these examinations.

Departments must establish digital repositories to archive all comprehensive exams, and all comprehensive exams are archived within the department.

Continuous Enrollment (Comprehensive Exam). Students who have completed all course work and are preparing for the comprehensive examination must remain in continuous enrollment until their degree is granted. To maintain continuous enrollment, students must register each term for the appropriate continuous enrollment course (Continuous Enrollment for Graduate Candidacy Standing) in their major discipline.

Thesis and Dissertation Requirements. Students who write a thesis or dissertation as their culminating experience work with a thesis or dissertation committee to meet the specific requirements for their program. For document formatting requirements and archiving procedures, students should consult *A Guide to Thesis, Project, and Dissertation Format* available online on the Graduate Studies website. The California State University Education Code (Title V, Section 40510, p. 473) defines a thesis as follows:

The written product of a systematic study of a significant problem that defines a problem, states the major assumptions, explains the significance of the undertaking, sets forth the sources for and methods of gathering information, analyzes the data, and offers a conclusion or recommendation. The finished project [product] evidences originality, critical and independent thinking, appropriate organization and format, and thorough documentation.

A thesis is distinguished by certain elements such as an introduction to the study, a review of the literature, a methodology section, results, summary, and recommendations for further research, while a project may not have these components.

The Office of Graduate Studies will conduct a final clearance review, ensuring all submission thesis and dissertation documents are complete and approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies. Every thesis or dissertation is published on ScholarWorks.

Project Requirements: In many departments, graduate students have the option of producing a project instead of the traditional research thesis. A project is defined by the California State University Education Code as:

A significant undertaking appropriate to the fine and applied arts or to professional fields. It evidences originality and independent thinking, appropriate form and organization, and a rationale. It is described and summarized in a written abstract that

includes the project's significance, objectives, methodology, and a conclusion or recommendation. (Title V, Section 40510, p. 473)

Whereas a thesis is an empirical scholarly research study, a project is distinctly more creative in nature. Often, projects will be based on a compilation of comparative analysis of the works done by other researchers. Although such material provides the study with substance, culminating projects must evidence originality, critical thinking, and reflect the scholarly or artistic capability of the candidate. While requirements for various creative projects will vary, there will be certain elements common to each project.

Upon completion of the project, the program coordinator will submit a project completion form to the Office of Graduate Studies. Departments must establish digital repositories to archive all projects, and all projects are archived within the department. Students have the option of publishing the project on ScholarWorks with accompanying formatting review by the Office of Graduate Studies and approval from the Dean of Graduate Studies.

Quick Comparison: Thesis or Dissertation vs. Project

FEATURE	THESIS OR DISSERTATION	PROJECT
Goal	Original research; contribution to field	Demonstration of learned skills and concepts; may be applied, theoretical, or creative
Structure	Formal, must conform to the appropriate style manual	Flexible; determined by program
Submission and Approval	Submitted and reviewed by the Office of Graduate Studies	Submitted to student's program only
Publication	Required (Published on ScholarWorks)	Optional

IMPORTANT NOTE: Theses and projects can be completed in any graduate course (6000 level) as long as the course description in the CSUSB catalog indicates that the thesis or project completion is one of the course requirements. Students register **ONLY ONE TIME** for the course that contains the thesis or project. If the thesis/project is not completed in the semester in which the student first registered for the thesis/project course, then the student will receive a grade of RP (Report in Progress) for the course for that semester. The RP grade in the course remains until the thesis/project is



completed and approved by the student's thesis/project advisor and archived, at which time the student's professor will submit a "Change of Grade" form, replacing the RP grade with a letter grade.

Continuous Enrollment (Thesis and Project). Students who have completed all course work and are enrolled in a thesis/project course must also register every semester for one of the 6990-6996 courses (Continuous Enrollment for Graduate Candidacy Standing) in their major discipline until their degree is granted. Earned units are not degree-applicable nor will they qualify for financial aid. This is a variable unit course, see the fee schedule.

Students in doctoral programs will follow their program's procedures for continuous enrollment.