

## **SELECTING A SENIOR THESIS TOPIC: SOME ADVICE AND CONSIDERATIONS**

The Senior Thesis is the final “capstone” project for Criminal Justice majors. The Thesis requires considerable time and energy, so it is important that you select a topic that meets your interests, your skills and abilities—and that is realistically possible to complete in a semester.

There are a number of factors to consider when selecting a Senior Thesis topic. You would do well to consider the following when selecting your topic.

1. Student’s Career Goals: It makes sense to select a thesis topic that is related to your preferred career goals (e.g., law enforcement, security, corrections, or law). You will be more interested in it, you will have and will gain more expertise in that topic, you may develop valuable contacts with professionals in your chosen field, and your completed thesis may help you in your job search.
2. Courses completed: You should select a topic that relates to a course that you have completed. Textbooks and other reference materials that you have read for a previous course will help in writing your thesis. Papers completed for other courses may supplement the research and writing of your thesis. Select a topic that you already know something about.
3. Internships, Volunteer Work, or Work Experience: Experience working in the criminal justice field provides a wealth of information, resources, and personal contacts not available to most other students. You should consider an internship or some volunteer work, and be alert to research opportunities that may be appropriate for a Senior Thesis.
4. “Criminal Justice” vs. “Criminology” topics: Criminology relates to why particular crimes occur, and addresses the sociological, psychological, biological, or environmental factors related to the commission of crimes. Criminological research focuses on testing theories that explain crime causation.

Criminal justice topics address the responses to crime by police, the judiciary, and corrections. Criminal Justice research is applied research that examines topics such as loss prevention and security procedures to prevent crime; police patrol, arrest and investigation; judicial decision-making and sentencing; and correctional programs.

In deciding whether to pursue a theoretical or applied research topic, you should consider #2 (above) and select a research topic for which you are best prepared, based on courses that you have taken. \*[Note: Criminal justice students only take one or two courses dealing with theories and causes of crime, but take 10 or more courses in Criminal Justice. That is where your expertise lies. Focus your thesis on that area.

## **Some examples of Senior Thesis Topics**

- **Historical Research**: How has crime and justice changed over the years, in a given nation, state or local jurisdiction? Is crime worse, less, or the same? Do we punish more or less harshly compared with past years?
- **Legal Research**: How have laws and penal codes changed over time? Are more behaviors punishable as crimes than before? Have criminal sanctions changed, and if so, how? What are some trends in case law? How have appellate Court decisions affected criminal justice policies and practices?
- **Comparative Research**: How do various nations differ in the extent and seriousness of crime? ... in their legal systems and the administration of justice? How do different states within the U.S. compare? How do different counties or cities within Minnesota compare on crime and justice?
- **Security Administration Research**: What is the extent and nature of loss and/or victimization in business or government agencies? What security procedures are in place to prevent loss and enhance security?
- **Law Enforcement Research**: What are the policies and procedures of a given police department in patrol, arrest, and investigation? What are the numbers and rates of crime reported by one or more police departments? What new innovations have been implemented for crime prevention and response?
- **Judicial Research**: How many court cases are reported by a given court or judicial district? What trends are observed in types of cases coming to court? What factors are considered by County Attorneys in their prosecutorial role? What are some observable trends in sentencing patterns? How have Sentencing Guidelines affected the courts and corrections?
- **Corrections & Juvenile Justice Research**: What correctional alternatives are available for sentencing? How many and what kinds of offenders are sentenced to probation? ...intermediate sanctions? ...to prison? What programs are used by correctional personnel to supervise and change offenders? Describe a delinquency prevention or juvenile corrections program. What are some observable outcomes of those correctional programs? \*

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\*A note to students on "Evaluation Research": Research on the effectiveness of laws and policies for preventing and responding to crime is essential. Students should recognize, however, that this is also one of the most difficult types of criminal justice research. Therefore, before selecting a thesis topic that asks "how effective" a particular criminal justice policy or program is, ask yourself whether you have the resources, the time, the agency contacts, and the necessary data to tackle that topic. Also note that Evaluative Research ranges from simple to more complex research designs. Students are encouraged to begin with a "descriptive evaluation" that simply examines what a criminal justice agency does, cases processed, roles and responsibilities of personnel, rather than the "effectiveness of" the agency.