Thesis vs. Non-thesis (Project) Paths

HELP! Should I pursue a thesis or non-thesis Master's degree?

July 25, 2016 | Matthew Schwartz, Associate Professor & Chair, Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences | mschwartz@uwf.edu

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After making the decision to continue (or return) to graduate school, many students must then address the question, “Should I pursue a thesis- or non-thesis- track Master's degree?” This is a question that faculty advisors, graduate program coordinators, and departmental chairs receive every term and, while there’s no one right answer, the decision will certainly affect a student’s path through the degree and may well have implications for that student’s next step along the academic/professional pathway. Let’s look at a few of the issues and implications that go into this decision.

What’s the same in a thesis and a non-thesis Master’s degree? All Master’s degree students must complete coursework associated with graduate-level content in their areas of study. This coursework will build on undergraduate studies and bridge into new specializations related to both content and skills (e.g., statistics or sampling methods). Usually, these courses include both thesis and non-thesis students, though some programs and advisors may set up dedicated individual or directed studies courses that focus on a research technique specific to that group. Both thesis and non-thesis students earn a Master’s degree (M.A. or M.S.) in their field of study.

In the UGA Program, all masters students must complete the 30 semester hours graduate core curriculum. Hours 31 through 38/39 are different for the two paths.

In the Regulatory Sciences Program, the degree title is a Master of Science in Pharmacy with an emphasis in Regulatory Sciences.
What's the difference between a thesis and a non-thesis Master's degree? Students pursuing a thesis are tasked with proposing, executing, summarizing, and defending a research project. After successfully defending a proposal to an advisory committee, the thesis student will work with her advisor to execute the project and then compile and present results in written and verbal formats. Non-thesis students complete all program-required coursework and may have to also complete an exit exam to demonstrate content knowledge across the discipline. Such coursework may include course projects and presentations, but such projects may not include data collection and are typically less extensive than a research thesis project.

At UGA this person, i.e. the advisor, is often called a major professor.

In the UGA Regulatory Sciences Program, we require project students to complete a comprehensive exam.

Why should I consider a non-thesis degree? It may be possible to pursue and complete a non-thesis degree, while working, something that is much more difficult to do in a thesis program. My own students have found this of particular value when they are pursuing a M.S. degree to advance in their current career. A non-thesis degree may often be completed more quickly than a thesis because the student need not navigate the research proposal and execution steps. The non-thesis degree program will include a substantial amount of coursework that will provide content and advanced skills that are applicable to professional and workforce demands. Many programs will provide students with an opportunity to perform research and present results in verbal and written forms, skills (and products) that are invaluable when seeking to enter, or advance within, the workforce.

It is possible to complete a thesis program that includes a research proposal and the collection of data in a part-time program. Both the thesis student and the project student must be focused, dedicated to their topic, and organized to manage the challenges of being a part-time student.

In the UGA Regulatory Sciences Program, we ask that you decide on your path 17 to 20 semester hours into your program. So it is possible to change paths.
What are the benefits of a thesis? The Master's thesis is an excellent demonstration of critical thinking and communication skills that employers value, while also contributing new knowledge to the discipline of study. A Master's degree thesis is all-but-mandatory if a student seeks to enter a Ph.D. program, though one may be able to gain entry into a Ph.D. program directly from the baccalaureate degree. 

In the UGA Program, thesis research projects can often lead to publishable material. A copy of the thesis is maintained in the University's Library in the electronic theses and dissertation database.

Which degree type is right for me? Students whose main reason to pursue a Master's degree is advancement within a current job or movement from one professional position to a new workforce position would do well to consider a non-thesis option, as it may well provide a more flexible schedule and shorter path to completion. If you want to pursue a Ph.D., a thesis Master's degree will provide evidence of scholarship and research experience that strengthens your portfolio. In most cases, students interested in entering a career in academia (i.e., becoming a professor or academic research scientist), will need a Ph.D., though not all such academics will require a Master's degree. 

So...which should I choose?! This is a great question to include in your discussions with the program coordinator or chair of the graduate degree programs you are considering. Note that not all universities or programs offer both thesis and non-thesis Master's degrees: some focus only on thesis degrees, while others (particularly those that serve large numbers of part-time students) may focus mainly on non-thesis programs for their Master's degrees. Another important consideration is that every Master's thesis degree student requires a thesis supervisor who is able and willing to support that research project. This means that the student and advisor must agree on the research topic, timeframe, and funding. For this reason alone, students interested in a thesis should start talking to prospective program and faculty advisors in advance of the formal application process (but that's a topic for another posting...).

In the UGA Program, an advisor (major professor) is required for the thesis student as well as the non-thesis student. This means that the student and advisor must agree on the research topic or project and timeframe.

The Regulatory Sciences Program encourages both thesis and project students to start talking to prospective faculty advisors early on in their Master’s program.