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Global Studies Distinction Project Guidelines for Students

Introduction

The Global Studies Distinction project is a substantial undertaking, but one that will help prepare you for any number of future opportunities. Research skills are highly valued by employers and are essential for graduate school and professional degree programs. Completing this project will demonstrate your research abilities; thus, the finished project can serve as a writing sample, conference presentation, or publication. The skills and techniques you will develop while working on this project will be applicable in a wide range of future endeavors.

This is an optional part of the major: not every student will have the focus, desire, and commitment to undertake a distinction project. We are here to support you in this process but the effort and follow-through is all yours. At every stage of this process you are responsible for contacting faculty, arranging meetings, conducting academic research, and meeting deadlines for written work. Much of the work of research is not visible on the page, but is instead in the organization and independent motivation that is required to complete the project. Before you embark on this path make sure that you are prepared to make the commitment necessary to see it through.

What is a Distinction Project?

A distinction project is, in the most basic sense, an independent research paper (approximately 50 pages in length) that you produce as a capstone for your degree. As part of this process you will build your content knowledge (by reviewing the literature), learn the basics of research design (through the proposal process), and gain valuable experience in assembling data, applying research methodologies, and in formal academic writing. Successful completion of the distinction project will require organization, discipline, and planning on your part. This document provides a step-by-step guide to the process, including a general timeline to refer to as you prepare. It is strongly recommended that you meet with your academic advisor before beginning your project and throughout the process to make sure that you are on track.

Overview of the Distinction Process

The distinction project is an optional baccalaureate thesis that, upon successful completion, awards the “graduation with distinction” honor. Global Studies students are required to pursue a topic of research related to the coursework in their thematic area within the major. The distinction project can serve as a writing sample for future academic and professional applications, the foundation of a conference presentation, or be submitted for publication. The general expectations are high, although specific approaches and methods will vary based on the main disciplinary “home” of the research content.

The entire project will take you, at minimum, one academic year. In order to be successful you will need to choose and begin to explore your topic before your senior year. This is particularly

important if you would like to combine your study abroad experience with data collection activities. GLBL 200: Foundations of Research is an excellent place to begin this process, and can be taken as early as freshman year. It also serves as a pre-requisite for additional required coursework for Distinction. What follows here is an overview of each step of the process.

Coursework and Process:

- *GLBL 200: Foundations of Research* (As early as freshman year)

This course is designed to introduce you to research in the social science disciplines, including both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This course will help you determine if the Distinction path is appropriate for you, and help you to identify appropriate topics, approaches, and scale for your project.

- *Identify a Topic and Research Question Related to Your Thematic Area* (At any point, earlier is better)

Your topic selection is up to you. It must be based in your thematic area in the major and offer a unique contribution to the topic, but it can be based in any relevant discipline or perspective that you have a base of knowledge in. Your question will be derived from classes and readings on this topic, and it must address an issue that is unresolved, inadequately studied, or newly emerging as an area of academic inquiry. Your question will be refined in later stages, but the more narrow you can make it now the easier it will be to proceed. At this stage it is extremely helpful to meet with your professors and advisors to help narrow your focus.

- *Assemble a Faculty Committee* (Once you have identified your topic and question)

Students are responsible for assembling their two-person faculty committee representing two distinct disciplines. They will need to identify faculty members with expertise relevant to their topic and recruit them to serve. Your committee members will offer guidance, recommend readings, and ensure that your methodological approach meets standards in the relevant disciplines. It is the responsibility of the student to communicate with their faculty committee throughout the process.

- *Intent to Declare Distinction* (No later than the beginning of your next-to-last semester)

The Intent form should be submitted once you have a topic and outline of your research project prepared. This form will require the signature of your faculty advisors prior to submission. It is available on the Global Studies website.

- *GLBL 494: Research Methods I* (No later than your next-to-last semester)

This course will help you to refine your research question, prepare a formal proposal (including a literature review, hypotheses, research plan, and timeline) and provide guidance on data collection and analysis. It is required that you take GLBL 494 in order to complete the distinction project. GLBL 200 is a prerequisite for this course.

- *GLBL 495: Research Methods II* (Final spring semester, optional)

This course will help you to finalize your research and complete the writing process. Emphasis is placed on data analysis and presentation, academic writing skills, formatting issues, and both setting and maintaining deadlines for completion of project sections.

Presentations, Research and Writing:

- *Planning Meeting* (No later than the first two months of your next-to-last semester)

You will work with Global Studies staff to schedule a meeting of your advisors and Associate Director Wedig to review your proposal. At this meeting you will discuss the feasibility of your work, including whether it is appropriate for distinction in terms of scope and contribution to the field, and agree on a timeline plan for completion. All attendees should have a copy of your proposal draft to review at least one full week before this meeting.

- *Data Gathering and Analysis* (Throughout, concluded prior to your final semester)

Using your approved proposal from your Planning Meeting as a guide, you will gather the necessary data and conduct your analysis as specified in your research design. We encourage the use of mixed methods, both quantitative and qualitative, but your committee has final say. You should have this step completed by your final semester to give yourself adequate time to complete your final version and so you can take advantage of available conferences and symposia to present your findings.

- *Human Subjects Review Process*

If your research involves human subjects (through interviews or other data collection instruments), it will require campus Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. This will be discussed in your Research Methods courses, but since it can be a time-consuming process you should review the information and deadlines available here: (<http://irb.illinois.edu/>). Work that involves human subjects but does not have the appropriate IRB approval cannot be approved for distinction or be presented at conferences or symposia.

- *LAS 494* (Final semester)

Register for a minimum of two hours of LAS 494: Senior Project credit with the Chair of your committee and at least one credit with your second committee member in your final semester. Our office will assist you to complete this step, but you will need to take initiative to get this done. This ensures that appropriate credit and recognition is given for your advisors' service and will represent advanced-level credit for your research efforts.

- *Presentations and Publication* (Anytime, final semester recommended)

By your final semester (although often earlier) your work will be advanced to the point that you are able to share it with others. You will be required to take part in a poster presentation at the Global Studies Annual Reception in February. As an opportunity to present your work, you are also strongly encouraged to apply to the Undergraduate Research

Symposium held on campus in the spring (this is required in GLOBL 495). You should also consider applying for conferences from your disciplinary or issue focus; most either have an undergraduate track or are open to all. Submissions to campus publications or outside journals are also highly recommended as a means of establishing yourself in the field and sharing your research results. GLOBL 494 and 495 include presentation and publication elements to help prepare you for these events.

Final Steps for Completion:

- *Submit Final Draft* (By November 1 for fall graduation, April 1 for spring graduation)

The final draft version of your project must be submitted to your committee and Associate Director by the deadline. Your committee members will review your work and make a recommendation for distinction to Global Studies. At this time they have the option to request that you revise and resubmit your work prior to giving their final recommendation. Format and content guidelines are available on our website.

- *Distinction Recommendation* (Before Thanksgiving break for fall graduation, by April 20 for spring graduation)

Your committee members will discuss your work to arrive at a single distinction recommendation for Associate Director Wedig. For each option you must also meet the indicated minimum major and cumulative GPA requirement. If you do not meet the GPA requirement for the faculty-recommended level, you will receive the highest distinction level that your GPA qualifies for. For each of these options, your committee can withhold their final recommendation pending revisions. The options are:

1. No distinction – project does not meet the minimum standards for recognition
2. Distinction - original research, contributes new interpretations and increases our understanding of the topic appropriate to its primary disciplinary home (minimum 3.25 major and cumulative GPA)
3. High Distinction – meets all requirements for distinction, also includes substantial original quantitative and/or qualitative analysis (minimum 3.5 major and cumulative GPA)
4. Highest Distinction – meets all requirements for high distinction, also includes original data collected and analyzed by the student and/or represents a graduate-level contribution to the field of study (minimum 3.75 major and cumulative GPA)

- *Final Steps* (End of final semester)

Once approval has been granted, you will need to complete two final steps. First, you will need to submit an unbound copy of your final, approved project to the LAS Student Affairs Office along with a Certification sheet (red-bordered sheet obtained from LAS, or downloaded from our website, in advance and signed by your committee and Dr. Wedig). Second, a bound copy of your final version must be submitted to the Global Studies program. This bound copy must include a copy of your Certification sheet as the title page.

- Printing and binding can be done cheaply at copy stores near campus. Wire coil is recommended for durability and ease of reading.
 - Final version can be double-sided to save paper, money, and shelf space.
 - A final .pdf can be submitted via email to Lynne Rudasill to be archived at the Center for Global Studies Library. (optional, but strongly recommended)
- *Graduation* (The end of your undergraduate career)

Provided that you have completed all necessary requirements in time, your committee has made a positive recommendation, and you meet the minimum GPA standards, you will be given an orange cord to wear at graduation in recognition of your achievement. Your name will be noted as graduating with distinction in the program, and your degree will reflect this honor.

Distinction Project Components

Students are, at a minimum, expected to include the following components (or approved equivalents) in their completed project. The order and length of each component will depend on your research question and methodology. Your research proposal draft for GLBL 494 will include most of these pieces, requiring only revision and expansion for your final project, which will be in the 50 page range on average.

- Abstract
- Introduction
- Formal research question/statement
- Problem statement or other placement of their work within the field
- Review of the relevant literature, including both contemporary as well as appropriate foundational works and cases
- Formulation and articulation of testable hypotheses
- Description of data and methodologies used
- Presentation of data and analysis as a test of hypotheses
- Analytical conclusion, including applicable policy recommendations
- Appropriate and consistent academic citation throughout
- Bibliography/Works Cited section

Frequently Asked Questions for Distinction Projects

What follows are some questions and general notes of advice for students considering the distinction project path. Specific questions can also be addressed to your academic advisor in Global Studies.

Getting Started

1. When can I begin working on my distinction project?

Short answer: the earlier the better. The distinction project will focus within your Thematic Area so, in a way, every course you take in that section of the major is a step towards completing the project. We encourage you to start narrowing your interests and research focus from your very first semester.

2. *When should I declare my intention to pursue a distinction project?*

You must formally declare your intention no later than the first month of the first semester of your senior year. You may declare earlier, of course, but be certain that you intend to follow through if this is the case. As a general guideline, you should not declare until you have a definite research topic in mind and have begun at least preliminary research into this topic.

3. *How do I choose a topic?*

Your topic should be a question that fits into your Thematic Area, has a global aspect, and is interesting enough to you that you will be able to finish. It should also be an unresolved question so that you will be able to add to the understanding of the topic with your original research. Papers that you are assigned for your classes can be used to explore your topic in greater detail early in the process, as well. Your formal research question will evolve as you read more on the topic and finalize it in GLBL 494.

The Committee Process

4. *How do I find faculty members to serve on my committee?*

The best way is to approach faculty from your classes that relate to your research topic. This ensures that they know you and your work and that their research and teaching interests align with your project. A faculty member with similar interests will be able to offer much more in terms of research support and is more likely to be actively engaged with your project. You should provide at least a preliminary draft outline of your intended project as part of your request.

5. *Do faculty ever say no?*

Yes, all the time. They may be already serving on a number of committees, have a planned sabbatical, or be otherwise overloaded with responsibilities. Do not take it personally! It is recommended to ask early and be prepared to seek out alternate committee members.

6. *How do I select my committee Chair?*

Your Chair is the primary faculty member you are working with, and is designated by you. The decision can be based on a number of factors including the disciplinary home of your project, faculty experience with the specific content or region, or particular methodological expertise of a faculty member. Seniority may also be a concern. You will consult and work with both faculty members during the process, regardless of the title assigned.

7. *My committee is not responding to my (emails/phone calls/psychic messages/etc.)!*

Faculty members have many responsibilities in addition to your project and may at times be difficult to reach. In general, finding the right committee members in terms of their interests will help keep their attention focused on your work. However, it is also up to you to meet deadlines and create a channel of communication with your committee. It can be helpful, for example, to agree on a schedule of regular check-ins with your committee either via email or in-person. This helps to set reasonable communication expectations for all involved and creates a series of deadlines to encourage progress.

8. *My committee is asking me to change my project.*

Your committee has the final word on approving your project, and their opinion is therefore quite important. At times they will ask for revisions or recommend a change in your focus. If you are not sure why they are asking, then you should seek clarification and discuss options for a compromise if possible. You have chosen your committee based on their expertise so you can generally trust their advice – it is their duty in this process to help you. Clarity early on in the process about your project and design can help avoid this situation down the road.

Completing the Project

9. *I've run into obstacles in locating data/ I've found an article that duplicates my research/ Current events have made my research less relevant/ etc.*

Research is referred to throughout this guide as a process not as a product and that is with good reason. With original research there are always unforeseen complications that arise, and your work will always be subject to revision. If you find yourself facing such an obstacle you should not panic, but instead contact your committee members. If your project changes slightly that is just fine, it is far better to do honest work that evolves than to force inferior work into an outmoded framework.

10. *I've gathered a pile of data, now what?*

Once you've finished your data collection it's often useful to take a bit of time to reflect on your work and make sure that you're focused on your final project. You should review your proposal and planning meeting notes at this time, and make sure that you are still on track in terms of your work. For example, if you did not collect exactly the data you had planned for, a meeting with your committee would be useful to help refine your research design. It may be necessary to construct a new outline for your finished project or revise your timeline, for example. A short pause at this point will pay dividends later on.

11. *I have writer's block and I'm so far behind!*

This is inevitable, and is one of the issues covered in GLOBL 495. Take a walk, take a nap, talk with friends about something other than your research, sit quietly with a coloring book, whatever it takes to remove yourself from the project and recharge. Every writer faces this; you'll eventually find the best approach to get yourself refocused. It can often be helpful when new writing is difficult to go back through

what you have written and edit as a means of refreshing your focus and reminding you of how much progress you have made so far. Having a regular schedule for writing also helps – write a little each day rather than waiting until the urge strikes you. Far too often, that urge simply will not strike.

12. Timing is everything...

Moving from data gathering to the final written draft takes time. It is not simply a matter of writing down your results. When you get to the final writing phase you will be reworking everything you have written so far in light of how your project has evolved. Start early, give yourself extra time to meet your deadlines, and be prepared for inevitable interruptions due to other responsibilities, writer's block, friends stopping by, a rain of frogs, etc. It's better to allocate too much time for writing than not enough.