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An Open Letter About the Importance of the Thesis

Dear Graduate Student,

I thought it might be helpful if I wrote to you about my perceptions of the importance and role of the thesis as a requirement for the completion of your master's degree at CSU Stanislaus.

My theme for communicating the importance of the thesis is captured by the word "awesome." I know that this word has quite a colloquial usage these days (as in "awesome, dude"). However, I am using it in its more traditional meaning: awe—a reverent, unabashed, wonder.

First, let me extend my appreciation to you for choosing CSU Stanislaus. The faculty and administration have expectations for you to perform at the highest level of academic achievement so that you contribute to the betterment of the university and your discipline. This is an *awesome* responsibility for you.

The master's degree programs are also an *awesome* responsibility for the faculty who create curricula, teach, conduct research, and contribute to their professional organizations and communities—essential responsibilities for offering you an excellent graduate program.

As the Dean of the Graduate School, I have administrative responsibility for the offering of high quality graduate programs. It's my job to support faculty in their professional work as they teach and guide you so that you may achieve your academic and professional goals at the highest level of academic rigor and intellectual accomplishment.

Specifically for the thesis, both you and I have "awesome" responsibilities in at least four ways:

1. *Awesome* in the sense that you can't get your degree without my approving your thesis as the final demonstration of your having met each of the faculty's curricular requirements for the master's degree.
2. *Awesome* in that I have the honor of reading the results of your research. It is intellectually interesting for me to learn new information and to view the excellent and diverse research conducted by students under the direction of outstanding faculty.
3. *Awesome* because your research contributes to the vast and permanent knowledge in our respective disciplines—for posterity! As both the dean and a faculty member, my scholarly reputation is on the line as well as yours. Along with your faculty, I certify that your research is ready to be placed in the library as a resource for current and future scholars and professionals.

It's important to remember this last point: your thesis is a *scholarly publication*. The thesis is *not* a term paper. It is *not* another class assignment. You want to be proud of your thesis, preparing it with great care and not as an after thought at the end of your program when you're anxious to graduate. Further, you are encouraged to publish your research in a scholarly journal. It is exciting to see your research in print, to be asked for reprints, and to have your work cited in other research papers.

4. *Awesome* because your thesis is a visible demonstration that proclaims your readiness to join an *elite* group of people who have earned a master's degree. A master's degree is not just a collection of courses taken after you finish a baccalaureate. The thesis is a crucial element that differentiates *you, the master's student*, from *you, the holder of a bachelor's degree*.

The thesis is so important and such a traditional display of academic accomplishment that the Board of Trustees of the CSU, as do all governing boards of higher educational institutions in the world, recognize the thesis as a necessary culminating requirement of great magnitude. They define the thesis quite explicitly with the following key elements: "...a systematic

study of a significant problem... evidences originality, critical and independent thinking, and thorough documentation... oral defense.”

The thesis shows “the world” that you are able to apply your research skills to very real and critically important problems that face you as a professional in your workplace, as a future researcher, or as a future doctoral student preparing to become a university professor.

The problems that I see most often with a thesis can be avoided by the following actions:

- **Understand the importance** of the thesis to you and to the universe of scholars and scholarship. Take pride and care in its design, its execution, and the format in which it is completed.
- Plan **sufficient time** for completing your thesis with **quality**. You should begin to think about your thesis almost from the first semester and begin considering possible ideas. Once you have identified your topic, you need time to narrow your thesis topic to a manageable area of investigation (or hypothesis), research the literature, secure approval of your prospectus, design your methods, conduct the study, reflect upon your findings, and write the thesis. For most students, the thesis typically requires work over two semesters for completion.
- **Communicate well and often with your thesis chair and other committee members.** Establish timelines that allow adequate time for faculty review and approval (as well as your oral defense) well before the due date of the submission of your thesis to the Graduate School. You want to avoid the last minute rush that leads to poor quality, frazzled nerves (yours), and irritated faculty. Unfortunately, failure to adhere to university deadlines also delays your expected graduation date.
- **Proofread.** Read your thesis carefully many times and edit accordingly. Have another person who is a skilled writer read it, and then read and revise again and again and again—*before* you present your thesis to the faculty. The quality of presentation is *your* responsibility. Faculty should not be expected to read your rough drafts. You want the faculty’s time and expertise focused on the quality of your research, not serving as editors.

Enjoy your master’s degree program. I look forward with great anticipation to present your diploma to you at graduation ceremonies and to share the pride of your accomplishment.

Awesome!

Dr. Diana Demetrulias
Vice Provost