DEPARTMENTAL HANDBOOK OF
REQUIREMENTS AND REGULATIONS
RELATING TO
GRADUATING WITH HONORS IN PSYCHOLOGY

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Table of Contents

I. Introduction 3
II. How To Become a Psychology Honors Student 3
III. Requirements for Graduating with Honors in Psychology 3
IV. How Registration for Honors Thesis Credits Works 3
V. The Psychology Honors Thesis 4
   A. Thesis committee membership 4
   B. Format of the undergraduate thesis document 4
   C. Thesis proposal meeting 4
   D. Thesis defense meeting 5
   E. Filing the final thesis document 5
VI. Graduating with Honors in Psychology: What Happens at Graduation? 6
I. INTRODUCTION

This Handbook describes the procedures for pursuing and ultimately graduating with Honors in Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University. It also addresses frequently asked questions posed by students and faculty.

II. HOW TO BECOME A PSYCHOLOGY HONORS STUDENT

The process for becoming a psychology honors student is relatively simple if a student meets the basic requirements. In order to be considered for admission, a student must (1) be admitted to the Honors College, (2) have a 3.5 GPA overall and in his or her Psychology courses, and (3) have a Psychology faculty member who is willing to mentor the student as he or she works on an undergraduate honors thesis, described further elsewhere in this document. The student would download and complete the application for Honors in Psychology. The application must be signed by the faculty member, who is pledging to provide mentorship on the thesis.

III. REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATING WITH HONORS IN PSYCHOLOGY

Once accepted as an honors student, there are several things a student needs to do to actually graduate with honors in psychology. These include:

- Maintain status in the Honors College
- Complete 3 units each of PSYC 497, PSYC 498 and PSYC 499 for a total of 9 units with grades of ‘A’ in all 3 courses
- Complete an Honors thesis (more information on this below)
- Maintain a GPA of 3.5 overall and in the Psychology major and complete all other requirements for the BS degree in Psychology

IV. HOW REGISTRATION FOR HONORS THESIS CREDIT WORKS

At the beginning of each semester a student is enrolled in the Psychology Honors Program, the Honors Coordinator verifies with the student’s faculty mentor that the student is actively working on his or her honors thesis, and will confirm the class for which the student should be enrolled. After confirming this information, the Honors Coordinator relays this information to the Associate Director of Psychology Advising and Undergraduate Academic Operations, who then emails the student with permission to enroll and instructions on how to enroll.

Typically psychology honors students enroll in PSYC 497, 498 and 499 in three successive semesters, although it is possible to take two courses in one semester. The most typical sequence is to take PSYC 497 in one’s junior year, and PSYC 498 and 499 during one’s senior year.

At the end of a semester, the Honors Coordinator contacts each faculty member working with an honors student and requests a grade from them for the student’s work during the semester. The Honors Coordinator is responsible for submitting these grades each semester.
V. THE PSYCHOLOGY HONORS THESIS

A. Thesis committee membership

Undergraduate honors theses committees will have three or more full-time faculty members on the committee. Only faculty members may serve as committee members. One member will be the departmental honors thesis coordinator and one member will be the student’s faculty mentor. The third member may be selected from within or outside of the Department of Psychology but must be a full-time faculty member at the University.

B. Format of the undergraduate thesis document

The thesis document should follow the latest edition of the American Psychological Association guidelines. Students should write a document that proposes to use data that already has been approved for use by the VCU IRB, or if data are to be collected, will be submitted for approval by the VCU IRB.

Consistent with expectations for our Master’s theses in the department, the undergraduate honors thesis proposal should have the following sections:

i. Introduction – to include a description of the relevant literature, the conceptual basis for the study, and a statement of the problem; hypotheses or research questions

ii. Proposed Method
   a. Participants
   b. Measures or Materials
   c. Procedures

iii. Data Analysis Plan

iv. References

v. Appendix with consent / assent forms, measures

C. Thesis proposal meeting

Once a student and his or her faculty mentor have worked through drafts of the proposal and the faculty mentor has agreed it can be distributed to other committee members, a thesis proposal meeting can be set. For undergraduate honors proposals, these meetings typically are 60-90 minutes. Students should submit an electronic copy of the proposal to all committee members at least two weeks prior to the scheduled proposal date unless other arrangements have been made. If a committee member requests a hard copy of the proposal, students must provide one.

This proposal meeting is open to all VCU faculty, Psychology Department graduate students, other honors in Psychology students, and friends of the presenter. The meeting must be announced in the departmental calendar at least one week prior to its being held. The student’s faculty mentor serves as the chair of the committee. The committee chair may request that non committee members leave at any point during the meeting, as appropriate. All committee members should be present at this meeting, and the chair must be present. No more than one member may be absent, and he/she must be represented by proxy or by written comments that normally would be submitted prior to the meeting. Meetings should be scheduled in one of the Department meeting rooms or an acceptable
alternative. If the proposal does not meet with the committee’s approval, they may elect to hold an additional proposal meeting. Approval of the thesis proposal by the committee **must be unanimous**.

There is no set format to the proposal meeting, but typically students will make a powerpoint presentation on their research project for 15-20 minutes. This is followed by questions from the committee, generally with audience members out of the room. Once all questions have been asked and answered, the student is asked to leave the room for a short amount of time while the committee deliberates. The student then is called back into the room and either is informed that their project can proceed, advised regarding needed changes to the project, or failed and another proposal meeting date is set.

**D. Thesis defense meeting**

Similar to the proposal meeting, once a student and his or her faculty mentor have worked through drafts of the final document and the faculty mentor has agreed it can be distributed to other committee members, a thesis defense meeting can be set. For undergraduate honors thesis defenses, these meetings typically are 60-90 minutes. Students should submit an electronic copy of the document to all committee members **at least two weeks prior to the scheduled defense date** unless other arrangements have been made. If a committee member requests a hard copy of the document, students must provide one.

This defense meeting is open to all VCU faculty, Psychology Department graduate students, other honors in Psychology students, and friends of the presenter. The meeting must be announced in the departmental calendar **at least one week prior to its being held**. The student’s faculty mentor serves as the chair of the committee. The committee chair may request that non committee members leave at any point during the meeting, as appropriate. All committee members should be present at this meeting, and the chair must be present. No more than one member may be absent, and he/she must be represented by proxy or by written comments that normally would be submitted prior to the meeting. Meetings should be scheduled in one of the Department meeting rooms or an acceptable alternative. Approval of the final thesis by the committee **must be unanimous**.

There is no set format to the defense meeting, but typically students will make a powerpoint presentation for 15-20 minutes. This is followed by questions from the committee. At the defense, audience members may or may not be out of the room. Once all questions have been asked and answered, the student is asked to leave the room for a short amount of time while the committee deliberates. The student is then called back in to the room and is given feedback on their performance.

**E. Filing the final thesis document**

Following the thesis defense, the student should make any changes to the final thesis document that have been requested by his or her chair or any committee member. A hard copy of the thesis, printed one-sided, should be delivered to the Honors Coordinator prior to the last day of the semester in which the defense has taken place.
VII. GRADUATING WITH HONORS IN PSYCHOLOGY: WHAT HAPPENS AT GRADUATION?

Students who have met all requirements for graduating with honors in Psychology receive special recognition at our Psychology Diploma ceremonies in December and May, including being the first undergraduate students to walk across the platform. Their achievements also are noted on our Psychology website and are touted in other publication outlets.