

Medicine, Health and Society Honors Handbook

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Overview

MHS Honors is a selective, two-semester program of individual undergraduate research conducted in the senior year and supervised by faculty advisers. Honors candidates propose, research, and write a thesis that contributes to existing scholarly literature in an area of MHS-related study. The thesis must examine some aspect of health and health care in its social and cultural contexts, but honors students may choose to pursue any of a broad range of topics and methods.

Eligibility & Application

To be eligible for MHS honors, students must be MHS majors with a GPA of at least 3.3 both overall and in MHS. They must also have the endorsement of a faculty advisor who is willing to supervise the honors thesis and who has appropriate subject matter and methods expertise. Whenever possible, applicants should choose an honors advisor with whom they have taken at least one class.

The honors application consists of the following components, **due by the end of the first week of April** of the applicant's junior year:

- Completed [RedCap form](#)
- Thesis proposal of 350-500 words outlining the following and included with RedCap submission:
 - The topic of your research and the questions you will be posing
 - An overview of existing knowledge about the topic, supported by citations, and the contribution you hope to make to it
 - The data and methods you will collect and use to answer these questions
 - How the topic is appropriate to MHS
 - Plans you and your faculty advisor have made for regular interaction and supervision
- Letter of support from your proposed faculty supervisor, emailed by them to mhs@vanderbilt.edu. The letter should describe your qualifications as an honors applicant and the faculty member's assessment of your thesis proposal.

- Your proposed supervisor should be a faculty member with subject matter expertise and research experience relevant to your proposed project.
- Ideally your supervisor will be someone with whom you have worked in some capacity (class, independent study, teaching or research assistant).
- Thesis supervisors must be members of MHS's [core faculty](#), [affiliated faculty](#), or scholars with health-related social science or humanities expertise.
- An existing research mentor in a non-social science or humanities field, such as a life sciences lab supervisor or clinical research supervisor, can serve as a second committee member.

Acceptance decisions will be communicated shortly after the end of classes.

Program Requirements

Overview

In consultation with their advisor, the student will carefully define and complete a substantive project involving original and independent research. Honors thesis research must be a substantial, self-directed scholarly endeavor. Typical thesis formats include primary research and data collection, secondary analysis of existing data, archival or textual analysis, extensive critical literature review, prospectus for a more extensive research project, and memoir and creative writing. In keeping with MHS's interdisciplinary mission, many different kinds of social science, health sciences, and humanistic lines of inquiry are appropriate, as are many different kinds of data. Depending on the project, data may consist of interviews, original or existing survey data, participatory or observational data, media representations, policy documents, reports, scholarly works, literature or artistic works, maps or GIS data, or other sources. See the list of [previous honors theses](#) on the MHS website to get a sense of the range of possible projects.

Coursework and Timeline

Honors students are required to enroll in MHS 4998 (3 credit hours) in fall semester of senior year and followed by MHS 4999 (3 credit hours) in the spring. **These hours are mandatory** and reflect the substantial time commitment that thesis work entails. Thesis hours do not count toward MHS elective, concentration, or Advanced Hours requirements.

Students will be enrolled by the MHS program specialist at the beginning of each semester. Enrollment in MHS 4999 is contingent on the faculty supervisor's approval of the student's performance in MHS 4998 at the end of fall semester. Students who need to be enrolled earlier for financial aid, class standing, or other reasons can request early enrollment by emailing mhs@vanderbilt.edu. Students whose fall semester progress has been insufficient or impacted by extenuating circumstances will consult with their supervisor and the DUS to decide if they should continue thesis work in the spring.

An honors methods class may be offered some fall semesters. Enrollment is strongly encouraged but not required. Honors students are also eligible for enrollment in MHS graduate-level methods courses.

Honors students are expected to **meet regularly and work in close consultation with their supervisor** throughout the process of conceptualizing, researching and writing the honors thesis during the senior year. Supervisors with multiple students may choose to set a regular weekly or bi-weekly meeting with all their supervisees.

Some theses may be based on ongoing research, involve data collected during a previous semester, or have research already in progress over the summer. Others may not begin collecting data until the semester starts. Students should discuss these time frames with their supervisor. But all projects will follow a version of the following schedule, with the specifics to be decided by the student and faculty supervisor and/or adjusted to fit the timeline of the honors methods course as appropriate.

Fall Semester:

- *Ongoing*: meet regularly with faculty supervisor every one to three weeks. Students are expected to be proactive in scheduling and attending meetings and rescheduling as needed.
- *Ongoing*: survey of background and scholarly literature. Plan to meet at least once for a consultation with MHS research library Pam Morgan pam.morgan@vanderbilt.edu.
- *Ongoing*: initial data collection as appropriate
- *Weeks 1–6*: produce a detailed initial work plan to be submitted to MHS in consultation with faculty supervisor. The work plan should contain a timeline of specific tasks by week, along with a draft prospectus outlining the topic, research questions, and approach, or an annotated bibliography. Submit the work plan by the end of week 6 via RedCap [link tk].
- *Weeks 1-8*: complete IRB application for projects that involve human subjects (interviews, surveys, observation, analysis of social media and online communication) (see IRB FAQ)
- *Weeks 6-8*: faculty supervisor submits interim check-in
- *Weeks 7-15*: complete initial draft of at least one section of the thesis, such as methods and project design or background and literature review.
- *Week 15*: faculty supervisor submits fall semester evaluation

Spring Semester:

- *Week 1-2*: update work plan to build toward defense date.
- *Ongoing*: meet regularly with faculty supervisor every one to three weeks.
- *Weeks 1-4*: complete data collection
- *Ongoing*: data analysis
- *Ongoing*: drafting and revision of thesis sections/chapters
- *Week 9*: deadline to schedule thesis defense; consult with faculty supervisor, second reader/committee members, and MHS program specialist
- *Week 11-12*: thesis defenses; complete draft due to committee at least three days before defense date
- *Week 13-15*: thesis revision; revisions due to committee at least three days before final approval date

- *Week 15:* faculty supervisor and second reader/committee members submit final approval of revised thesis due to A&S dean's office

Thesis

Theses are typically 40-60 pages/10,000-12,000 words in length, including bibliography and endnotes. Most theses follow a traditional structure of Introduction and Aims, Background and Literature Review, Methods, Findings, Discussion, and Conclusion. In consultation with their supervisor, students may decide on a slightly different format appropriate to their topic and approach.

A successful thesis will: demonstrate deep understanding of the substance, context, and existing knowledge about the topic; pose a research question or claim rooted in that existing knowledge; explain how data was systematically collected and analyzed data to address the argument or claim; interpret and discuss the findings using relevant concepts; and discuss their broader significance. High quality writing is essential to a successful thesis, and significant effort should be dedicated to expression, engagement, clarity, precision, accessibility, and elimination of mechanical and stylistic errors. Honors students should expect to engage in multiple rounds of editing and revision. Theses should also contain thorough, consistent, and precise citations and a complete bibliography.

All writing submitted as part of the thesis must be 100 percent your own original work. Students should consult their thesis supervisor about possible appropriate uses of AI tools in the research process and decide on expectations together, including the use of machine learning AI for quantitative analysis. **The use of generative AI to summarize background materials, analyze data, or produce the text of the thesis is not allowed** and constitutes an academic integrity violation.

Research on Human Subjects

Research on humans—including interviews, surveys, focus groups, observation and participation, behavioral interventions, collection of biospecimens, app- or device-based data collection, and use of social media materials—represents a great opportunity to produce new knowledge, learn about research practices, and develop research skills. It is also a significant responsibility to take on, since it asks research subjects to share their time, experience, and trust, and potentially expose themselves to risk. When planning a research project, **work with human subjects should be strongly and clearly motivated by a research question or problem that can only be answered using data that comes directly from people.** If you plan to conduct research with human subjects, be certain that your research aims and questions meet this standard.

Research on human subjects requires careful planning to protect the privacy and confidentiality of research participants and ensure that data are used, stored, and managed safely and ethically. **Data collected without IRB approval cannot be used in the thesis, published, or presented.** Thesis projects involving collection of any human subjects data require approval by Vanderbilt's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Honors students planning to conduct these kinds of data collection should complete [online human subjects training](#) for social and behavioral research (Group 2: Social Behavioral Investigators and Key Personnel) and use [VU IRB's Getting Started page](#) and the IRB FAQ below to plan the application process with their thesis supervisor. The application is straightforward to prepare but can be time-consuming, and approval can take up to one or two months.

Honors students conducting research as part of an existing lab or research team, at VU or another institution or program, should consult with their research supervisor to confirm that their activities are covered by the project's existing IRB.

Thesis Defense

The oral defense is an evaluation of the thesis, but it is also an opportunity for the student to share and discuss the complete work in depth with the committee's close attention and feedback. It consists of a short presentation of the thesis findings followed by questions from the committee members about the thesis itself and the broader topic area. The committee members decide the disposition of the thesis in a brief closed discussion (pass, pass pending revisions, fail) and detail any requested revisions for the student. Students may invite peers and family members to attend the opening and closing portions of the defense.

The defense lasts 60-75 minutes. **Students are responsible for scheduling the defense meeting time and place** (in Garland or elsewhere) in consultation with the supervisor, committee member(s), and program specialist. **The defense must be scheduled by the last day of classes before spring break for a time during the two weeks following spring break.**

Revisions must be completed and shared with the supervisor and committee member(s) at least three days in advance of the last day of classes. **The student and thesis supervisor must submit the completed committee signature page to the program specialist at mhs@vanderbilt.edu no later than noon on the last day of classes, along with a copy of the thesis for the department library.**

Honors

Students who successfully complete a thesis will be awarded a degree with honors; "Honors" will be recorded on their diplomas and transcripts and printed beside their names in the Commencement Bulletin. All honors students will also be recognized at the MHS department reception on the Thursday before graduation.

Theses of exceptional quality may be recognized with a degree "with highest honors." The criteria for a thesis to earn highest honors are:

- Exceptional and in-depth engagement with the literature

- Novel research questions/aims, conceptual intervention, and contribution to the problem
- Clear and well substantiated thesis statement.
- Strong use of empirical material or extensive/systematic literature review
- Advanced command of writing skills, nearly at the level of publishable work

Faculty supervisors can nominate a thesis for highest honors by sending a short statement referring to the above criteria and a copy of the thesis to the Director of Undergraduate Studies mhsdus@vanderbilt.edu one week prior to the final thesis submission deadline. Highest honors awardees will be decided by the MHS Awards Committee.

Expectations and Tips

Even if you have conducted research before, thesis work is likely to be a newly challenging—and rewarding—experience. As a substantial, self-directed, long-term project, a successful thesis requires independence, organization, diligent use of time, clear communication, and a willingness to seek support, ask questions, and respond to feedback.

Honors students and thesis supervisors should review the following expectations together and modify them as appropriate.

- *Planning and organization:* students are responsible for all deadlines, requirements, and scheduling. Supervisors and students should meet as soon as possible once the semester begins and work together to create a schedule for regular meetings and goals.
- *Effective use of time:* students should plan to make thesis work a priority and to devote regular, continuous effort to it. Supervisors may ask that students submit some form of new work (bibliography, outline, revision, draft finding, etc.) at or in advance of scheduled meetings.
- *Responsiveness:* students are expected to act on feedback and guidance from supervisors.
- *Clear communication and accountability:* lots of things can disrupt an independent project over the course of an academic year. Students are expected to tell supervisors about needs or extenuating circumstances affecting their work, and supervisors are expected to provide reasonable flexibility and accommodation.

Here are a few principles for students to keep in mind in taking on the challenges and opportunities of thesis research:

- *Embrace limitations:* all research takes place within constraints, such as limits on time, resources, skills and experience, and access to data, subjects, or settings, and this is part of what drives creative and meaningful inquiry. Planning your project and framing your research question around constraints—and around your strengths and available resources—will make it that much stronger.
- *Regularly reflect on your research question or claim:* Research questions should arise from your existing knowledge, convey what you want to find out, and why you think it matters. And they should be formulated to yield an interesting result whatever you end up finding. All the factors that go into a

research question are likely to change over the course of the project. Revisit and revise your research questions or claims regularly so that they reflect what you learn from your sources and data.

- *Be systematic and organized:* having a plan and structure and following them can help keep you on track and direct your efforts if you feel overwhelmed. Being systematic with your work and materials can help you discover things you might not have known to look for. Take the time to do things like: summarize your sources in a spreadsheet; keep your survey results or interview transcripts labeled and organized; keep a regular log of your research process and what your questions and knowledge look like as things progress. Experiment with organizing your materials in different ways to find interesting connections.
- *Show your work and explain your process:* many aspects of your topic or project design may seem so obvious to you that they are not worth explaining to your reader, but this is not the case. The structure of the thesis obliges you to spell things out carefully, both to give your reader all the information they need to know about your topic and how you collected and analyzed data, and so that your own expertise comes through. Clearly and thoroughly explaining the background of your topic, your choice to measure a particular variable, how you chose your methods, what your data will allow you to know, or even why you chose your topic in the first place will benefit your reader and clarify your own thinking.
- *Work alone, work together:* the research and writing of a thesis requires a lot of self-directed work, so find the ways to do this that will fit best for you. At the same time, this work cannot happen in a vacuum. Work with your cohort or with a smaller group of folks doing projects similar to yours to plan things like designated group writing time, accountability check-ins, or peer crits and feedback.
- *Use a citation manager* to organize your sources, generate citations, and produce your bibliography. [Zotero](#) is hard to beat for ease, usefulness, and compatibility across different platforms. BibTeX, Mendeley, and Endnote are great too, especially if you're already familiar with them. Citation managers can make mistakes, so be sure to proofread their output.
- *Consult with the research librarian:* making full use of library databases and search tools is crucial to a successful lit review or text-based analysis. MHS's research librarian Pam Morgan (pamela.j.morgan@vanderbilt.edu) is an expert on these tools and on MHS subject matter in general. Schedule a meeting with her early on in your first semester.

Resources and Required Reading

Booth et al.'s *The Craft of Research* is indispensable for developing a thesis project, offering step-by-step guidance through the early stages. Plan to **read Chapter 4 From Questions to Problems during the first week or two of the semester**. Chapters 3, 5 and 6, on identifying topics and developing sources are strongly recommended as well.

- Booth, Wayne et al. 2024. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [Library access.](#)

The MHS research librarian maintains an extensive set of research guides for MHS-related projects. You can find librarian Pam Morgan's Getting Started guide and the full list of MHS-related guides here:

- [Getting Started](#)
- [All MHS research guides](#) (click on MHS)

The appropriate citation style for your project may depend on your field and your supervisor's preferences, so consult with them to decide how to proceed. A good point of reference is the [Chicago Manual of Style](#) citation guide.

IRB FAQ for undergraduate research projects

Q: Why does this matter?

A: Federal law requires all research supported by the university to comply with rules governing the safe and ethical treatment of people participating in research, so the university devotes considerable effort to making sure any research you do follows these rules, including by completing human subjects training, obtaining approval for your proposed research, following an approved procedure to document the informed consent of your participants, and securely managing your research materials. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is the entity responsible for doing this.

Just as important, as a researcher, you have a personal and professional obligation to protect the safety, privacy, confidentiality, wellbeing, and dignity of the people who agree to work with you. IRB guidelines require you to do this in direct and practical ways. But they are also an opportunity for you to reflect on how you want to communicate and interact with your research participants. Your IRB approved materials can also help build trust by showing your participants that you are approaching your work with them with care and that you are accountable to rules meant to protect them.

Q: There are two IRBs?

VUMC and Vanderbilt University have separate IRBs and application processes. If you are already involved in a study in the med school, it has probably been approved via the VUMC IRB. If you are designing a new study for your thesis for data you will collect yourself, it will probably require submission via the VU Social, Behavioral, and Educational Research (SBER) IRB, which uses a portal called VERA. If you are conducting your own original project and your faculty supervisor's primary appointment is in VUMC, you will submit to the VUMC IRB.

Q: How do I start?

A: See the [VU IRB getting started page here](#).

Complete human subject Social Behavioral Investigators training [via CITI](#). You will need to register if you have not used CITI before or log in if you have; then navigate to View Courses>Courses Ready to Begin. CITI will automatically send your completed training credential to Vanderbilt IRB.

Use the [Vanderbilt HRPP determination survey tool](#) to see what kind of IRB application you may need to submit and where.

Updated August 2025

If you are submitting via the SBER IRB, [log in to VERA](#) and create a new study. Begin completing your study description using the IRB's [protocol template](#).

Q: What roles do I assign for myself and my supervisor?

A: Even though you will be the one conducting all the research, non-PhD student researchers cannot be Principal Investigators (PIs). Assign the PI role to your faculty supervisor. Assign the PI Proxy and Co-Investigator roles to yourself. Assign the Ancillary Reviewer role to the MHS department chair, who will also review and approve your application.

Q: What does the IRB expect me to do?

A: The IRB application asks you to describe in non-specialist language what data you will collect and how you will collect it; how you will protect the privacy, confidentiality, dignity, and wellbeing of your research participants; and how the research activities you are proposing will produce useful and important knowledge. The research protocol you submit needs to explain how the data you are collecting answers your research questions. It also asks for a lot of basic who, what, where, when, why, and how questions that are very straightforward but require careful thought and consistency, such as who your study participants are, how you will communicate with them, how long you will be collecting data for, etc. Don't stress about these questions. Work with your supervisor to come up with a reasonable plan and focus on being clear and consistent in your answers.

Q: How many people should I interview/survey/observe/etc.?

A: Consult with your supervisor to decide on a reasonable sample size for your project given the kind of data you are collecting and your available time and resources. For an ethnographic interview project, as few as six or eight interviews may be more than enough data for a thesis; even one or two case study interviews could contribute to an analysis that draws on other sources. For a survey project, anywhere from a few dozen to several hundred responses may be appropriate, depending on the survey and the research question.

Whatever you decide, remember that the number of participants you put in the IRB application is the allowable maximum. It's not a problem to interview or survey fewer people than you planned, but if you want to exceed the number you will need to amend your application.

Q: How do I complete and submit the application?

A: Complete the online forms describing your study submission in the VERA portal. Use the IRB-provided templates to describe your study protocol and compose an informed consent/participation document. Upload any materials that your research participants will see/hear, including draft recruitment language, interview questions, survey guides, or other research materials. Coordinate with your supervisor to submit the completed proposal. Check the status of your application in a couple days and don't hesitate to prompt your adviser and the department chair if you have not yet received Ancillary Reviewer approval.

Q: What kind of review will I undergo, and how long will it take?

A: Most thesis projects will be eligible for Expedited review, which is for projects involving no more than minimal risk to research participants. It is conducted on an ongoing basis and does not involve review by the

full IRB committee. Projects that involve collecting biospecimens, interacting with vulnerable populations, or using protected health information may require more extensive review by the full committee.

We have been told it will take about four weeks for expedited review and four to ten weeks for projects requiring full review.

Q: What if there is a problem with my application?

The IRB website indicates to expect feedback and questions from compliance coordinators, who may contact you to ask for clarification, revisions, missing materials, or other things during the pre-review and review. Follow their instructions and ask for clarification or more information when you need it.

Q: How and where should I store my data and other research materials?

Research materials should be stored someplace where they are password protected and where you and your research supervisor can access them. Platforms like Box and OneDrive seem to meet the IRB's requirements for data storage. **Research materials such as participant lists and consent records need to be retained by your supervisor for at least three years, so make sure you both have access to them and do not delete these materials or remove your advisor's access to a shared drive.**

Q: What if a problem occurs during my research?

Alert your supervisor and the two of you will discuss it with the IRB together.

Q: What do I do at the end of my project?

Submit a Continuing Review and tell the IRB the project has been completed. Complete any steps you indicated would happen at this point, such as deleting interview recordings. Again, make sure that your supervisor has an organized record of your participant list and consent materials to retain for the federally mandated three years after the conclusion of the project.