

Updated Guidance for the Thesis or Equivalent Standard

By the ABAI Accreditation Board

Thesis or Equivalent Standard (9-104 & 9-109)

Master's degree programs are required to have a thesis or equivalent, as indicated in standard 9-109. It is optional for doctoral degree programs to require a thesis, as indicated in standard 9-104, though doctoral degree programs must have a dissertation. The required contact hours are at the discretion of the institution (though they are separate from required contact hours of each course content area). The purpose of the thesis or equivalent standard is to develop competence in defining a research problem, designing a method to address the problem, and conducting and reporting an investigation that carries out the method to conclusion.

History and Context

ABAI's accreditation standards have always required a thesis or equivalent for master's degree programs. Over time, the standards and the requests for reporting evidence have been systematized. In 2016, the Accreditation Board was structured as an autonomous accrediting board of ABAI, and further improved upon the structure and organization of the standards and requests for program's evidence.

In 2019, the self-study report form included general guidance: The thesis or equivalent must involve a proposal and include evaluative components. A project that is the equivalent of a thesis normally involves a proposal that describes the work to be conducted, the work itself, and a report of the work that describes the rationale, method, outcome, and an evaluation of the outcome.

In 2022, the Accreditation Board evaluated the standard, clarified the requirements and parameters, and issued guidance for the thesis or equivalent. Following its issuance, program coordinators and leadership presented questions and conflicting interpretations. In 2023, the Accreditation Board updated the guidance. It is important to note that the standard itself did not change; rather, the Board elaborated upon its components and articulated considerations for the wide range of acceptable activities.

In general, the Board expects to see a program have these thesis/equivalent items in place for at least the last two years of data in the self-study application for accreditation or renewal of accreditation. Programs must decide how to best meet this requirement in keeping with the program's mission, goals, resources, and student learning outcomes.

Terms Defined

Behavior-analytic: adheres to behavioral principles and theories.

Systematic: orderly and within the conventions of relevant research and evidence-based practices.

Investigation: conducted to yield answers to questions.

Core faculty member: a full-time doctoral-level behavior analyst (see standard 6-100). Meaning, behavior analysts who document their expertise in the applied, experimental, or conceptual analysis of behavior; BCBA or BCBA-D certification is not required but may be appropriate for some programs. Core program faculty are faculty members who devote at least 50% of their professional time to program-related activities.

Committee: a group of at least two individuals overseeing the student's thesis or equivalent; a core faculty member who provides direct oversight of the project and at least one other faculty member (in or outside the program) with relevant expertise.

Guidance

The thesis or equivalent requirement is designed to develop and capture the student's learning related to systematic investigations and scholarly research projects in behavior analysis. The thesis or equivalent includes three parts: the written proposal, the investigation, and the final written product (the final written product must be documented and submitted with the accreditation application).

Written Proposal

The written proposal describes the work the student will do within a scholarly framework.

All proposals must include a review of relevant literature and the method used to address the problem being analyzed. Areas of investigation may be in any branch of behavior analysis: philosophical/conceptual, basic, or applied. Typical investigations are experimental or correlational in nature or are systematic literature reviews. The methodologies, designs, tools, technologies, and criteria are at the discretion of the program and proposal committee.

Experimental

These usually involve the direct manipulation of at least one independent variable such that, should it prove influential on at least one measured dependent variable, its effects would be captured. Examples may include experimental work with one participant, direct replications, extensions, and new areas of study.

Correlational

These are usually less controlled than experimental theses or equivalents, yet still have the potential to produce meaningful data. Case studies serve as one common exemplar of a correlational study.

Systematic Literature

These must be substantial and systematic in addressing a problem to potentially yield new insights. Direct replications of systematic literature reviews are not permitted, though extensions of existing reviews could be.

Investigations and Activities Not Meeting Accreditation Standards

- Stand-alone survey projects will typically fail to meet the thesis or equivalent standard. However, a survey can be added to the other investigation formats to provide more insights. Additionally, a survey that manipulates some independent variable (e.g., question format) could be considered experimental.
- Routine clinical work will not meet the thesis or equivalent standard. Instead, experimental or correlational work conducted in clinical settings should focus on questions that are not typically answered through daily clinical work and must involve appropriate supervision and oversight by a core faculty member (see 'structure and oversight').
- Certification or licensure test-preparation modules are not permissible activities.
- Final or comprehensive examinations, in and of themselves, are not equivalents. They may be incorporated as part of student's culminating activities and can be directly tied to the student's thesis or equivalent project by ensuring all components described in this document are met. If incorporating a comprehensive examination, consider that the questions and methods are based on a behavior-analytic approach to problems or issues.
- Reports or projects with fictitious or hypothetical subjects will typically fail to meet the thesis or equivalent standard, except when such data are illustrative.

Structure and Oversight

The written proposal is a formal procedure that is governed by three sub-requirements: 1) being overseen by a doctoral-level core faculty member, 2) being presented to a committee that includes, at least one additional faculty member (in or outside the program) with relevant expertise, and 3) appropriate institutional review.

Direct Faculty Oversight

The thesis or equivalent must be overseen and supervised by a doctoral-level core faculty member.

Committee

The thesis or equivalent committee must consist of a core faculty member who provides direct oversight of the project and at least one other faculty member with relevant expertise. The other faculty member(s) providing direct oversight can be housed within the program or another program (or even at another institution).

Appropriate Institutional Review

There must be appropriate approval from an institutional review board for human subjects or institutional review board for animal subjects. What is deemed “appropriate review” is subject to each institution’s review board. Exempt studies may still qualify for thesis/equivalent projects.

Structure and Oversight Considerations

The length, format, and formality of the written proposal is at the discretion of the program.

How a program (and institution) allocates resources to the thesis equivalent committee is at their discretion. How the committee works to oversee the proposals is also at the discretion of the program and its institution.

Investigation

The investigation carries out the proposed method.

During the investigation, the student adheres to all agreed-upon protocols, federal regulations, and institutional and program policies. The faculty overseeing the thesis or equivalent helps to monitor progress and suggest or approve adjustments to the proposed method as needed.

The program’s monitoring system is at their discretion. Documenting meetings can be helpful to students and aid in accreditation reports, but at a minimum, completing a project is evidence for conducting the investigation.

Formal Written Report

The formal written report of the work is a formal product that requires four elements: 1) readability, 2) organization, 3) format, and 4) evaluation.

Readability

The written report must be understandable to behavior analysts outside the program. That is, the report is consistent with behavioral terminology, theory, and practice.

Organization

Written reports adhere to professional standards in our field. This includes but is not limited to organization typical of journal articles, APA formatting, and other institution- or program-specific requirements.

Reports of empirical and correlational investigations include an introduction to the problem that reviews the relevant literature and provides a rationale for the investigation, a detailed description of the method sufficient to permit replication, a presentation of results that is sufficient to address the problem, and a discussion of the results that relates them to the problem and the relevant literature.

Reports of systematic literature reviews include an introduction to the problem, a description of the parameters of the literature review, a systematic review and analysis of the relevant literature, and a description of the advancement in addressing the problem that is afforded by the literature review.

Format

The length and format of the written report is at the discretion of the program (and institution). However, the approved written report must be retained by the program for accreditation review in a readable electronic format.

Any written format that meets the requirements described in this section is acceptable. Examples include thesis-like documents and papers presented as mock journal articles. Academic posters may be used as part of final projects and presentations, along with a written report product.

Not permitted, however, are formats like oral presentations (though programs can require an oral presentation in addition to the written report).

Evaluation

Finally, the committee reconvenes to evaluate the formal written report. Again, the way the committee evaluates the formal report is at the discretion of the program and institution. The approved written report is then retained for accreditation review.

Considerations

The Board offers additional considerations for the thesis or equivalent activities in the curriculum.

Coursework Requirements

The thesis or equivalent requirement (standard 9-109) is in addition to the course content area requirements (standard 9-107). That is, a project completed in one course cannot satisfy the

entirety of the equivalent requirements – just like the Principles of Behavior course content cannot be used to also satisfy the Basic Behavior Analysis course content requirements (i.e., no “double-dipping”).

However, the supervised experiential learning requirement (standard 9-108) indicates that work to complete a thesis or equivalent may fulfill that standard, which requires 90 hours of (faculty) supervised experience. In this case, the thesis or equivalent project can be conducted as part of a practicum or fieldwork course, so long as it meets the requirements described herein.

Method Preparation

Developing the initial idea or preliminary conceptualization of the problem and/or method may be completed in coursework before starting the thesis or equivalent. That is, students may develop relevant components in course activities and gather relevant input from instructors. However, the three requirements of the thesis/equivalent (proposal, investigation, formal written report) must have the appropriate supervision and committee involvement and be separate from courses meeting the content area requirements.

Thesis or Thesis Equivalent

The difference between the purpose of the thesis and equivalent, as well as their required components, is nominal. However, committee composition, breadth or depth of investigation, and report formatting are at the discretion of the program and institution and may vary greatly. In other words: same standards, but freedom to alter the format and scope.

Programs may offer both arrangements. If a master’s degree program does not require a thesis, it must require the equivalent of a thesis as described above. The designation of the equivalent is also at the discretion of the program and institution.

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that students' investigations are part of their degree requirements and professional development. These activities are likely to involve inspiration, conceptualization with feedback, and even piloting throughout the program – in and outside of coursework – with relevant faculty, peers, and supervisors.

As indicated in other relevant standards, it is important for the program to encourage the faculty's innovation and creativity in the methods of instruction and modes of delivery (standard 2-105). And practicum and research environments must be sufficient in number and quality to support the achievement of student learning outcomes and program objectives (standards 2-106 and 2-108). Also, master's programs course content areas, supervised experiential learning, and thesis/equivalent activities must align with the degree program standards of 9-106-00 through 9-106-04.

All research, regardless of thesis or equivalent types, must be conducted in an ethical manner. The accreditation and recognition requirements indicate that the program must comply with all applicable federal, state, and local government requirements. Normally, thesis and equivalent projects are governed by specific course codes and prerequisites. In cases where regions, states, or institutions do not necessitate specific course codes or have other formalities, the program must provide evidence of the thesis or equivalent requirement. The program must demonstrate that the student and faculty requirements, processes, and grading conventions for the thesis or equivalent are clearly described in the program handbook and other relevant policies. These materials must be included in the accreditation application and available during the site visit.

Finally, this guidance purposely uses broad language because the activities that programs may arrange for students to engage in can vary. Again, a student's investigation must have appropriate faculty oversight; with that, experimentation and innovation are encouraged, and in some circumstances may push activities beyond the scope of this guidance. Programs should use appropriate discretion to ensure students conduct appropriate behavior-analytic activities, meet the purpose of the thesis or equivalent requirement, and align with the program's goals and mission.

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