



**Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies**  
College of Humanities and Social Sciences  
4400 University Drive, MS 5G3, Fairfax, VA 22030  
Phone: 703-993-8762 Fax: 703-993-5585 Email: mais@gmu.edu

## **Capstone Project/Thesis Guidelines for Zoo & Aquarium Leadership**

### Requirements

The capstone project is the culminating work in the MAIS-ZAL concentration program. It should draw upon all of the coursework and disciplines studied by the individual student. Besides reflecting the student's mastery of subject matter from coursework taken throughout the program, the project must also demonstrate independence of thought, and intellectual maturity, and the student's ability to analyze data. In addition, the project should demonstrate originality and creativity, and it should be written in correct and fluent prose.

The project shall be designed to demonstrate a student's capacity to develop and create a new and applied project that responds to the mission of his/her institution. Although the design of projects will vary in consideration of the need and mission of the zoo or aquarium, all projects will fulfill the following goals:

- Demonstration of the student's baseline knowledge and ability to creatively design and plan a project.
- Demonstration of the student's ability to work collaboratively with colleagues in his/her home institution and throughout the ZAL industry.
- Demonstration of the student's capacity to navigate the intersection of administration, collections management, and education. Projects will generally be grounded in 1 of these concentration areas.
- Dissemination of results through AZA meetings and publications and in peer-reviewed journals.
- Demonstration of the value of the student to his/her institution and the industry.
- Establishment of long-term professional relationships with mentors and colleagues.

The project should be self-contained, i.e., the project can be part of larger initiative, but must be something that a student can carry out by him/herself within a reasonable period of time, not to exceed 1 year from beginning to end.

### Proposal Guidelines

The MAIS-ZAL project proposal should fulfill the following criteria:

- Describe what the project will entail, including a timeline.
- Demonstrate the value of the project.
- Offer a context of existing work in the area (literature review).
- Explain the role of the faculty advisor and committee members in monitoring and assessing the work.
- Outline the nature and presentation of the final output.
- Indicate the criteria upon which the work should be assessed and evaluated.
- Provide justification for the number of credit hours (2 to 5) being sought.
- Demonstrate plans for dissemination of results through meetings and publications.



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### Project Committee Membership

Each ZAL student will have a project committee consisting of three individuals: 1 fulltime GMU faculty member, 1 AZA affiliated member, and 1 additional advisor, who may be GMU or AZA affiliated, or from another accredited university or institution. All committee members must be approved by the GMU-ZAL concentration head and the AZA-ZAL Representative, and will be asked to complete an agreement specifying their obligations to the student, which will be kept with the student's records.

### **Major Advisor/Project Chair**

Individuals who serve as the primary academic advisors must be fulltime GMU faculty members who have completed a terminal degree (PhD).

The major advisor is expected to communicate with the student via email, telephone or in-person at least three (3) times per semester. However, s/he is encouraged to communicate with the student as often as necessary, which may be as often as once per week. Each major advisor will sign a document of commitment agreeing to guide students in:

- Establishing a project committee.
- Choosing elective courses.
- Refining a project topic.
- Conducting a literature review in the chosen research area.
- Creating a project proposal (and funding applications, if applicable).
- Data collection and analysis
- Writing of project report. The advisor will provide critiques of at least 2 drafts of the report (in a timely manner after receiving the drafts, which is normally understood to be within 2 weeks of receipt) and the final product.

### **Additional Committee Members**

Personnel who volunteer to be members of a student's project committee must have a terminal degree (PhD, DVM, etc.) in the appropriate field, or a Master's degree and extensive experience within the field. They must submit their resume/CV to the ZAL program for approval prior to becoming official members of the student's committee. Approval is only valid for a specific student's committee.

How each additional committee member will guide the student will depend on the committee member's particular area of expertise, and will be tailored to the student's needs. Additionally, each committee member will be expected to read and comment on at least 1 draft of the project within two weeks of receiving the draft, in addition to the finished product. The committee member's contributions will be outlined by mutual agreement in a written document by both the committee member and the student, and approved by the GMU-ZAL Director and the AZA-ZAL Representative.



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### Project Topic Suggestions

Students should develop projects based upon the needs of their particular institutions and the criteria delineated above. Topics for past projects have involved diverse ideas:

- New exhibit design
- Public education outcomes
- Species management plans associated with Species Survival Programs
- The administrative structure of volunteer programs