

## **Major Area Paper**

### **Department of Criminology, Law and Society**

### **George Mason University**

Doctoral students entering the Criminology, Law and Society PhD program in fall 2018 and later are required to write a Major Area Paper (MAP). The MAP is an opportunity to conduct an expert analysis of a particular topic of interest. A successful MAP may be the foundation for a student's dissertation proposal, but a MAP is not the same as a dissertation proposal. A dissertation proposal leads to an argument for a specific study. A MAP is a critical synthesis about what we do or do not know about a research area and includes logical conclusions based upon this synthesis. It is an opportunity for the student to demonstrate his/her development toward becoming an independent scholar, a process that is concluded with the successful completion of the dissertation.

#### **Goals and Scope of the MAP**

The MAP should represent a focused review of a research area in criminology, law and society that helps advance the field. As such, the MAP should demonstrate the student's expertise in an area of study, and advance theoretical, methodological, practical, and policy-related issues relevant to the literature, as well as identify gaps in our understanding of this topic. A sophisticated, critical analysis of the literature is expected. The review should integrate information from within the particular subject area, incorporate material from other relevant areas, and should establish implications for the field. The manuscript should be a synthesis – not merely a list or description of studies – but a perspective that is greater, more meaningful, and more parsimonious than the sum of its parts. We recommend that students examine various high-quality review journals for useful models of papers (e.g., *Annual Review of Criminology*; *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*; *Annual Review of Sociology*; *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*).

The rationale behind the MAP is for students to demonstrate that they have a strong understanding of a particular research area *and* that they can exercise independence of thought. This requires an ability to recognize, recall, explain clearly and precisely, apply, and synthesize the major research concepts, findings, theories, methodologies, and debates within the field itself, including any assumptions and policy implications and/or consequences. This then forms a knowledge base for students to show that they have moved beyond describing and summarizing information and toward independent synthesizing of information and thinking critically about it.

- That is, students must show that they are able to:<sup>1</sup> Apply – select, transfer, and use data and principles to complete a task or solve a problem in another familiar situation;
- Analyze – break down knowledge into parts to explore understandings and relationships; see how parts relate to each other and an overall structure/purpose
- Evaluate – justify a decision or course of action through assessing and critiquing ideas and concepts using specific standards and criteria;
- Create – develop, integrate, and combine ideas into a new product, plan, or way of viewing things that is new to them

In short, in the course of writing the MAP, students must show the faculty that they are developing the skills of an independent scholar – balancing breadth with depth of understanding and making thoughtful

<sup>1</sup>This is taken from Bloom's Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain, available at: <http://stearnscenter.gmu.edu/teaching/blooms-taxonomy>

judgments about the material they are reading and discussing. Thus, while the MAP supervisor will offer guidance, it is the student who is responsible for identifying a suitable topic, and conceptualizing, researching, and writing the MAP. The MAP is a student-led and student-produced paper.

### **Timeline and Eligibility**

Students are eligible to submit a MAP for approval once they have completed at least 36 credits toward their PhD (including a credit reduction) and after they have successfully defended their master's thesis (if required). Additionally, students must be in good standing at the time of MAP submission, complying with all George Mason University guidelines (i.e., making satisfactory progress toward their degree as defined in the CLS section of the University catalog).

In practice, this means that students can begin writing their MAP before reaching the minimum number of credits. Full-time doctoral students who complete their CLS MA at Mason are strongly encouraged to submit their MAP before beginning their fourth year in the program (by the September 1 due date; see below) if not sooner. Full-time doctoral students who come to Mason with their MA degree already completed are strongly encouraged to submit their MAP prior to their third year.

Typically, students who complete the MA in Criminology, Law and Society along the way to their PhD should not begin the MAP process until they have defended their master's thesis. It may be reasonable for students to propose a MAP before they defend their thesis, but students must successfully defend their master's thesis before submitting a completed MAP for evaluation.

### **MAP Process**

The first steps are to select a MAP supervisor and a tentative MAP topic. Students will select a member of the CLS graduate faculty to be the primary supervisor for the MAP. The MAP supervisor can be, but does not have to be, the student's assigned faculty advisor. When selecting a potential MAP supervisor, it is recommended that students discuss both mentorship/supervision styles and potential MAP topics with several different faculty members. Students and faculty have differing needs and styles; finding an appropriate match is an important aspect of this process. Students should also consider whether they would prefer a MAP supervisor whose expertise closely aligns with their own area(s) of interest, or prefer a MAP supervisor whose expertise will help broaden their intellectual outlook. Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses, and students need to decide which is best for their own intellectual and career development. Faculty can provide guidance on this issue.

Further, the selection of the topic is a critical component of the student achieving the goals of the MAP. Viable approaches for identifying an appropriate MAP topic are for the student to consult with faculty members, to develop ideas from classroom readings and experiences, and/or from attending academic talks and reviewing the journals noted above. Students can select a MAP topic that is similar to, or distinct from, the topic(s) of their thesis and/or dissertation. There are advantages and disadvantages to keeping with one topic for students' major papers (e.g., specialization vs. breadth of knowledge). Again faculty can provide guidance on this issue.

Once a faculty member has agreed to serve as a student's MAP supervisor, they will help guide the student toward writing a brief proposal for the MAP. This proposal should be approximately 1000 words and should describe the scope and rationale for the MAP, how the completed MAP will contribute to the current state of knowledge in the field, and a timeline for completion. The MAP supervisor and the Graduate Director must approve the MAP proposal by completing and signing MAP Form 1.

After the MAP proposal has been approved, the MAP supervisor will help the student develop a plan for completing the MAP. Regular check-ins and meaningful discussions between the student and their MAP supervisor will be crucial to the successful and timely completion of the MAP. Any changes to the scope and content of the MAP should be revisited throughout the writing process to ensure that the student and supervisor are in agreement.

Lastly, the student will complete the MAP. The MAP submitted for grading will be a sole-authored, student product. The MAP should be approximately 10,000 words, excluding references and written in a social science format (e.g., APA).

### **Evaluation and Approval Process**

A defensible draft of the MAP must be submitted to the Graduate Director by September 1 (Fall semester), or February 1 (Spring semester). A defensible draft is similar in quality to a manuscript that could be submitted for publication.

Similar to the journal review process, the student's MAP will be evaluated independently by three CLS faculty members (none of whom is the MAP supervisor). These reviewers will be randomly assigned by the Graduate Director, and the review process will be double-blind (the reviewers' identities will be blinded from the student and vice versa).

The reviewers' evaluation goal is not simply to decide whether the paper meets a minimal "satisfactory" level of performance. Rather, the reviewers' approach and evaluative responses are modeled after the journal review process.

The reviewers must provide their evaluations to the Graduate Director within three weeks of the submission deadline. Evaluative grades assigned by each reviewer at this stage include: "pass with distinction,"<sup>2</sup> "pass," "revise and resubmit," and "fail." When there is a "revise and resubmit" grade, detailed feedback about what the student should demonstrate to achieve a passing grade will be provided. The Graduate Director will provide the reviews to the student via email once the MAP has been evaluated by the three reviewers.

It is expected that a "revise and resubmit" grade will be common, and therefore students should anticipate the need to revise and resubmit their MAP based on the reviewers' feedback, which could range from minor corrections to major revisions. It is expected that passing or failing grades will be less common at this stage.

Students who receive a "revise and resubmit" grade will have up to six weeks to revise their MAP for a second review. The MAP supervisor should help guide the student through the revision process. A memo detailing the changes made and how the student responded to the feedback must accompany the revision. The revised MAP will then be re-evaluated by the reviewers. The reviewers will have two weeks to complete the second review.

Evaluative grades assigned by each reviewer at this second stage include: "pass with distinction," "pass," and "fail." A student's MAP is approved when the student receives a grade of "pass" (with or without distinction) from at least two of the three reviewers (after the first or the second review). A student's MAP is not approved if they receive a grade of "fail" from two or more reviewers (after the first or second review). A student who does not pass the MAP requirement will be terminated from the program.

<sup>2</sup> For a MAP to "pass with distinction," all three reviewers must agree to this grade at either review.