LEGAL STUDIES HONORS PROGRAM GUIDE
University of California, Berkeley
Honors Thesis Information & Resources
Fifth Edition
I. Overview

You have spent much of your undergraduate careers being consumers of research and gaining a reputation of excellence in this role. Thesis projects are opportunities to become researchers and pursue questions that excite your interests. It is one of only three opportunities for students to be activists in the building of knowledge with the other two being masters theses and doctoral dissertations. I truly believe that if you undertake the thesis project, you will find the experience fascinating, challenging, and rewarding.

-Michael Musheno, Director of Legal Studies

You have discovered that Legal Studies is an interdisciplinary, liberal arts major that engages with the meanings, values, practices and institutions of law. The curriculum examines how law shapes and is shaped by political, economic and cultural forces. In studying the dynamics of law and society, you have been exposed to many academic articles and books that pose interesting questions and utilize a wide range of methods to uncover answers that, in turn, lead to new questions requiring further inquiry. The pursuit of an honors thesis allows you to put yourself into the world of intellectual exploration, identifying your own questions and devising ways to get an answer, however tentative it may be. So, in many ways, thesis work, like most studies of law and society, begin and end with questions.

Within the Legal Studies program, an honors thesis represents a piece of original socio-legal research that seeks to answer a question about some aspect of law or legality, broadly defined. Honors thesis projects generally intersect with other disciplinary fields (e.g., economics, political science, philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, etc.) and utilize empirical (both qualitative & quantitative) and/or normative methodologies to examine the particular research question. Completing an honors thesis is a challenging and time-consuming process spanning across two semesters—the Honors Seminar in the Fall semester and the Research/Writing phase in the Spring semester. Each of these phases is discussed in the following sections.

II. Fall Semester: Legal Studies Honors Seminar

All honors students are required to enroll in LS H195A in the Fall semester. The Undergraduate Advisor, Lauri LaPointe, can be contacted for enrollment information. This seminar provides an intimate and focused space for students to learn about how to construct a research proposal, learn about different methodologies to employ in research, and receive feedback on their project across several written assignments. The main objective of the seminar is to produce a research proposal articulating a well-researched and designed project to be completed the following semester. The seminar is
taught by the Director of Legal Studies, Michael Musheno, and a graduate student serving as the Legal Studies Honors Fellow.

Putting together a research proposal involves several steps. Students begin by identifying a research topic and question which examines a socio-legal issue or phenomenon, often drawing on their scholarly interests, past coursework, and personal work or life experiences. Students then deeply explore their topic/question of interest by compiling a literature review. Finally, students select a research design and methodology that most appropriately answers their research question. Developing a research project is a dynamic and iterative process, with each of these components continually being refined throughout the semester. Towards the end of the semester, students begin identifying and reaching out to potential thesis advisors from the Legal Studies and Berkeley Law faculty.

Please refer to the Legal Studies website for the most updated version of the H195 course syllabus.

III. Spring Semester: Completing the Thesis

Between the Fall and Spring semesters, honors students generally finalize who their faculty advisor will be and continue to refine their projects. Depending on the type of project, students sometimes use the winter break to begin their data collection process, particularly if a remote field site or archive is being utilized. All honors students are required to enroll in H195B for the spring semester, a process which requires the signature of the thesis faculty advisor.

All Legal Studies Honors students are required to have an advisor from either the Legal Studies or Berkeley Law faculty. While faculty from other departments may be secondary advisors for a student’s thesis, each student must have at least one Legal Studies or Berkeley Law faculty member as a formal advisor. Generally, an honors student should choose a faculty advisor based on his or her areas of expertise with special attention to how well that advisor might “fit” the student’s topical and/or disciplinary area(s) of interest. A full listing of Berkeley Law faculty and lecturers, some of whom have taught or are currently teaching Legal Studies courses, is on the Berkeley Law online faculty directory.

Although there are no formal course meetings in the Spring semester, students will continue to have Professor Musheno and the Honors Fellow as resources to provide feedback on their projects. Students primarily work with their faculty advisors to complete the research process. This includes finishing data collection (e.g., interviews, observations, archival work), analyzing these data, and writing up the results in a final thesis paper. The faculty advisor is responsible for reviewing the thesis paper and assigning the ultimate semester grade.
All honors students are expected to participate in the Annual Legal Studies Undergraduate Research Conference, hosted by Berkeley Law towards the end of the spring semester (typically the last Friday in April). This is a wonderful and unique opportunity for students to present their work to an audience and receive feedback on their projects.

IV. Tips for Incoming Honors Students

There are a number of things that incoming students may want to consider prior to beginning the honors program, including the following:

1. Attend the **Honors Information Session** in the Spring semester to speak with the instructors and get your questions answered about the program.

2. Attend the **Annual Legal Studies Undergraduate Research Conference** hosted by Berkeley Law towards the end of the Spring semester. This will give you a sense of what successful honors thesis projects look like and you can talk with former students to ask about their experiences.

3. Over the summer, start thinking about potential thesis topics and research questions. If relevant, be observant in your job/internship/vacation location for interesting ways in which the law works/doesn’t work, shapes peoples’ behaviors, people discuss the law, and for potential interview/observational subjects.

4. Consider enrolling in classes in the upcoming Fall semester that might be helpful to your thesis and relevant to your area of interest.

5. Completing an honors thesis requires a significant amount of time and effort. Students are advised to adjust their courseloads accordingly, particularly in the Spring semester when the bulk of data collection and writing occurs.