

Master of Education

WHAT IS THE CULMINATING PROJECT?

There are two basic requirements of the Culminating Project. The first is that you will play an informed and instrumental role in introducing change into an educational setting. The second is that you will engage in critical reflection on the processes of change with the support of program faculty and peers.

The Culminating Project is not a traditional masters thesis, nor is it merely a professional project that you might otherwise have implemented in an educational setting as part of your professional development. To borrow from the words of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1992), the project should "emanate solely neither from theory nor from practice, but from critical reflection on the intersection of the two."

The Culminating Project has several parts: the development of the project proposal, the implementation of the project, the analysis of the information gathered during implementation, and final write up of the project.

As the culminating experience of your M.Ed., your goals in the project are to:

- name and frame an educational issue or question, a curriculum/instruction project, or an educational project responding to a community need;
- write a proposal that is grounded in the broader professional conversation surrounding that issue or project, using your professional judgment to determine what information to gather and analyze;
- implement the proposed project;
- reflect, systematically and critically, on the processes in which you engaged during the implementation of your project and analyze information you have gathered;
- articulate the results of the project in a final paper.

CULMINATING PROJECT PROPOSAL

Your first task is to write a proposal for your Culminating Project. Generally, proposals include the following components: (1) an introduction to the issue or project you will be addressing and a reflective narrative of your interest in the issue, (2) a description of the broader professional context in which your issue or project is situated, i.e., a review of the literature, (3) a description of the setting in which you will be working, (4) a detailed plan of what you want to do, how you will do it, and what tools you will employ as you do it, (5) a plan for disseminating information on your findings, and (6) associated appendices. Think of the proposal as building a case as to *why* you are proposing to do *what* you want to do, *how* you will do it, and *who* will benefit from your findings.

SECTION 1 Introduction/Reflective Narrative

This section provides an overview of your project and is written as a reflective narrative describing your involvement in the issues that your project addresses. The basic question you are answering in this section is: *What is the project and how does it fit in my professional, intellectual, or personal development?*

Questions (these are not intended to be used as a checklist - they are only questions that may serve to help you get started) to *consider* as you write this section include:

- What is it I want to change and why do I want to do it that way?
- When did I first become interested in this project? What caught my attention? What from my own educational history, my own personal background, or my own professional training contributes to my interest in this project?
- How has my thinking about this project developed? How have my beliefs about it changed? What do I know now about the project that I did not know earlier in my career?
- How does this project fit into my overall goals for myself as an educator?
- What skills do I bring to my plan to address the project under consideration? Skills might include accessing and evaluating information from a wide variety of sources, collecting and analyzing data, communicating my ideas effectively to others, or the ability to frame issues from a variety of perspectives.
- What do I hope to accomplish with this project? What are the problems or questions that the project is designed to address?

SECTION 2 **Review of the Literature and Other "Voices" in the Professional Conversation**

As a professional about to embark on a major academic and professional project, you are part of a larger professional conversation about issues, dilemmas, problems, and solutions. In this section of your proposal, you should situate your project in this broader context. One purpose of placing your project in a broader context is to document the professional influences on the planning of your project. A second purpose is to encourage you to reflect on how your project might contribute to the professional conversation.

This section includes your *critical* synthesis and analysis of several kinds of "voices" in the professional conversation.

Specifically, you should seek:

- *Published and unpublished theoretical and empirical work:* Based on seminal work by "key" researchers who have systematically studied endeavors related to your project, what might be expected to happen as you implement your project?
- *Essays, opinion pieces, or other persuasive writing:* What do others in the field say about the importance and significance of issues and projects similar to yours? What are some of the reasons they develop for engaging in projects similar to yours? What are some reasons not to engage in such projects? What are ethical issues, values, beliefs, or broader lines of thought implicit in your project?

Our expectations for the analysis and synthesis of published and unpublished works such as these are modeled after reviews of the literature that are part of much professional writing in education. You will have encountered such reviews of the literature in your coursework and will write your own literature review in BEDUC 597.

- *Project descriptions:* What other projects have been developed that address issues similar to those of concern to you? How are these projects similar to and different from your own? Projects may be found through ERIC and other databases as well as through your own professional networks.
- *Local resources:* What local networks of support, resource centers, professional organizations, peer groups, mentors, or other local or regional resources are addressing the issues underlying your project? What contacts have you established with these resources?

Your analysis and synthesis of sources such as these will enable you to benefit from the "wisdom of practice" as well as from theoretical and empirical work.

As you synthesize and analyze the professional conversation, you should also make judgments about the value of what you read and discover. Questions you could *consider*:

- How do I account for contradictory findings, views, or conclusions? For empirical pieces, is the methodology appropriate to the question? In what ways does the methodology limit the findings? For essays, what are the authors' claims to authority in the area?
- What questions are not being raised in the conversation? What are the "silences" in the field?
- What can I learn from others that I have encountered in my reading and in my professional networks about how I might best evaluate the effects of my own project? What modes of study were used in other projects that were most appropriate and least appropriate for the questions at hand?

As you conclude this section, you should discuss the place of your project in the local and national conversation. Does your project primarily apply the thinking of others to your setting? Does your project reflect new ways of thinking or strategies to address the issues of concern to you?

SECTION 3 Contexts of the Project

In this section, you will discuss the setting in which your project will be conducted. Your detailed description and analysis of the setting provides the context for understanding the significance of the project for the learners and others who will be involved. It is also in this section where you might situate your project in the historical, social, or political aspects of your setting.

Discuss *who* is in the setting and how various players are related to one another. Discuss also your role in the setting.

Possible questions to consider in this section include:

- What is the composition of the population involved in the project (e.g. ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status)? What is the community like, its economic base, values, etc.?
- What is the “culture” of the educational setting? What are the hierarchical relationships operating within your setting? What is the organizational structure?

SECTION 4 Implementing the Project: Cycles of Action and Reflection

In this section, you will write a *detailed* description of your project. You will describe what the project will accomplish and how you will accomplish this. You will also discuss the tools that you will employ for analyzing and reflecting upon the process of implementing the project.

In your professional seminars and other program courses, you have learned how to systematically gather and think about information related to professional practice. Your ability to make professional judgments about your project and your ability to share the professional

knowledge developed through your involvement in the project will depend upon the quality of your information gathering and reflection. Your strategies for information gathering should capture the richness of the processes of introducing change into an educational setting.

In most qualitative projects, information gathering and analysis are ongoing and inform further action and reflection throughout the course of the project. This is our expectation for your project as well. "Cycles of action and reflection" means that you engage in systematic, ongoing analysis to:

- know how your project is being experienced by those involved;
- use your informed knowledge to modify and develop your project; and
- make professional judgments about the effectiveness of your project.

In your project proposal, you should describe your plan for recording and gathering information on a regular and systematic basis. Questions to address in this section might include some of the following:

- Whose perspectives will be sought in your information gathering? Whose will not? Why?
- If you do observations, who will you observe? How will you record your observations? How often?
- If you do interviews, who will you interview? How will you document your interviews?
- If you do surveys, who will you survey?
- What documents will you analyze?
- What other information will you incorporate into the analysis of your project?
- How will your ongoing information gathering and analysis feed back into your project?
- Will anyone assist you in gathering information? If so, how?

More detailed material will be included in your appendices. This may include unit plans, samples of materials that you will use in the project, a bibliography of professional materials, and other appropriate supporting documentation. The appendices should also contain a timeline of your project, identifying key points of decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. Also include in your timeline when you intend to obtain necessary letters of support or permission.

Section 5 Dissemination of Project Information and Contribution to the Field

An expectation of the Culminating Project is that you make your knowledge public. In this section, you should discuss the audiences with whom you plan to share what happened in your project. Why would those audiences be appropriate? How will you share your project's outcomes?

Some options:

- Colleagues in the setting
- Administrators or supervisors in your setting
- Parents
- Students
- Fellow students in the M.Ed. program
- Professional Development Workshops

CULMINATING PROJECT: THE FINAL PAPER

The final phase of your Culminating Project is the writing of a final paper which documents the process of designing and implementing your project, effects of your project on the learners and others involved, and your reflections on your role in implementing change in an educational setting. The emphasis of your information gathering should have captured the richness of the processes of introducing change into an educational setting. Your final paper should mirror that richness.

Your final paper you must show that you have:

- named and framed an educational project;
- implemented a project grounded in the broader professional conversation;
- collected, analyzed, and summarized information related to the project;
- reflected, systematically and critically on the processes in which you engaged during the implementation of your project;
- determined the effects of your project on the learners and others involved; and
- shared (or plan to share) this information with others.

The first sections of the final paper will be revised sections of your Culminating Project proposal. One task in your revisions will be to modify the "future tense" language of your proposal to "past tense" language of a final, reflective paper. You will also need to rewrite these first sections to reflect what you actually did, describing any changes from your initial implementation plan. If you did not gather information to address an area that you originally planned to address, you should discuss reasons for these changes as well.

After revising your proposal sections, you will need to write two additional sections for your final paper: **What Happened/What Does It Mean** and **What's Next**.

It is important that you not rush into writing your final paper. Give yourself enough time and distance from the implementation of your project to reflect on it, to see factors that may not have been immediately viewed as important, and to ponder questions such as "So what?" "What does it mean?" "What changed?" or "How do I know?"

1. What Happened/What Does It Mean?

This section of the paper describes *what happened* during the implementation phase of your Culminating Project. The information you gathered should be represented in your outcomes/findings/results and, of course, be related to what you intended to change. The data may reveal something about current practice in your educational setting, the effects of your project on the attitudes, behaviors, or achievement of learners, others involved in your project, or on you.

In your project plan, you identified facets of your project on which you expected to gather systematic information. This section should include data on each of these project components, plus information on any additional facets of the project that became salient during implementation.

Questions to consider include:

- What happened?
- How did I use the information I planned to collect to feed back into my project? How did that feedback loop operate? What was the process?
- Were there additional questions, concerns, or issues raised during the implementation phase of my project for which I collected additional, unplanned for information?

It may have become clear during the implementation of the project that certain factors were perhaps more or less powerful or influential than you originally thought. If new issues were introduced, you should identify both the unanticipated information as well as the information that stems from your original questions.

While describing what happened, you will also be addressing the question, "What does my information mean?" You may have entered into your project expecting to find particular answers. Often, however, students gain new insights and perspectives during the implementation of their projects and these should be described as well. A key objective of the final paper is for you to carefully, thoughtfully, and reflectively explain the meaning of your information, not merely summarize the evidence. This section of your paper highlights that objective. It brings life to the information you've collected and allows it to speak. Interpretation requires that you transcend the simple reporting of "facts" to explore and explain the process of change - in you, your students, others involved in your project, or whatever it was that you intended to change. Interpretation requires you to explore and explain the meanings beyond the "facts."

Questions to consider include:

- What does information related to my project mean and why are those meanings important?
- What do I know now and how do I know it?
- What surprised me? Why was it a surprise? What did I do about it?
- What changed? Did it change as I expected?
- What didn't change? Why do I think it didn't change?
- How did dilemmas I may have encountered during the project influence the direction and outcome of my project?

To answer these and other such questions you must make inferences that are pertinent to the questions, issues, and concerns that shaped your project, draw conclusions about the effects of your project, and examine alternative explanations. This requires judgment grounded in broad knowledge and understanding of the topic explored in your Culminating Project.

You must use reasonable care in the interpretation of your findings and your explanation of the processes of change that occurred. You will need to discuss the basis for your interpretations and identify support for your interpretations and explanations. Support for your interpretations and explanations may be found in metaphors or analogies that come from "the wisdom of practice;" reports on projects that have been implemented in similar settings; the rules or principles that guided your inquiry; and your review of literature.

2. What's Next/Conclusions

This section of your paper provides an opportunity for you to reflect on your role as an agent of change. Consider the overall impact of your project on yourself, your colleagues, your students, or others involved in your project.

Questions to consider as you write this final section include:

- Did my project make a difference? If so, in what way?
- What would I do differently and why?
- What did I learn?
- What if? Why not? Just suppose?

Reflect on your efforts to disseminate information about your project to answer questions such as:

- What was the reaction of your colleagues to your project and findings?
- What are your judgments about the effectiveness of the methods you chose to disseminate information about your project?

As a graduate of a master-level program, you have skills, knowledge, and responsibilities for leadership. Your project should be the first of many innovations you initiate. Discuss the next steps that you envision for your role in making schools and other educational settings better places for all students.

COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CULMINATING PROJECT PROPOSAL AND FINAL PAPER

Initially, the most challenging aspects of the Culminating Project are stating your project succinctly and deciding on what it is exactly that you want to do out of the myriad of possibilities. As you consider potential Culminating Projects, it will help if you reflect on the following questions:

1. Am I sufficiently grounded in the topic to benefit from past research and practice, and to extend what is already known about this area to my setting?

In your courses, you have studied theory and have analyzed exemplary practice. You have learned to understand educational issues and questions through different lenses and from different perspectives. In your Culminating Project you will consolidate, transfer, and extend what you know to your own setting.

For example, if you are interested in creating modifications to your school's discipline policies, have you thoroughly reviewed the current research literature on discipline issues? Have you grappled with the various ways that discipline issues have been named and framed at different points in time? Have you analyzed and critiqued the current policies, the history of their development, and the current strengths and weaknesses of practices in the setting in which you will do your project? Have you begun to analyze organizational factors that will affect the implementation of your project?

The point at which you begin to write your Culminating Project proposal is not the point at which you should begin to develop your expertise in an area. There are many opportunities for developing an informed and critical perspective on your potential topic during your courses. Nonetheless, we understand that some of you may develop interests in a particular issue or project late in your graduate studies. If you wish to pursue these interests for your Culminating Project, you may be encouraged to take additional course work, independent study, or to take time on leave from the program to develop deeper understanding of the issues that you will be addressing in your project.

2. What kinds of *change* do I hope to introduce into the setting?

In your courses, you have learned about many types of change as well as the complex processes of introducing change into educational settings. You must examine your own roles and responsibilities to help you determine what kinds of change you hope to introduce into your setting. Possible types of change include:

Personal Change: In attitudes; relationships between students, teachers, parents; classroom behaviors of students or teachers; etc.

Content /Pedagogical Change: What is taught; how it is taught; the types of questions that are asked; the way that homework is assigned; the ways that students are organized for instruction within the classroom; etc.

Structural Change: The ways that staff works together; working relationships between administrators, teachers, parents; staffing patterns; length of the school day or class periods; ways in which instruction is scheduled and students are grouped; restructuring of goals, formal policies, institution-wide practices; ways that power is shared, manifested, or contested in an institution; etc.

As you plan, consider the areas in which you have the power to make changes. Be ambitious, but be realistic.

3. Is the project "do-able" in a period of one-to-two quarters?

In your courses, have learned to use information gathering and analysis tools for documenting and reflecting upon the dynamics of learning and teaching. You should consider your time constraints for gathering and analyzing your information.

We suggest that you identify the major components of your project and place them on a timeline. Then ask yourself whether or not it is reasonable, given the realities of your life, to meet the deadlines of your timeline.

4. How do I know if the project I'm planning is "too big" or "not enough"?

The total Culminating Project experience is 9 credits of your graduate program. Three of those credits will be taken in BEDUC 597, the course in which you will finalize your Culminating Project proposal. For the remaining 6 credits, you will enroll in BEDUC 598 (implementation of your proposal) and 599 (analyzing your results and writing the final Culminating Project paper).

The writing of your proposal in BEDUC 597 will involve regular meetings with your advisor and considerable time focused in the library for development of your review of the literature. For some students, it may be necessary to register for BEDUC 597 in order to complete the proposal satisfactorily. (Note that the Culminating Project totals only 9 credits although some students may register for any of the Culminating Project courses more than one time.) Standard contact hours and preparation hours for traditional courses can be used as a *rough* guideline for how much time you should expect to invest in both BEDUC 598 and 599. That is, during the implementation of your proposal in BEDUC 598, you should expect to spend a minimum of 12-16 hours per week for approximately 10 weeks on the project activities and on the information gathering, recording and preliminary analysis.

Analysis generally takes as long as information gathering. You should expect that the complete analysis of results and the writing of the final paper (done while you are enrolled in BEDUC 599) should require effort equivalent to that of a 2-3 credit course. In the final reflection, analysis, and writing phase of the project, you can expect to do additional reading and to revise your paper several times.

Projects requiring significantly less student effort than described above are probably inadequate for a Culminating Project; projects requiring significantly greater student effort are beyond the expectations of the program.

5. Whose support, approval, or cooperation will I need to obtain prior to committing myself to a project?

Procedures related to your setting.

You must follow the procedures in your educational setting for gaining permission to gather information. If you are seeking information from colleagues, you will need to make appropriate arrangements sensitive to time and space. If you intend to work with students, you will need to notify parents of your project. We strongly recommend that you obtain letters of cooperation from anyone upon whom your project's success will depend.

Human Subjects Review (HSR)

If your Culminating Project will involve formally collecting and analyzing data and making your knowledge about the project public, you will need to take steps to ensure that the project and the dissemination of information about your work causes no harm to any of those involved. The University of Washington has procedures in place whereby your proposed project will be reviewed by others who will verify that no harm is likely to come from your project. HSR forms are available online: <http://depts.washington.edu/hsd/>

If your Culminating Project is a research project, you will need to work closely with your advisor to determine the level of HSR review that will be required. You will want to consult the Human Subjects Manual for the types of research and accompanying review process.

The Manual is available online:

<http://depts.washington.edu/hsd/INFO/MANUAL/hsmdoc.htm> Consult section II.

Whether your project is exempt or requires expedited or full review, there are HSR forms to complete. Your advisor will assist you with their completion and submission.

6. What will be the political effects of implementing my project?

In your personal work setting, your school or institution, your department, and your community, who might be frightened, confused, angered, or otherwise bothered by this project, and what can you do to minimize this? Answering this question will assist you in the completion of the Human Subjects Review form and may also become part of your final paper.

7. What resources will I need for the project? How will I find these things?

Resources include curriculum materials, equipment, other people, exemption from formal policies, money, a network for personal support, and, where appropriate, the support of parents.

8. How long should the project proposal be?

There is no minimum or maximum number of pages, but keep in mind that you are presenting a proposal for a major project. Many students have found that papers between 20 and 30 pages are adequate for the development of the proposal.

9. How many literature and professional resource references do I need?

The depth and breadth of the literature and other professional resources will vary tremendously for different areas. For some projects, you will have to find studies and project descriptions in related areas. For other projects, your task will be to make informed judgments about narrowing the literature to workable levels.

More important than the number of citations in your reference list is the quality of judgment you make about which works have been most influential and thought-provoking in the professional conversation.

Some questions to guide your selection of sources would include:

- What have been the most influential works in the field? Which authors have been important for the development of thought about the field?

A way to find the "key players" in a given field is checking who is consistently cited in the literature. Program faculty can also help you to identify "key players".

- Beyond the key players, what other authors have made significant, thought provoking contributions to the professional conversation?

These might include dissenting voices, or authors who have proposed new applications or significant sidelines to the main threads in the literature. For example, in a project on parent involvement, an appropriate summary of the professional conversation would include not only the "stars" in the field who are publishing extensively, but also authors who interpret the issues through different lenses, who pose questions about the conventional lines of thinking, or who raise thought-provoking questions that are not yet addressed in empirical work.

Your selection of articles and other sources should also reflect the complexity of the field and the diversity of settings and populations within which the issues might be addressed. For example, we would expect that a literature review on non-sexist teaching strategies would include discussion of social class, ethnicity, and age variables.

When writing your section on written work that is part of the professional conversation, you should choose the "best" references and references that are representative of the scope of current thinking in the field. Usually, a reference list of 25-30 sources and an additional resource list of local and regional resources should be adequate for representing the many voices in dialogue. This is intended only as a general guideline, since the quality of paper will depend on the quality of judgment that you bring to your selection of works, not on the number of studies and essays that are included in your reference list.