Completing the course work in your master’s program is a significant accomplishment but is only preliminary to what is to come. Once you complete your course work, you will need to complete a culminating project. The M.S. degree requires a comprehensive exam or a research proposal. The M.A. degree requires a thesis. Often students underestimate the effort required to successfully complete their final project. The comprehensive exam is offered twice a year. The research proposal or thesis can take months to complete.

For students completing the M.S., the comprehensive exam is a good option for practitioners or anyone else seeking to complete their requirements in a short period of time. Once you commit to the exam, you will be enrolled in a BlackBoard website where you will find sample questions and tips for success. The exam covers four areas of the curriculum. Your answers must demonstrate an understanding and application of relevant concepts, critical thinking, and good writing skills. Your answers must contain scholarly research citations. Relying on an undergraduate text book to craft your answer is unlikely to demonstrate you are capable of graduate level work. Superficial analysis or poorly written responses will receive a failing grade. You must receive a passing score in each area to fulfill this requirement. (More information can be found at <http://www.indstate.edu/ccj/academicprograms/grad/exam.html>.) I recommend you do the best you can to clear other obligations from your schedule during the comprehensive examination period. Unfortunately, some students have failed the exam because work or family obligations prevented them from committing the necessary time to write an acceptable exam. You should contact the exam facilitator if you encounter problems.

Many traditional students are more comfortable choosing the research proposal option. The research proposal is unlike most of the papers you have written for your classes. You cannot approach it as an essay or term paper. It has a unique structure and purpose. You will be completing the preliminary portion of a thesis, but you do not need to collect or analyze data. Producing a good research proposal is a process and not an event. Virtually all proposals require numerous re-writes. Before starting, you need to form a committee and work closely with the committee chair. I do not recommend you try to do significant writing on your own. Under proper supervision, most students can complete an acceptable research proposal in two semesters. Please keep in mind that your committee will need time to review your draft. It is not uncommon for the committee to take three to four weeks to respond with changes needed in the next draft. Every committee member is serving on numerous other committees, so it will take time to properly process your proposal. Your final draft must be near publication-ready.

The thesis is a necessary step for those intending to pursue a Ph.D. If you are not planning to enter a research doctorial program, the thesis option is not recommended. The thesis is the most demanding project and many M.A. students switch to the M.S. program when they learn what is required. Do not attempt to start a thesis until you have the approval of your thesis chair. The thesis starts with the research proposal process but adds data collection, analysis, and discussion of the findings. As you approach completion of your course work, you should start to form a thesis committee. Prior to collecting data, you must submit your research proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Any data collected prior to receiving IRB approval cannot be used. The IRB must determine that your research conforms to ethical and scholarly standards. The thesis is a significant amount of work for the student and the committee. Faculty members are not likely to accept a position on your committee unless convinced you can succeed. The burden is on the student to propose a realistic project and demonstrate likelihood he or she can be successful. If your efforts to form a committee fail, you may need to reformulate your project and again solicit faculty support. The final draft of the thesis must be in publishable form because it will be published. Even improperly formatted margins can result in a rejection of the document. Most students can complete a thesis in 12 to 18 months.

I hope this helps you determine which option is best for you.

Best wishes in completing your degree requirements.

DeVere D. Woods Ph.D.

Chair

Department of Criminology &

Criminal Justice