Graduate Professional Project Guidelines  
Master of Arts in Communication

Overview:

As a culminating experience toward completion of a MA in Communication degree, a graduate professional project is a combination of academic and applied processes. Each graduate professional project includes the following:

• Students select a three-person committee (a chair and additional member from the ESC graduate faculty and an outside representative from the professional organization) to guide the project  
• Students must enroll for 3 or 6 credits of graduate project (COMM 873 or COMM 874)  
• Each project must begin with a project proposal and end with an academic report and a professional project, all delivered in written form and defended orally

Committee:

The student will work with an academic advisor (who serves as the chair for the student’s committee) to develop a graduate project plan. This advisor must be a member of the ESC graduate faculty. In addition, the committee will include a second ESC graduate faculty member and one external professional member representing the professional organization. This committee will help guide the student through the proposal and final report/defense process. All final decisions about a graduate project will be made in collaboration with the student’s academic advisor.

Credit Hours:

The graduate project credits can be taken all in 1 semester or split across semesters (e.g., 3 credits in the fall and 3 in the spring). Students should try to sign up for the number of credits that correspond with the work being completed in a particular semester. For example, if the majority of work will take place in the spring semester, students may want to take 3-6 project credits to allow them the time in their schedules needed to complete the work.

Graduate project guidelines – proposal components:

The purpose of the proposal meeting is for the student’s committee to review the proposed graduate project and to agree with the student on the specifics of the project to be undertaken. Once the three members of the committee and the student sign off on the specifics of what is expected of the student through this proposal, any substantive changes must be made with the approval of the full committee.
This proposal should include any background information necessary to establishing the context of the project and a detailed description of what the student plans to produce for the project.

For example, if a student were to propose an IMC campaign to promote a new initiative for the Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Society that created a club for high school students to create exhibits for the museum, the background information might include summaries of best practices from other historical museums with similar clubs, an analysis of what promotions the WSCHS has done in the past, a survey of local high school seniors to ask what types of messages appeal to them and how they want to receive the information, and applied information from trade journals on how to reach and appeal to high school students. This background information would then support the proposed deliverables that might include a Facebook page, Twitter posts, fliers, teacher packets, and the creation of a website.

As another example, if a student were to propose an in-depth civic journalism project — in print, broadcast, online or some multi-media combination (including blogs and social media) — extensive research, interviews and observation would be required prior to the development of content for a mass audience. The subject of the project would likely be of local concern, but the reporting must include a national/world view of how the issue affects citizens. The project would require the supervision of a working professional and a faculty member with extensive field experience. In addition to traditional reporting, special attention should be paid to using academic research, computer assisted reporting (data mining), and conducting surveys and focus groups. The writing should be incisive, thought provoking, and professional in content, quality and impact. The outcome of the project should help readers understand a particular problem and create solutions for change.

**Graduate project guidelines – written components:**

A graduate project in the MAC program should contain both an academic report and a professional product.

1) All academic reports should begin with an executive summary of the project as a whole. This may include, for example, why the student became interested in the topic/work, an explanation of the situation that this work will contribute to, how this work meets the goals and objectives of the person or group the project is intended for, what approach or method the student used in completing the work, and a summary of the finished product. Typically 1 page in length, this often written last, after all other work is completed.

2) The second section of the project explains the background related to the project. This may include, for example, an explanation of industry standards on a topic or approach, a history of the organization the project is for, best practices of similar work, relevant academic research and theory pertaining to the topic, etc. This section allows the student
to show his or her expertise on the topic and lay the groundwork for the chosen approach explained in the next section.

3) The third section of the graduate project will be a clear discussion and delineation of the process the student will use in undertaking the project and a clear justification for the appropriateness of this methodology. This may include, for example, information on people to be interviewed, a creative brief, follow-up surveys/focus groups/in-depth interviews to be conducted, other data or information to be collected, a timeline, etc. (The above is not an exhaustive list. Decisions about what is appropriate to include in a methodology section will depend on the nature of the project undertaken. A discussion regarding appropriate methods should be undertaken with a student’s advisor).

Note, for the proposal, the methodology section is typically written in the future tense as activities have not yet been undertaken. In the final project, the methodology section is typically written in the past tense.

4) The fourth section of the professional project will contain a copy of the final product undertaken through the project. This will be what material is turned in to the organization, business, etc. involved with the graduate project. This section should include a copy of every piece produced for the project. If the work is digital in nature (i.e., video, radio, social media, etc.), an electronic version should be attached. If a website or other easily changed pieces are produced, hard or archived digital copies of the work should be included.

5) The fifth section of the professional project may contain a conclusion and recommendations section, at the discretion of the student's advisor. This may include an analysis of the strengths and limitations of the project as carried out. What worked well? What could have been done more efficiently? What recommendations for future efforts can be made? What was learned by the student from this process? What needs for additional work have been identified through this project (areas of future inquiry or research)? The concluding section generally relates the particular project back to the information in the second section.

A final copy of the completed project contained in a binder and a digital copy of the whole project must be submitted to the MAC graduate coordinator in addition to digital or hard copies to committee members as requested.

Graduate project guidelines – oral components

1) Upon completion of a student’s professional project, the student’s committee is given finished copies of the graduate project from above. The student will collaborate with his or her committee to schedule an oral presentation of the project. The student should work
with his or her advisor to establish what should be in this presentation. After the presentation, the committee can engage the student in a Q&A discussion session.

2) At the completion of the oral presentation component of the professional project, committee members will make any final recommendations for changes to the student’s project report and establish a timeline for final changes to be made. Should the committee agree that changes are minor, committee members may decide to sign the Notice of Completion form at that time. Should the committee agree collectively or should any individual member believe that significant work is still needed to complete the project, that member, or the full committee can wait to sign the Notice of Completion form pending appropriate changes.