I. Guidelines & Expectations

A. Basics. The master’s project is the last academic task that students must complete in order to earn a master’s degree. In order to undertake the project, students register in LS850, The Master’s Project Colloquium, a three-credit pass/fail course that has two components:

- An independent study supervised by a graduate faculty member with some expertise in the issues or methods involved; and

- A classroom component, the Master’s Project Proseminar, held twice a semester at GLS House, which provides advice and support for work in progress.

Prior to the project semester, the student must fulfill all project prerequisites (see E below) and submit a proposal for approval. Once the proposal is approved by the GLS Advisory Committee, students and supervisors are free to begin work on the project, and students will be given a permission number that allows them to register for LS850.

The project is considered a one-semester effort; as such, it should require the time and expense typically associated with a demanding three-credit graduate course. Together, the student and supervisor arrange a schedule of regular meetings and deadlines for meeting goals and expectations. The supervisor then advises the student on progress toward those goals.

Once the supervisor considers the project to be complete, it is evaluated by a 3-person examining committee of Duke graduate faculty that includes the supervisor. The student must submit the penultimate version of the project to the GLS office at least 10 days before the scheduled master’s examination. To be considered by the examining committee, the project must meet all appropriate academic standards and require no more than minor edits. Last-minute efforts by any students who have failed to work steadily with their supervisors will not be considered.

The examining committee may recommend corrections to the final version (due a week after the master’s examination) before it can be considered for publication as a GLS master’s project on DukeSpace. Upon receiving a passing grade by this committee (and assuming all other degree requirements have been fulfilled), the student is awarded the master’s degree, and graduates that semester.

B. Concept, Goals and Methods. The master’s project is an opportunity to integrate knowledge and skills acquired over the course of the program. It should demonstrate the student’s ability to conduct sustained critical analysis on a particular question or issue. The student, working independently under the supervision of a graduate faculty member, must conceive, initiate and realize an interdisciplinary project that demonstrates graduate-level critical inquiry and analysis in an academically appropriate, clear and coherent manner.

Typically, the master’s project builds on a research paper or otherwise grows out of previous coursework. Many projects take the form of an extended essay of 50-60 pages, much like a standard master’s thesis, that interprets an issue in light of scholarly sources. The project can also integrate materials, methods, and perspectives from a number of disciplines, and may be innovative in approach. Projects can involve:

this document sets out 1) our program’s guidelines, expectations and requirements for the master’s project; 2) the format of the project proposal; and 3) the format of the project itself.
• Primary research (e.g., social science interviews or historical archival research);

• Applied research (e.g., developing a curriculum, video, website, program, policy or some other practical endeavor of academic significance); or

• Creative work (such as fiction, memoir, personal essay, visual art or other arts).  **Note:** A project involving creative work requires previous demonstration of ability in the medium and an understanding of its methods and issues. Written work should engage a wide readership meaningfully and meet sophisticated literary expectations.

While it is fine to explore issues pertinent to your career experience, the project must analyze them with appropriate critical distance from a broader academic perspective.

C. **Requirements**

1. **The project should:**
   a. Engage in an open and objective process of **critical inquiry**;
   b. Involve **written analysis**;
   c. Demonstrate an awareness of the **scholarly literature**; and
   d. Represent an **effort equivalent to** a 50-60 page research paper.

The master’s project is at heart a work of critical analysis that seeks to answer the central research question posed in the project proposal. Even a creative project should be thought of as an attempt to engage through creative methods with some particular question, issue or problem of academic significance. While the project does not require a separate literature review, it must be informed by an awareness of the state of the scholarly conversation and current research.

For example:

- A project that brings to light new archival data should interpret that data within the context of the ongoing scholarly discussion among historians and others.
- A project that involves curriculum design should include a discussion of appropriate scholarly research and an analysis of how scholarly theories (whether pedagogical or content-oriented) influence that curriculum.
- A project that features 50 pages of creative writing should include an essay of 15 pages on the relationship of the fiction or memoir to some larger context (e.g., cultural, philosophical, historical, psychological) or to the creative process that produced it.

2. **The project should be interdisciplinary.** The master’s project should avoid narrow disciplinary concerns more appropriate to a specific academic specialty unless it analyzes those concerns from some broader perspective. For example, the project might apply the methods or perspectives of more than one field, or it might explore issues that do not fall neatly into any particular field.

3. **The project should conform to appropriate academic standards of both form and content.** While the master’s project is not required to make a publishable original contribution to the academic discussion, it should represent a serious effort to draw conclusions about an issue that is, in academic terms, worth exploring. In addition, it should meet the following academic criteria:

- **Human Subjects.** All research involving human subjects must be conducted according to appropriate ethical and scientific standards; it must be reviewed by the Human Subjects Committee of Duke’s Institutional Review Board before any research is conducted.
Developing a Master’s Project Idea

- **Choose an issue of personal interest.** We suggest amplifying a course paper or otherwise building on topics you have already studied during your time in the program. This will ensure that you have an understanding of the issues and scholarly conversation necessary for writing the initial Project proposal – as well as a potential supervisor. Alternatively, you might analyze, within appropriate academic contexts and concerns, an issue about which you have personal experience or career expertise.

- **Once you are midway through your coursework, think carefully about which further courses might help you develop the background, skills or relationships you will need for your Master’s Project.**

- **The Master’s Project will require a focus greater than that represented by a broad topic.** In the semester prior to writing your proposal, center your thinking on developing a viable central question. This will ensure that your ideas are appropriately focused for writing the proposal. Such a question should make clear what is at stake or at issue in your project – why we should care about it. It should be an open, non-rhetorical, analytical question – not merely a question of fact but interpretation -- whose answer you truly want to pursue over the course of several months.

- **Master’s project archives** are available for review and are a good way to get a feel for topics, formats, and project size. Bound copies be borrowed from the GLS office. More recent projects are available on the DukeSpace website.

D. **Faculty Supervisor.** prior to the project semester, the student is responsible for finding a faculty supervisor to work with, and confirming that the supervisor is available during the project semester. This supervisor must: 1) be a member of the Duke Graduate Faculty; 2) have appropriate expertise for guiding and evaluating the proposed project; and 3) be approved in advance by the GLS director.

The responsibilities of the faculty supervisor include 1) advising the student in developing a workable concept and proposal; 2) guiding the student through the work required to complete the proposed project, and 3) determining when the student has successfully completed it. Before the project semester, the supervisor attends the Proposal Meeting (see E below). During the project semester, the supervisor sets a schedule of goals and deadlines for the student while meeting with the student regularly (typically once every two weeks). The supervisor serves as first reader on the examining committee, and confirms for the committee 15 days prior to the scheduled examination that the student has produced a project that is ready for examination.

Because a student’s relationship with the supervisor is crucial to a successful project, students are encouraged to select a project supervisor from among faculty with whom they have studied, preferably one who has taught in the GLS program. While working on their interdisciplinary projects, students are of course free to consult with faculty other than their supervisors, but only one faculty member can be appointed supervisor.
E. Prerequisites

- **Master’s Project Planning Session.** Each student is responsible for attending this session (offered each January, June and September) before his or her seventh course (ideally during courses five or six). At this session, students will learn details about the process leading to the project, and can ask questions about the proposal and other prerequisites.

- **Research Librarian Bibliographic Consultation.** Before the proposal is submitted, the student must consult with a Duke research librarian in any field pertinent to the proposed project to discuss the current state of scholarly research and discussion, as well as strategies for further research.

- **Human Subjects Approval (if appropriate).** Before any research involving humans as subjects can be conducted, or the proposal is submitted, the student must receive a waiver or approval from the Human Subjects Committee of the Institutional Review Board. Documentation of either waiver or approval should be submitted with the proposal.

- **Proposal Meeting.** At least two weeks before the proposal deadline, the student, the supervisor and a representative of the GLS program (either the director or assistant director) will meet to share ideas and work out the final details of the proposal.

- **Master’s Project Proposal.** Approval of a master’s project proposal by the GLS Advisory Committee is required prior to the master’s project semester. Students should submit a proposal (see below for format) by the deadline at least one semester before the master’s project semester. Students should strive to craft a proposal that is centered on a focused, analytical central question. An optional Proposal Workshop is available for support in crafting the proposal.
II. Proposal Format

A. COMPONENTS OF THE PROPOSAL. Use no more than three double-spaced pages to answer the following questions under separate headings.

Central Question (1-3 sentences)
Articulate -- in its most distilled, essential, focused form -- the concept at the heart of this proposed project: What question (or issue, or problem) does this project seek to address or analyze?

Typically, this takes the form of a concise, analytical, open-ended central research question or falsifiable hypothesis. For a project involving applied research or creative work, this can take the form of a statement of the goal of the project. (Save all but the most basic definitional explanation for the Context or Method sections.)

Context (2-3 paragraphs)
Discuss what is already known about this question, what we might learn from your project and why this is significant. What background, context or scholarly debate do I need to know? What are some possible answers to your central question? What do you believe is really at issue or at stake in this project?

Method (1-2 paragraphs)
How will you go about answering this central question or achieving this goal? Many projects take the form of an academic essay based in the scholarly literature (much like an extended class research paper). If you choose this approach, what sort of theories and research materials will you use in your project and why? If you are doing primary research, what is the research design and how will you evaluate your results?

If you plan a project that is not an extended essay (e.g. a project that involves applied research or creative work), what form will it take? Will there be an accompanying essay or will the written analysis be integrated into the project in some other way? If there is an essay, what issues will it address? What materials, methods or theories will you use in your project and why?

Preparation (1 paragraph)
How have you prepared yourself, through courses, personal or professional background, or other means, for undertaking such a project?

B. PRELIMINARY BIBLIOGRAPHY. Attached to each draft of your proposal should be a 1-2 page bibliography that indicates what you anticipate will be the key sources for your project, and thus demonstrates your awareness of scholarly sources that will be important to your research.

List primary and secondary sources separately, using a standard bibliographic format.