**Undergraduate Research Thesis Proposal**

**Update from the URO & Office of Undergraduate Education**

**Summary** - The Office of Undergraduate Education proposes revisions to the Faculty Rules, with support from the Undergraduate Research Office (URO) and the University Honors & Scholars Center. These revisions will standardize rules for writing a thesis and recording successful completion of the thesis on the student’s transcript. With these revisions, any student who successfully writes and defends a thesis will receive recognition at graduation, regardless of whether he or she is enrolled in Honors. Honors and non-Honors theses may differ in a number of ways, including breadth, depth, and length, depending on standards in the discipline. Honors students would graduate “**with Honors Research Distinction**” in the discipline of the thesis topic (replacing the current designation “with Distinction”), while non-Honors students would graduate “**with Research Distinction**” in the discipline of the thesis topic.

The wording changes to the **Faculty Rules** include the following (underlined indicates new wording):

(C) Standards for graduation "with research distinction in [special subject(s)]," “with honors research distinction in [ ],”and "with honors in [ ]" shall be as adopted by the council on academic affairs.

**Background -** Undergraduate research is a key form of academic enrichment and is essential for many students who wish to pursue a postgraduate degree. Each year, however, fewer than 300 Ohio State Honors students complete an Honors thesis. On the other hand, participation in undergraduate research is surging at OSU. In 2010, more than 500 students gave a poster presentation at the Denman Undergraduate Research Forum, and approximately 30% of them were not Honors students. Currently, standards related to the completion of Honors theses (called projects or performances in some disciplines) vary widely across campus. This often leads to confusion and inconsistent recognition of students’ accomplishments. In addition, Honors Directors at fellow CIC institutions indicate that most of their universities permit non-Honors students as well as Honors students to write a thesis, although transcript designations vary. OSU’s national reputation will be enhanced if more students who complete a research project write a thesis that is recognized by institutional rankings.

The non-honors thesis option is consistent with the recently established strategic plans of the Honors & Scholars Center and the Undergraduate Research Office, as well as President Gee’s goal to “put students first.” The new guidelines also would facilitate interdisciplinary research by accommodating students who wish to complete a thesis with a faculty member in a department or discipline outside of the student’s major.

**Process –** A full proposal to the Council on Academic Affairs has been vetted in numerous committees over a two-year period, resulting in revisions that received broad support. Groups that provided input and support include the:

* Arts and Sciences Committee on Curriculum and Instruction
* Honors Directors Committee
* Honors committees in all of the colleges
* Honors Faculty Advisory Committee
* Undergraduate Research Office Faculty Advisory Committee,
* Honors Student Advisory Board & the Undergraduate Research Office Student Advisory Board

Formal approvals/endorsements of the proposal to CAA and word changes to the Faculty Rules include:

* Curricular Associate Deans approved the proposal, January 7, 2010 (W. Carlson)
* CESP endorsed the proposal, February 2, 2010 (W. Carlson)
* Presented to the University Senate Steering Committee, February 25, 2010 (L. Harlow)
* CAA approved the proposal, May 1, 2010 (with Randy Smith)
* The Faculty Rules Committee approved the proposal , September 29, 2010
* Pending - October 28, 2010 meeting of the Faculty Council
* Pending - November 4, 2010 meeting of the University Senate
* Pending - February 11, 2011 meeting of the Board of Trustees

**Implementation** – Pending approval by the Board of Trustees, we expect that non-honors students will be able to graduate “with Research Distinction” starting in Spring Quarter 2011. During the 2010-2011 academic year, the Professor Allison Snow, Director of URO, will meet with college offices, department chairs, and directors to discuss the proposed changes and how to implement them. Each department has the option of altering the minimum GPA and other requirements listed below.

**Anticipated effects on faculty workloads** – Effects on faculty workloads are expected to be small. First, fewer than 300 honors students currently complete a thesis each year. Although we can’t predict how many non-honors students will complete a thesis, it is likely to be fewer than 500 per year, and probably fewer than 200 per year (see next point).

 Second, the numbers of non-honors students who complete a thesis should be similar to or less than the numbers of students who are already doing presenting their findings at the Denman Forum and/or the Fall Undergraduate Research Forum. We have found that ~30% of these students are non-honors students (approximately 200 students per year), many of whom are close to graduating. This is a relatively small number of students given the large size of OSU, although participation may grow.

Third, serving as a faculty research advisor or as the additional faculty member for the one-hour oral defense is optional. Faculty members are free to decline these responsibilities due to lack of time, resources, or interest. Typically, faculty members who choose to supervise undergraduate researchers do so because they enjoy helping students and they may need students’ assistance. Students who are committed to completing a research thesis, whether honors or non-honors, are highly motivated to succeed. Many faculty recruit undergraduate researchers as sophomores or juniors, allowing students to make substantial contributions to the professor’s research program prior to graduation.

Fourth, student researchers can take advantage of professional training that is offered by their departments, colleges, and the campus-wide URO, relieving faculty of these jobs. For example, students can learn about research ethics, working with human subjects, preparing abstracts and posters, presenting research at forums, and writing proposals. Students who take advantage of these services, as well as help from peers and graduate student mentors, do not need as much help from faculty research advisors. Finally, the administrative procedures for completing a non-honors thesis will be simple and straightforward. Certification that the requirements have been met will be provided at the college level. If a department finds that too many students are requesting to graduate “with Research Distinction,” one way to reduce the number of requests is to raise the minimum GPA requirement (currently 3.0).