

Environment, Ecology and Energy Program Senior Honors Thesis Guide

So, you're considering completing a Senior Honors Thesis. A lot needs to be considered before making your decision. This document will provide you with resources, answers to the most frequently asked questions about Senior Honors Theses, and recommendations that will help guide you through the process. Please note that the official guidelines for completing an honors thesis are available on the Honors Carolina website.

PART 1: IMPORTANT RESOURCES & LINKS

- Dr. Geoffrey Bell (gwbell@email.unc.edu, 3305 Venable Hall), Honors Program Faculty Advisor – contact to obtain and submit a learning contract or if you have any questions pertaining to procedures for completing a Senior Honors Thesis.
- Violet Anderson (vmanders@email.unc.edu; 3202 Murray Hall), Student Services Manager – contact about registration for ENEC 693H/694H.
- Honors Carolina Senior Honors Thesis website (<http://honorscarolina.unc.edu/current-students/honors-thesis-and-undergraduate-research/honors-thesis/>) – contains a wealth of information for students and faculty about completing honors theses and deadlines. *Deadlines change each year so you need to be sure you use the current academic year deadlines when planning your research and writing.*
- Senior Honors Thesis Guide (<http://honorscarolina.unc.edu/files/2014/02/Senior-Thesis-Guidelines-2013-2014.pdf>) – contains the eligibility and completion requirements for Senior Honors Theses.
- Carolina Digital Repository (<https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/forms/honors-thesis.form>) – site for uploading the final version of your written thesis.

PART 2: THE BASICS

What is a Senior Honors Thesis?

A Senior Honors Thesis is a year-long independent project whereby a student conducts original and substantial research under the supervision of a UNC faculty member. Permission of a UNC faculty member should be obtained prior to registration. If you are not sure how to find someone to work with, contact Dr. Bell for advice. We often know of faculty looking for student researchers and may be able to pair you with a good faculty match. The faculty member and Dr. Bell will help you determine a project that qualifies for a Senior Honors Thesis. For E3P undergraduates, their research must focus on some aspect of the environment including the natural (e.g., ecology, geology, marine science, hydrology, energy, etc.) and/or social sciences

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(e.g., public policy, economics, anthropology, etc.). “Environmental” research is broadly defined in our program and if you are not sure if a topic is appropriate or whether your research has a strong enough environmental component, please contact the Honors Program Faculty Advisor.

Why do a Senior Honors Thesis?

Successfully completing an honors thesis means that you can graduate from UNC with Honors or Highest Honors (see below for defining criteria). This distinction will be printed on your diploma, transcript, and in the commencement bulletins. You will also receive a gold honors cord to wear for graduation. Note that graduating with Honors or Highest Honors is different than graduating with distinction or highest distinction. These distinctions are awarded solely on the basis of your cumulative GPA. A Senior Honors Thesis is a special commendation that demonstrates to others you are capable of carrying out a research project.

Who is eligible to complete an honors thesis?

Honors Carolina: You **do not** need to be an Honors Carolina student to complete an honors thesis. Any UNC student that meets the minimum GPA requirement is eligible to start an honors thesis.

GPA: Honors Carolina requires that students have a minimum cumulative GPA of 3.3 at the time of registration for Senior Honors Thesis credit hours. If your GPA is close enough to a 3.3 that you have a reasonable expectation of raising your GPA to a 3.3 within the semester you register for the first honors thesis course (ENEC 693H), you may begin a senior honors thesis project on a probationary basis. Such exceptions must be approved in advance by the E3P Honors Faculty Advisor and either the Associate or Assistant Dean for Honors. If you do not raise your GPA to meet the standard at the end of the probationary semester you will receive a grade for ENEC 693H but cannot continue as a candidate for graduation with honors or highest honors. You can, however, continue your research by way of independent research (ENEC 395).

Major: To complete an honors thesis in the E3P, your primary major must be Environmental Science (BS) or Environmental Studies (BA). You must enroll in ENEC honors thesis courses.

Year: You must be in the second semester of your Junior year or first semester of your Senior year to officially start Senior Honors Thesis research (i.e., register for 693H). This does not preclude you from starting your research earlier. In fact, it is common for E3P students that register for 693H in the first semester of their senior year to begin collecting their data the summer prior to the start of the semester.

Field Site Students: Honors Carolina has granted an exception that allows first-semester Juniors who attend one of the E3P’s field sites to register for ENEC 693H. Field site students should register for the second honors thesis course (694H) in their senior year to complete the thesis.

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PART 3: GETTING STARTED

How and when do I start doing research?

Several different ways exist to get involved in honors thesis caliber research. The following are the three most common honors thesis research experience scenarios for E3P students:

- They start their honors thesis research during one of our semester-long field sites.
- They conduct independent research over the summer as part of an internship, Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU), or other field work experience
- They work in a UNC faculty member's lab over a period of time and develop an independent project.

Who can be my thesis mentor/advisor?

Only tenured or tenure-track faculty (i.e., Assistant, Associate, or Full Professors), postdoctoral fellows with teaching appointments, and fixed-term faculty (i.e., Lecturers, Senior Lecturers, or Teaching Professors) who have been employed by an academic unit for at least one year may serve as your official thesis mentor/advisor. Your thesis mentor/advisor must also be affiliated or adjunct faculty in the E3P; consult [the faculty list on the E3P website](#) to be sure. If the faculty member you wish to work with is not listed, please contact Dr. Bell or the Program Chair; we may be able to add them to our faculty.

If you started your research with a mentor who is not a UNC-CH faculty, such as through a summer REU, NOAA Hollings Scholarship, or internship, your off-campus mentor can participate in your honors thesis committee as a Reader (see section on thesis committees below). Your official thesis mentor/advisor (i.e., instructor of record for ENEC 693H/694H), however, must be a E3P-affiliated UNC faculty member who is willing to advise you on your thesis in conjunction with the off-campus mentor/reader with whom you have already established a relationship. Faculty are willing to serve in this role, but you must help us identify the appropriate on-campus faculty mentor/advisor.

What coursework is required?

The E3P uses Format 2 from the Honors Carolina Senior Honors Thesis Guidelines document. The course sequence is ENEC 693H (first semester) and ENEC 694H (second semester).

How do I register for coursework?

Registration for ENEC 693H/694H is by permission through Connect Carolina. A section must be created for you by the E3P's Student Services Administrator, with permission from a faculty mentor/advisor. Complete the following steps **BEFORE THE FIRST DAY OF CLASSES** to

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get registered in a timely fashion. The longer you wait to start the process, the more likely it becomes that you may miss the deadline for enrollment.

Step 1: Obtain the official learning contract from the Honors Program Faculty Advisor.

Step 2: Your faculty mentor/advisor and you must complete all parts of the learning contract and attach a syllabus by following the instructions provided on the learning contract form. This learning contract is used to make sure that you satisfy all the eligibility requirements, understand the expectations of your faculty mentor/advisor, and are aware of the assessment criteria he/she will use to assign a grade. It also is protection for you.

Step 3: Submit (email or hardcopy are acceptable) your signed and completed learning contract (including attached syllabus) to the Honors Program Faculty Advisor.

Once approved, the Honors Program Faculty Advisor will sign the contract and send it to the Student Services Manager who will register you for a section of ENEC 693H/694H with your thesis mentor/advisor as the instructor of record. Note that it sometimes takes a week or two between the submission of your learning contract and registration, especially if you are submitting your forms in the first week of the semester when everyone else is also. The earlier you submit your forms, the faster we can register you for your class.

PART 4: COMPLETING YOUR THESIS

Who should be on an honors thesis committee?

At a bare minimum your committee must consist of your UNC faculty mentor/advisor. However, the E3P recommends adding at least one Reader to your committee. A reader is beneficial because he/she can provide you and your mentor/advisor with a different perspective on your topic and/or add expertise that is important for your research. They can be other UNC faculty, postdoctoral fellows, or graduate students. They are not required to be affiliated with UNC.

You, your faculty mentor/advisor, and any Readers should discuss and agree on the level of involvement for each Reader. In some cases, a Reader may be a co-advisor where they provide feedback and guidance throughout the entire course of your research project, especially in a case where you conducted the research through a summer REU or internship. At the very least, however, a Reader should participate in the oral defense, receive a copy of your written thesis a week prior to your defense, and be able to vote for the Honors or Highest Honors distinction.

What are the requirements to complete an honors thesis?

Coursework: You must earn a passing grade in both ENEC 693H and ENEC 694H.

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Written thesis: You must write an original research paper that will be submitted to your committee for approval while enrolled in ENEC 694H and then archived in the Carolina Digital Repository (CDR). Detailed instructions on how to upload your thesis to the CDR are available in the [Honors Carolina Senior Honors Thesis Guidelines](#) document. Although format and length of your thesis is defined by your committee it must contain a cover page (see the Honors Carolina Senior Honors Thesis website). Ideally, you should have a completed draft to your committee members at least one week prior to your scheduled oral defense. Your committee may ask you to revise this draft upon completion of your oral defense before uploading it to the CDR.

A word about the thesis. Writing a research paper should be an iterative process in which you work with your faculty mentor/advisor, and possibly the reader, to produce a polished draft. You should plan to spend at the very least several weeks revising thesis drafts with your advisor. It is more common, however, to write and share drafts of the various thesis sections with your mentor throughout the two-semester course sequence. By revising drafts prior to your defense date, you reduce the time required to make changes after your defense and identify areas that need improvement prior to the defense.

Oral defense: As part of ENEC 694H you will schedule a defense of your thesis, which involves an oral presentation of your research followed by a question-and-answer period. It is the student's responsibility to coordinate a day and time that accommodates all of your committee members and reserve a room for your defense. Friends and family are welcomed during your oral presentation. This presentation is a culmination of your hard work, and we are happy for you to share your results. After the presentation ends, invited guests and other attendees may ask you questions about your project if they wish. Enjoy this opportunity to share your wisdom gained from the research experience with your peers and family. Once their questions are complete, the committee will ask everyone to leave and they will ask you questions in a closed door session. Typically your committee will notify you whether you will graduate with Honors or Highest Honors at the conclusion of your defense.

Reporting: Your thesis advisor must report the outcome of your thesis research (Honors vs. Highest Honors) to the Honors Program Faculty Advisor before the Honors Carolina deadline.

What are the important deadlines?

Requirement	Deadline
ENEC 693H/694H learning contract submission	Before the 1 st day of classes
Oral defense	See Honors Carolina Senior Honors Thesis website
Reporting Honors or Highest Honors status	See Honors Carolina Senior Honors Thesis website
Upload thesis to CDR	Before the last day of class

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What are the criteria for Honors vs. Highest Honors?

Honors Carolina lets individual programs define the distinction between Honors and Highest Honors. The E3P recommends that Senior Honors Thesis committee members base their decision on both the quality of the thesis research and the scholarly aptitude of the student. Below is a list of factors the committee may want to consider when making their decision.

Scholarly aptitude:

- Provides a substantial intellectual contribution to developing the research project.
- Shows initiative to gather information, supplies, and funding for research.
- Develops logical and novel solutions to problems.
- Conveys a passion and enthusiasm for research and discovery.
- Is receptive to constructive criticism and adequately implements advisors' suggestions.
- Is capable of reflective thinking.
- Is well read on his/her research topic and illustrates a strong understanding of the important concepts and findings in their field of study.
- Can work independently and collaborates well with others.
- Expresses ideas accurately and clearly.

Thesis quality:

- Research is novel and important.
- Research may be combined with other research or is enough to publish on its own in a peer-reviewed journal.
- Written thesis is organized, complete, and well-explained.
- Oral presentation is informative, organized, and clear.

How do I pick up my honor cord?

You may pick up your honor cord during the last week of final exams in the office of the Student Services Manager (3202 Murray Hall, Environment, Ecology and Energy Program main office).