Frequently Asked Questions for the MAIS Student

1. What does it mean to be an MAIS student? There are two ways to approach this question, philosophically and pragmatically. Philosophically, an MAIS student is interested in exploring a problem by incorporating methods, research, and expertise from a variety of disciplines. A discipline-based Masters student will approach a problem only from one perspective. Neither approach is better in general. The approach is dependent on the problem you are exploring and the outcomes you hope to achieve. You’ll explore the philosophy behind interdisciplinary study in your first two terms.

Pragmatically, being an MAIS student can be a bit of a challenge. Unlike discipline-based students, MAIS students don’t have a physical home. Certainly, your major area will provide a home of sorts. However, because you will incorporate different academic areas into your studies, you’ll have your foot in many doors, with none being exclusively yours. If you have an assistantship in a particular department, you may find more of a home there. If you don’t have an assistantship, you won’t have a place to hang your hat, so to speak. The problem with this lack of physical home is that there may be some difficulty forming relationships with other MAIS students. To that end we have created a Facebook page to provide a virtual space for MAIS students to congregate. You can access the page by searching for Oregon State MAIS Grad Students. You’ll need to be approved to join.

2. What’s the difference between graduate and undergraduate study? That’s an easy one: expectations. Graduate students are expected to create superior work that produces new insights, interesting conclusions, and excellent writing. Graduate students don’t miss class, turn in assignments late, or have lame excuses. At OSU, some of your classes may be what are called slash classes. This means that classes are populated with mostly undergraduate students with some spots reserved for graduate students. It is not uncommon in these classes for there to be only one or two graduate students, though some classes will have many graduate students. In these classes, you should make sure that you are getting graduate level work. Unfortunately it is sometimes necessary for you to press the professor to make sure you are not just doing a longer paper than the undergraduates. You’re paying more for graduate credits so you should get more. It’s okay as a graduate student to have expectations, too. Expect graduate level work, not just more work.

3. What are the requirements for the MAIS degree? The degree requires a minimum of 49 credits. This includes 45 credits in your three fields of study and 4 credits of coursework on interdisciplinary study and research methods. A minimum of 9 credits in each of the three fields of study is required. No more than 21 credits should be taken in any one field unless the total program exceeds 49 credits. You must also complete a thesis or research project. Thesis or research project hours do not count toward this 21 credit requirement. No more than 3 credits of blanket-numbered courses in each field of study may be used in the program; thesis credits (Option A) or research paper credits (Option B) are exempt from this limitation. There is no foreign language requirement. All programs of study submitted to the Graduate School must consist of, at a minimum, 50% graduate stand-
alone courses. Directed or independent studies, thesis or research credits count toward the 50% stand alone requirement. The remaining credits may be the 500 component of 400/500 slash courses. Your plan of study is approved by your committee at the program meeting which should be completed by the end of your first 18 hours.

4. **What’s the difference between a thesis and a research paper?** A thesis incorporates all three areas of your degree program while a research paper only incorporates two. Please note that some faculty may have a different standard of what constitutes a thesis or a research paper. For example, a student who produces a documentary that incorporates three areas may have a chair who will not see that as a thesis. This is something that needs to be negotiated between the student and their chair.

5. **Where do I go to get questions answered?** Well, that depends on the type of question. You have a variety of resources at your disposal to help you navigate your way through your graduate career. Your primary resource for answering questions will be your major advisor, once you’ve chosen one. Until then, your professors are important resources. Most departments have a designated coordinator or director of their graduate program. This person can be an invaluable go-to person. The graduate school can help you with academic questions. In addition, both David Bernell, MAIS Coordinator (david.bernell@oregonstate.edu) and I (tgoodnow@oregonstate.edu) are always available to help in any way that we can. We can answer those logistics questions (e.g. how do I change an area of my program?), those non-logistics questions (e.g. will my chair’s feelings be hurt if I want to switch chairs?), and everything in between.

6. **How do I choose a thesis topic?** This is a hard question. Here’s the brief answer: curiosity. What are you curious about? There a lots of ways to narrow a topic. You’ve chosen your academic areas because you have an interest in them. Given your areas, you’ve already made a substantial step in limiting what you’ll study. For example, if my major area is Women Studies with minor areas in Speech Communication and Political Science, I’m probably not going to be interested in exploring the steroid controversy in Major League Baseball and how it affects fan perceptions of favorite players. If that IS what I’m interested in, then I should probably change my areas. The basic idea behind finding a thesis topic is to find something that you really want to know about and something you won’t be bored with a year later. Ideally, it will also involve a topic that will serve you well once you graduate. (Leaving OSU as something of an expert in current public/private collaborations on adult education and workforce training will serve you better in the job market than being an expert on evolving educational theories in pre-WWI Europe.) Perhaps you already have an idea of what you might want to study. This is where your literature review comes in. The idea behind a literature review is to discover what’s already been discovered concerning a particular area. In this process, you may find a gap in the literature. At this point, you ask, “How can my thesis help to fill this gap?” Remember that as a graduate student your research should advance your areas of study. So, what can you study that will advance the research in this area?

7. **When do I have to have my thesis topic?** That depends on your major department and
chair. You should begin thinking about the area you want to explore your first term. During the IST 512 class you’ll produce a proposal. Hence, you’ll need to have a fairly specific topic in mind to complete that assignment. Know that it is possible to change your topic at any point. However, the later in the process that you change the topic delays your completion of the degree. On the other hand, rarely does the final thesis mirror exactly what was proposed in the program meeting.

8. **Who is on my committee?** Your thesis/research paper committee is composed of four professors, all of whom must be designated Graduate Faculty by the Graduate School. The Primary Professor, also called the chair, is from your major area and the person with whom you will work most closely. You will also have one person from each of your minor areas. The final person is the Graduate School Representative. This person represents the graduate school and makes sure that university standards are met in your research and that you are treated fairly in the process. You request a list of possible graduate representatives from the Graduate School. This is a random list. It is likely that the person who serves in this role has little or no knowledge of your research area. This person may also be the hardest role to fill in your graduate committee as serving as the graduate representative is often low on the list of priorities for faculty. You may have to contact several professors before you fill this position. This is just a warning; don’t wait until the last minute to find the grad rep.

9. **How do I choose a thesis chair?** Your thesis chair is the most important person in your graduate career. They will guide you through the process. Consequently, it is important to choose carefully. Your chair will come from your major area; you cannot have a chair from your minor area. If you find that you really want to work with a particular professor but they’re not in your major area, you should change their area to the major area. There are two things to consider when choosing your chair. First, they should have some expertise in the general area that you want to study. Knowledge in your specific topic isn’t necessary, in fact may be impossible. However, the chair needs to have general knowledge to be able to guide your research. The second thing to consider is your ability to work with this person. Remember this is going to be the most important person in your academic life for at least a year. Your chair can make the experience bearable, even enjoyable, or they can make your life miserable. So, think about your relationship with this person before you commit to working with them.

10. **How do I ask someone to be my chair or on my committee?** Just ask them. Generally, you should try to ask a professor face-to-face to serve on your committee, though with the grad rep, you’ll probably see them for the first time at the program meeting. When you ask someone to serve on your committee, you should have verbal synopsis of your thesis/research paper prepared. Faculty generally want to work with students on topics in which they have an interest and feel they can contribute. If you find you need to change committee members for whatever reason (you’ve changed areas, topics, etc.) don’t forget to inform the former member that you no longer need their assistance. Really, professors don’t take it personally if they are replaced. However, it is important that they are informed about their committee membership, as many faculty only reserve so much time
to work on committees. If they think they are serving on one, they may turn down another. If you replace a committee member, they may be free to serve on a different committee.

11. Where do I get the forms necessary for the various items I have to file? Go to the Graduate School Webpage where there is a link for all required forms. Or go to http://oregonstate.edu/dept/grad_school/current/forms.html#program.

12. How long does it take to schedule a committee meeting? A long, long time. Actually, it doesn’t have to take a long time, but the problem is coordinating five schedules to have the same two hour block available (the program meeting usually doesn’t take longer than an hour but the defense often takes the full two hours). As a result, as soon as you get clearance from your major professor, you should start trying to find a time that works for everyone. This is especially true for defenses. There are a lot of students trying to defend at around the same time and it’s usually at either the beginning or the end of the term when professors’ schedules seem to be particularly busy. If you wait for the last minute, you may find yourself either having to push the defense to the next term or be in the unenviable position of trying to replace faculty members.

13. How long can I expect to take to complete my degree? The average MAIS student takes two years to complete the degree. There are 49 required credits with at least 25 of those credits in course work. The average grad student takes 9 to 12 credits per term. In addition, you will have to write your thesis or research paper, which takes substantially longer to complete than a term paper. While it is possible to finish the degree is less than two years, planning for two years is reasonable. Remember that if you plan on taking more terms than your course work requires, OSU has a continuous enrollment policy. This means that you must be enrolled for a minimum of three credits each term during the regular school year until you complete your degree. You must be enrolled for at least three credits during the term that you plan to defend. While it’s not unusual (unfortunately) for students to take longer than two years, it is not advisable. Too often, financial pressures or family pressures require students to leave OSU before the degree is completed. In these cases, it can be extremely difficult to find the discipline to work on the thesis or research paper without the constant encouragement/pressure from the major professor and peers. Completing the MAIS degree in two years is doable. See the attached sample time line for a feel for how to accomplish this.

14. What do I need to complete this degree? There are four keys to success in the MAIS program: discipline, an outlet, support, and a sense of humor. There are two parts to discipline – organizational skills and time management skills. You have to be organized or you can end up wasting a lot of time looking for or redoing something you’ve already done before. Find an organizational system that will work for you for keeping research and data collection easily accessible. Having good organizational skills will work hand in hand with good time management skills. It takes discipline to be able set goals and meet them. We’ve all spent more time than planned playing solitaire or some other game, checking Facebook or email, or watching your favorite team or TV show. Time
management allows you to set reasonable goals for getting work done and for relaxation time.

This leads to the next requirement, an outlet. Being a graduate student doesn’t mean you don’t get to have a life outside of school. In fact, I believe, if you want to succeed in a timely fashion, you HAVE to have something other than school. Otherwise, you set yourself up to burn out. Sometimes, the time you spend away from work can actually be the most intellectually productive as your subconscious has a chance to work through ideas and problems in a more relaxed way. So, make time to get away from the pressures of graduate school. Have a weekly date night with your significant other (also helps in keeping relationships thriving), reserve a couple hours for pleasure reading, and/or most importantly, make daily time for exercise.

The next required component is a support system. You have a built in support system in your committee once it’s formed. These people have a vested interest in seeing you succeed. Perhaps more importantly are your peers. These are people who can help you work through problems or just be a sounding board when you need to vent. Your peers are going through the same thing at the same time that you are. They are invaluable. You’ll create a mini-cohort in IST 512 and you can always talk to your peers on the Facebook page. Additionally, it helps to have support outside of the academic arena just to remind you that there’s a whole other world out there.

Finally, you need a sense of humor. There will be stressful times and times when nothing seems to go right. You gotta have a sense of humor! Laughing will help you remember the greater goal and that any hurdles are minor compared to what you’ll gain when it’s all over.