

## Why Pursue an Independent Research and/or Thesis Option?

During and across AY02, AY03, and AY04, UNO has and will experience material budgetary reductions in all non-prioritized segments of the budget. The MBA is a UNO priority<sup>1</sup> program. So interrelated and long-term oriented are the UoN fiscal year budgets, that one manifestation of these material budgetary reductions is a reduction in summer school offerings, even when an individual course offering *probably* would be net revenue generator. Costs must be cut. Traditionally, even when budgets were flush, summer school offerings rarely included MBA classroom electives.

That the course offerings are reduced does not equate with you having the desire to elongate your enrollment by one semester. Nor need you wait. In addition to traditional classroom courses, UNO CBA offers two other access points into the credit hour generation process: BSAD 8900, Independent Research<sup>2</sup> (1 - 6 credit hour, maximum of 6) and/or the Thesis Option (6+ credit hours).

BSAD 8900, Independent Research can be a mini-thesis, a trial run of a thesis topic, or a horse of a different color. BSAD 8900 can complement or be completely separated from BSAD 8990, Thesis. Enrollment in non-classroom course requires a "contract" with the professor and enrollment times are not limited to the dates for enrollment in classroom courses.

The MBA degree requires 36 hours of credit, including an ordinary student's complement of core courses of 27 hours.<sup>3</sup> Depending upon a student's undergraduate achievements and MBA choices, a specific MBA student has between 9 and 15 credit hours of electives.

### BSAD 8900, Independent Research<sup>4</sup>

Everyone knows that faculty members, in many ways, are not like normal folk. In fact, they are so odd faculty members are willing to work unpaid overtime. Not all the time, but on some specific tasks. If a faculty member is interested<sup>5</sup> in a research topic, then that faculty member often is willing to work unpaid overtime.

A faculty member who serves as the Supervisor of an Independent Research course works unpaid overtime. An Independent Research course consumes about one-third as much time from the professor as a regularly scheduled classroom course. Since an Independent Research course generates far less revenue than the average enrollment of over 20 students in a classroom course, the University is unwilling to pay

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unomaha.edu/uac/bulletin/2001april25.html>

<sup>2</sup> Everyone calls this course Independent Study, because that is its undergraduate name, but the official name in the Graduate College is Independent Research.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.unomaha.edu/graduate/catalog/2002-2003/degree/busadmin.html> or see <http://mba.unomaha.edu>

There are many web links in this document. Most are time sensitive; for example, note the date in this link. As of the original date of this document, for the Graduate College links, go to this web page to have the root page for all catalogs on the web. <http://www.unomaha.edu/graduate/catalog/>

<sup>4</sup> From the 2002-2003 *UNO Graduate Catalog*: "Individual research in an academic area in business administration. Prereq: Graduate and permission of instructor."

<sup>5</sup> See the last section of this document for a brief description of O'Hara's research interests.

the professor. The University is not being niggardly.<sup>6</sup> The University will compensate faculty if, within 18 calendar months, the number of students enrolled with that professor as Independent Research students approximates 9 students enrolled in 3 credit hour classes. However, I have supervised far more such students than is the average in CBA, and in more than 20 years I still have not yet been compensated. As I said: If a faculty member is interested in the research topic, then that faculty member often is willing to work un-paid overtime.

If an Independent Research course is worth that much to the faculty member, then what might it be worth to you?

Sure, you have the obvious and minute gain of graduating "on time". But, do you gain anything of lasting value? That is, do you learn anything? For is not learning the true measure of gain in an MBA program?

Students learn more when enrolled in an Independent Research course, for several reasons. FIRST, the student is interested in the topic. This has two parts: an open jar accepts more inflow than a closed jar; and, disinterest spawns fatigue. Since the student is interested, the student's effort is less likely to truncate at what is necessary to earn a grade. That is, when having fun students will dedicate more effort to the task and increased learning is the result. SECOND, the student has selected a topic of the student's known ignorance. The student will augment the student's existing stock of knowledge (as measured at the margin) far more in an Independent Research course because each increment of accretion is selected on the basis of its noted absence from the student's existing stock of knowledge. THIRD, with an Independent Research course, the student is far more likely to see the connection between the student's schoolwork and future pecuniary flows (or other high value totems). The probability of profit maximization increases with reductions in uncertainty. Or, in short, money motivates.

You get to pick your focus. You pick your focus in these non-classroom courses and in turn you pick your focus of *your* MBA.

You get to pick your focus, that is, in a voluntary contract with a faculty member. It might help you "pick" your focus if you already have developed your negotiation skills. If you do not now have those negotiation skills,<sup>7</sup> then you could go a long way towards learning those negotiation skills in the process of you picking your focus.

Depending upon the interest of the faculty member, the measurable output justifying the award of academic credit hours need not be an academic journal article. An academic journal article is a normal unit of production in academe. Traditionally, in the MBA Program, ten, typed, double-spaced pages of publishable quality text earn one graduate credit hour via Independent Research. Faculty are rumored to live in a world

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<sup>6</sup> How many g's were there? If you do not know the meaning of this word, and its derivation, then any offense you are experiencing is subjective rather than objective. Building your vocabulary and critical thinking skills are just two of the skill sets a student seeks to enhance with enrollment in an Independent Research course.

<sup>7</sup> Fisher, Roger, Ury, William, and Patton, Bruce. *Getting to YES: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

of "publish or perish".<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, faculty members are oddly drawn towards academic journal articles. While they are odd and oddly drawn, do not assume that publication is the only coin of the realm.

A unit of production is needed. Students and faculty may be, can be, and are encouraged to be quite creative in constructing metrics that quantify the existence of and the magnitude of output justifying the award of academic credit. To give examples here would merely serve to stifle your creativity. Suffice it to say that the UNO Graduate College awards academic credit via Independent Research to engineers, poets, MBAs, pianists, chemists, painters, and a myriad of others who endeavor to give full flower to their intellect and creativity.

In the bailiwick of academic research, its outputs are painted in three broad stripes: basic research, applied research, and pedagogical research.

Basic research is relatively rare in frequency. You might see basic research labeled original research, as in "never done before". Generically, basic research develops theory. The theory of basic research needs to be mindful of the existing and expected data, but focuses on organizing the data into understandable shapes and connections. Applied research can be quite profitable. Applied research does many things in addition to, and possibly other than, develop theory. Profit (often) springs from applied research because applied research practices the theory. Pedagogical research focuses on how to communicate the knowledge, the information, and the data developed by the basic and by the applied research from one locus to another. In short, how to teach.

These distinctions, especially between basic research and applied research, often are as dependent on the eye of the beholder as is beauty. But, I will try an example to show the different types of research.

*A retailer of widgets is confronted with a cash flow problem. The retailer has bills to pay for inventory on the shelf, but only has working cash in the till. The retailer does hold a promissory noted issued by her competitor and collateralized by his future sales. She<sup>9</sup> goes to the bank seeking a loan of a material amount of money, and the bank agrees. What is the correct interest rate on the loan?*

Hmmm, an easy enough question, right? Happens every day in some bank serving Fortune 1,000 firms.

How do you grab a hold of a question like "correct interest rate"? Well, those grab holds are theory, and basic research designs the grab holds. Do note, having a hold of one of the horns of dilemma is not quite the same as grasping the dilemma. The study of attaching grab holds and holding on to grab holds is the realm

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<sup>8</sup> Although some say it is "publish and perish".

<sup>9</sup> I hope this makes it more obvious why I prefer nouns to indefinite pronouns. Here is the same paragraph using nouns. "A retailer of widgets is confronted with a cash flow problem. The retailer has bills to pay for inventory on the shelf, but only has working cash in the till. The retailer does hold a promissory noted issued by *the competitor* and collateralized by *the competitor's* future sales. *The retailer* goes to the bank seeking a loan of a material amount of money, and the bank agrees. What is the correct interest rate on the loan?"

of applied research. Do you use screws or glue? Is the center of gravity off? Is it a fragile question, or can you really yank on those grab holds. Well, now, that looks a lot like its drifting off back towards basic research, but these are things you have to know if you are going to apply the grab holds. Enough of that, do you have a good hold on the question? Good. Now, hand it off to some one. Make sure they do not drop it. Welcome to management and the domain of pedagogical research.

As I am sure you have heard: "Those that can't do, teach. And those that can't teach, manage."

Doing and teaching are two entirely different things. The best teachers can do. The worst teachers can neither do nor teach.

Pedagogical research is how you teach a teacher to teach a student so the student learns. That's four hand offs of the question, not one: author to reader to teacher to student to action.<sup>10</sup>

No matter what you call it, and no matter what anyone else calls it, and no matter what it *really* is, whether it is basic, applied, or pedagogical research one thing is for sure. You will learn, and you will learn a lot, pursuing an Independent Research course.<sup>11</sup>

To see a very generic form contract for an MBA Independent Research contract, you may visit the middle of O'Hara's Syllabus web page.<sup>12</sup> As said above, roughly, per graduate credit hour, the expected page output is approximately ten double-spaced typed pages of text, exclusive of graphs, tables, figures, and appendices.

You may prefer to scope the project by clock hours on task rather than pages of output. To scope by clock hours, recall that approximately four hours of study are expected per graduate class hour. This means a 3 credit hour course assumes approximately 225 clock hours of effort.<sup>13</sup> Thus, for a student a 3 credit hour course equals 5.6 full time work weeks (*exclusive of vacation and sick leave*).<sup>14, 15, 16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Just out of curiosity, is the MBA Business Case graduation requirement, as it was designed, basic research, applied research, or pedagogical research? How about as the MBA Business Case was executed by you personally?

<sup>11</sup> At the start, you do not need to know whether the focus you pick is basic, applied, or pedagogical research. Knowing that may help your negotiations and may help in finding a publication outlet, but it does not change what it is you do when you do your research. Which broad stripe you paint on your research changes how you talk about your research, not what it is.

<sup>12</sup> <http://cba.unomaha.edu/faculty/mohara/web/ToSyllab.htm>

<sup>13</sup> That is, 225 clock hours of effort = 3 credit hours times 5 clock hours per credit hour (*i.e., 1 hour of class plus 4 hours of study*) times 15 weeks in a semester.

<sup>14</sup> Recall, the professor will work about one-third as much as the student and will obtain neither pay nor credit hours. What knowledge does the professor get in exchange for the professor's 60 hours of work? See, footnote 7.

<sup>15</sup> I just can not resist double footnoting. Is that permissible? See, Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. Revised by John Grossman and Alice Bennett. 6th edition. x, 308 p., 26 line drawings. 1996 Series: (CGWEP) Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing. Cloth \$30.00. ISBN: 0-226-81626-5. Spring 1996; Paper \$14.00. ISBN: 0-226-81627-3. Spring 1996. Turabian is a generalist, for how to do legal citations visit the Cornell Law School web site <http://www.law.cornell.edu/citation/> for its version of "the Blue Book".

<sup>16</sup> Shucks, surely if one may double footnote, then one may triple footnote. Right? Recall that the student picks the topic that the student likes and that such students learn more because they are open

For any given student an Independent Research course may be a good idea or may be a bad idea. The student must have an interest and the student must be a "self starter".

Why *must* the student be a self-starter? There is no class. There is no date for the midterm. There is no date for the final. There only is a blank page staring at you.<sup>17</sup> That blank page might assault you with a thousand insults about your inadequacies, and threaten to expose you for the pretender to knowledge that you are. A self-starter still coaxes the words out of the blank page. A self-starter finishes.<sup>18</sup>

## Thesis Option

In the 2002-2003 *UNO Graduate Catalog* one may read a densely written paragraph crafted to corner wily students and faculty so as to enforce the bureaucratic necessities.<sup>19</sup> In short, it says, build your own degree in cahoots with your Supervisory Committee<sup>20</sup> subject to Graduate College rules.<sup>21</sup> The feasible scope of potential thesis projects is as broad as your creativity.<sup>22</sup>

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and are less fatigued. Instead, such students shift to the joy of learning. The faculty have two big problems managing students working on Independent Research courses: first, getting students started, and second, getting students stopped. The latter is the bigger problem. The 225 clock hours is a scoping benchmark that often turns out to be a low estimate of effort. However, the ratio of pain to hours worked and the ratio of joy to hours worked are very different in a traditional classroom course as compared with an Independent Research course. What would generate an oppressive subjective experienced in a classroom course often generates an entirely different subjective experience in an Independent Research course.

<sup>17</sup> "There's nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein." Red Smith. By now, do you crave the full citation? If so, then you are starting to get the bug.

<sup>18</sup> Now for a commitment compelled by my commitment to truth in advertising. I have had well on 30 students enroll with me to earn Independent Study or Independent Research credit, but, alas, a mere handful have a transcript with a grade greater than Incomplete. Nary a one encountered a discouraging word from me. All were bathed in gentle reminders and encouragements. However, the siren songs of daily life, unfettered to a classroom, pulled them into the maelstrom of procrastination. In stark contrast, and to my mind oddly, all of my students, save one, who dared the scale the heights of authorship known as "thesis" reached the summit. Perhaps, mountains are more easily vanquished than molehills.

<sup>19</sup> "MBA students may elect to complete a thesis of at least 6 credit hours total under the guidance of a Supervisory Committee. The student is responsible for compliance with all Graduate College and MBA Graduate Program Council rules and procedures with respect to formation of a Supervisory Committee and completion of a thesis. The student shall submit to the Supervisory Committee a document including: (1) a proposed Plan of Study; (2) a description of the student's research topic; and (3) the student's research methodology. The student shall make an oral defense of the document to the Supervisory Committee. The Supervisory Committee's approval shall be in writing. A Supervisory Committee's approval should be obtained at least seven months before the intended graduation date. If a student elects to complete a thesis, then the Supervisory Committee of the thesis shall decide how the student will satisfy the comprehensive examination requirement. The Supervisory Committee's written approval of the plan of study shall require either the student's completion of BSAD 8800 or a comprehensive examination (either written or oral) prepared by and graded by the Supervisory Committee." See hyperlinks in footnote 3.

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.unomaha.edu/graduate/catalog/2002-2003/degreq/super\\_comm.html](http://www.unomaha.edu/graduate/catalog/2002-2003/degreq/super_comm.html)

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.unomaha.edu/graduate/catalog/2002-2003/degreq/thesis\\_meds.html](http://www.unomaha.edu/graduate/catalog/2002-2003/degreq/thesis_meds.html)

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.unomaha.edu/graduate/catalog/2002-2003/degreq/scope.html>

Typically, the thesis student completes all core courses, save BSAD 8800. The thesis student must earn at least 6 credit hours for the thesis, and typically only earns 6 credit hours for the thesis. Both of these are negotiable.

How many pages in a thesis? Well, that depends on how well you write and how well you edit. Shorter is better, but longer tends to *appear to be* easier. The range of pages in theses is between 50 pages of text and 150 pages of text, at least on those for which I have served on the Supervisory Committee.<sup>23</sup>

Any student earning any degree is expected to demonstrate mastery of the subject area. Ordinarily, this mastery is done in and against the competitive backdrop of the classroom. That backdrop may cloud the picture of an individual student or may obscure the benchmark against which all students are to be judged. A thesis student stands alone. A thesis student asserts and demonstrates that mastery in the thesis. Both the benchmark and the student's level of performance are in far clearer focus. Accordingly, it is far easier for faculty to write (if justified) glowing letters of recommendation.

While the thesis student stands alone, and while the thesis student labors at length alone, authoring a thesis should not be a lonely endeavor. The Supervisory Committee, especially its Chair, should be actively engaged with the student's exploration and development. When well done, a thesis is a symbiotic engagement.<sup>24</sup>

OK, enough of the flowery academic jabberwocky: "What's in it for you?". Learning, of course, goes without being said. What else?

Distinction is high on that list. AACSB schools have over 130,000 enrolled students pursuing MBAs in AY02.<sup>25</sup> UNO awards between 50 and 100 MBA degrees per year, but less than 1 per year complete a thesis. Nationally, a similarly minute sliver earns the MBA with a thesis. When the market gets tight, and MBAs start looking like fungible cogs in the corporate machine, distinction translates into interviews, job offers, and cash. Particularly when your MBA is from a fine institution such as UNO, but which appears to many to be a run of the mill degree.<sup>26</sup> On a resume, and especially when asked for a writing sample, the impact of a thesis is immediate and material.

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<sup>23</sup> See my Scholarship web page, and look in the section Supervision of Major Student Research Projects for authors and titles. <http://cba.unomaha.edu/faculty/mohara/web/scholars.htm> A copy of each of these theses is in the UNO Library collection.

<sup>24</sup> See footnote 14.

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.aacsb.edu/publications/enewsline/archive\\_data/mbaenroll.asp](http://www.aacsb.edu/publications/enewsline/archive_data/mbaenroll.asp)

<sup>26</sup> If you read the footnotes to the *US News and World Report* yearly ranking (or any other rankings, for that matter) of universities, then you already know that the method of ranking precludes, by definition, any fraction of the UoN System from being "high quality". To be high quality an institution must not be an open admissions institution, and must retain a high percentage of its admits. Only low quality institutions ever fail anyone. (Of course, in no way should this guaranteed success at high priced institutions be seen as any form of affirmative action for the rich. For nearly twenty years, Stanford did not recognize grades below "B" if tuition was paid in full, regardless of non-attendance.) Also, a large fraction of the ranking is based on existing reputation, rather than output. An institution is high quality because it has a reputation as high quality, regardless of its actual quality. Do not be confused by hype. Do not be confused by market realities. You are better educated than many of your national competitors, but chronically will be perceived as less well prepared. Use the element of surprise to your

Focus, also, is high on that list of what is in it for you. A well-aimed thesis prepares the student to move into and throughout a chosen industry. A well-crafted thesis prepares the student for strategic positioning, both in terms of career choices and on the job execution. The heart of the thesis is its literature review. The literature review lists, acknowledges, and where appropriate, uses all that has been previously written on the topic. The thesis author is prepared for knowledgeable discourse with the leaders of an industry. If your desire is to rise to the top, and if your other skill sets favor that ambition, then authoring a thesis will have the byproduct of generating the competitive intelligence required for that ascension.

Elimination of a disadvantageous informational asymmetry is another of your gains. Employers desire self-starters. All prospective employees claim to be self-starters. However, without question, the author of a book, the designer and implementer of a major research project, the conqueror of the blank page is a self-starter.

Yet another plus is an expansion of career options beyond the traditional array awaiting other MBAs. Typically, an MBA is a terminal degree. Academic employment has the "union card" requirement of a different terminal degree: the Ph.D.<sup>27</sup> Most MBAs are not attractive applicants to Ph.D. programs because the MBA degree typically does not provide the exposure to and development of the requisite research skills. A thesis provides that exposure and development. Also, just as corporate employers desire self-starters, so too does academe. However, most self-starters have yet to conquer the blank page, but a thesis author has. Why would you want an academic position? Professors are entrepreneurs with a stable paycheck,<sup>28</sup> abundant psychic income, and the job descriptions calling for self-actualization.

Personally, I would rate the number one reason to pursue a thesis is it is fun; and, as Dr. Smub was fond of saying: "There is nothing like fun for having a good time."

## **WHAT RESEARCH TOPICS DOES PROFESSOR O'HARA PURSUE?**

Broadly, O'Hara explores forensic economics in a commercial context, with an emphasis on intellectual property and alternative dispute resolution. Forensic economics is the estimation of monetary damages in a litigation context. Intellectual property includes patents, copyrights, trademarks, and trade secrets. Alternative dispute resolution, or ADR, includes negotiation, facilitation, mediation, and arbitration, to name but a few ways of reducing litigation. For a listing of his previous research efforts, please visit his Scholarship web page.<sup>29</sup> For an up to date set of interests, contact him directly and set up an appointment. His email is mohara@mail.unomaha.edu and his Roskens Hall phone number is (402) 554-2823. Let's have a good time.

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advantage. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, circa 2,400 B.C., Clavell, James (1983) (adapted Lionel Giles translation) Delacorte Press, New York, NY.

<sup>27</sup> See, generally, [http://www.aacsb.edu/publications/enewsline/archive\\_data/default.asp](http://www.aacsb.edu/publications/enewsline/archive_data/default.asp)

<sup>28</sup> Do recall that professors are odd folk who have been known to work unpaid overtime. A person for whom money is the primary totem of value will not enjoy the academic life.

<sup>29</sup> <http://cba.unomaha.edu/faculty/mohara/web/scholars.htm>