

# THESIS DOCUMENT SURVEY REPORT

Produced by: Thesis Office Subcommittee of the Senate Advisory Committee for Academic Policy – Spring 2022  
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**Background:** Since early 2019, the Senate Academic Committee on Academic Policy (SACAP) has been discussing faculty and student concerns about thesis document processes and deadlines that, in some cases, affect the timeliness of award of degrees. Through the course of these discussions, we learned that current graduate students, graduate alumni and graduate student mentors/ program directors are not surveyed about their experiences interacting with the Thesis Office. One of the outcomes of these discussions was the determination that data from faculty and students are needed to inform possible changes to available resources, timelines and various pathways for supporting thesis/dissertation writing and processing once approved.

In collaboration with Dean Kieda and Kelly Hayward from the Thesis Office, a subcommittee of SACAP determined that a first step for addressing concerns would be to conduct surveys of graduate students and programs directors. These surveys were conducted in Spring 2021 with results being presented in Fall 2021.

The original target population of graduate students included students enrolled in programs requiring either a thesis or dissertation. However, the only distribution list available was the registrar's current listing of all graduate students. As a result, many students who would have no reason to engage with the thesis office were included in the distribution list. The original target population of faculty included all graduate program directors/coordinators/ advisors, thesis supervisors and thesis/dissertation mentors and committee members. However, the only distribution list available was limited to graduate program directors; thus, most faculty with experience with the Thesis Office were not included in the distribution list.

Given the challenges encountered with reaching appropriate faculty members and the significant changes introduced by the Thesis Office in Summer 2021, Dean Kieda and Kelly Hayward from the Thesis Office, a subcommittee of SACAP determined that it was important to conduct another survey of faculty engaged with students in the thesis and/or dissertation process.

## METHODS

### Survey Population

In early March 2022, the Thesis Office was asked to provide a list of all University of Utah faculty who had served on a thesis or dissertation committee from 2019 through 2021. Although it was initially difficult to create the list, the office was able to provide the email address for 1645 faculty who met the inclusion criteria. A total of 241 individuals participated in the survey (14.7%), however, 83 people completed less than 45% of the survey and were removed from the data analysis to maintain data integrity. Of the 158 remaining participants, 47 indicated they had never served in any role with a student that had required them to engage with the Thesis Office or access Thesis Office services. Survey responses from the remaining 111 were included in the data analysis.

### Survey Administration

The faculty survey was formatted in Qualtrics and, in early April 2022, was distributed in the name of the SACAP to everyone meeting the criteria described above. Two additional reminder emails were sent and the survey was closed about six weeks after initial distribution.

## FINDINGS

The primary purpose of this report is to present findings from the survey regarding the experiences of faculty actively engaged with the thesis/dissertation process. This faculty survey included questions to gather the following information:

- Demographics
- Perceptions of responsibility for final document format, grammar, and content editing
- Level of awareness and usefulness of currently available resources
- Departmental changes and impacts of the Thesis Office
- Narrative responses

As noted above, this faculty survey mirrors many of the questions explored in the Spring 2021 survey. Differences in outcomes between the two sets of findings will be noted.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

The 111 program directors/faculty responding to the survey represented 15 different colleges. The largest portion of respondents came from Engineering (19.8%), Medicine (11.7%), Science (10.8%), and Health and Humanities both with 9.9%. The survey was completed by 15 Directors of Graduate Studies, 12 Graduate Advisor/Coordinators and 6 Department Chairs. The majority of respondents (69) identified as “other faculty.” The number of years in the person’s current role ranged from 1 – 50 years with a median of 11 years.

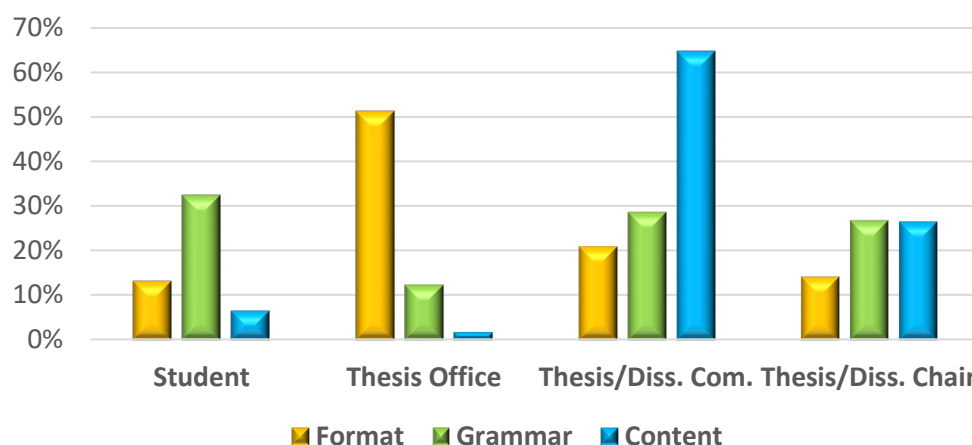
Each respondent was asked to identify the person in their respective unit who has the most contact with students relative to the Thesis Office. Nearly half (43.2%) identified the Graduate Advisor/Coordinator as the main person in this role. Another 29.7% indicated the Director of Graduate Studies fills this role while 10.8% reported it is an administrative assistant. Interestingly, eight individuals noted the Committee Chair fills this role, and three people did not know who filled this role.

### PERCEPTION OF EDITING RESPONSIBILITIES:

Respondents were asked to identify who is *primarily* responsible for making the *final determination* of the quality/accuracy of the thesis/dissertation document in three areas: format, grammar and content. Options included: student, Thesis Office, Thesis/dissertation Committee or Thesis/Dissertation Chair.

As seen in Figure 1, views on the primary responsibility for the three document components varied. Content was clearly considered the primary responsibility of the thesis or dissertation committee whereas primary responsibility for format was considered the purview of the Thesis Office. Primary responsibility for grammar was more evenly split between the student, the committee and the chair. These results mirrored the 2021 survey findings.

**Figure 1: Responsibility for Document Components**



## AWARENESS AND UTILITY OF CURRENT RESOURCES

In two separate sets of questions, faculty respondents were asked about 1) their level of awareness and 2) perceptions of the usefulness of current Thesis Office resources. The currently available resources that were evaluated included:

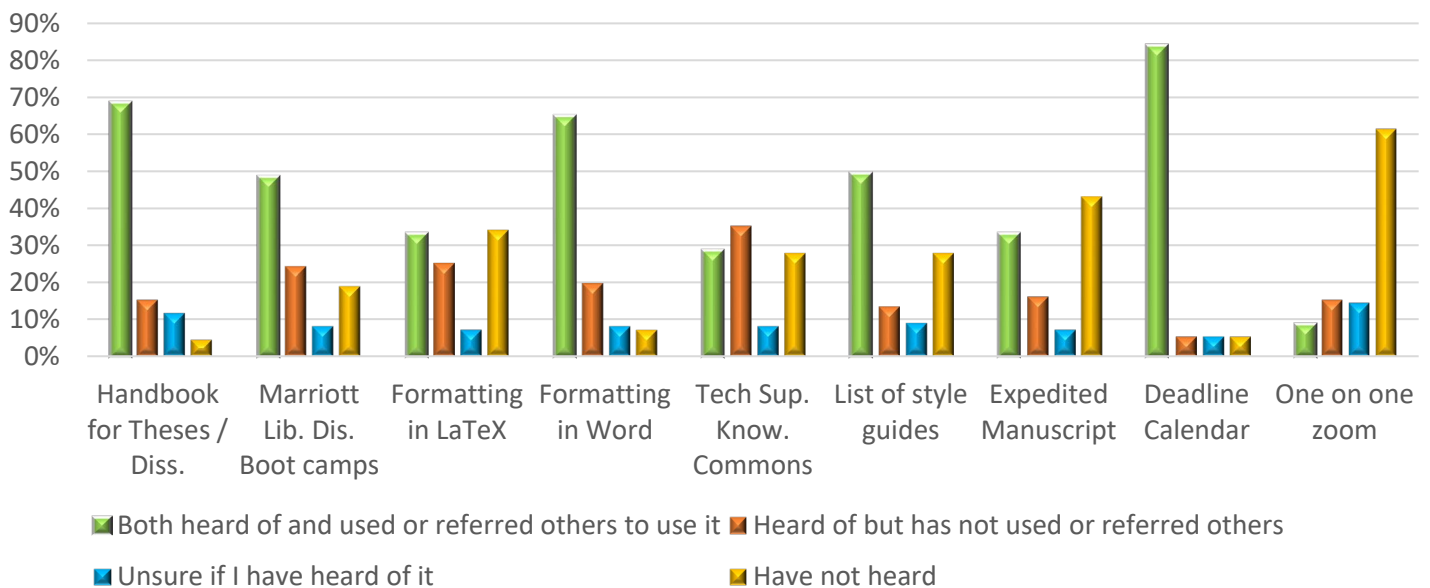
- Handbook for theses/diss.
- Formatting in Word
- Expedited manuscript
- Marriott Library Dissertation Boot Camp
- Technical Support Knowledge Commons
- Deadline calendar
- Formatting in LaTeX
- List of style guides
- One-on-one Zoom
- Grammarly

A table of all findings in this area can be found in the Appendix.

**Level of awareness:** The level of awareness was measured using the answer set: 1) I have never heard of this; 2) I am unsure if I have heard of it; 3) I have heard of it but have not used or referred others to use it; 4) I have both heard of it and used it or referred others to use it.”

In general, faculty reported greatest awareness of the Deadline Calendar, the Handbook for Thesis and Dissertations and Formatting in Word. The least known or underutilized resources in each group include One-on-one zoom, Expedited Manuscript and Formatting in LaTeX. Interestingly, more than one third of respondents had heard of the option to receive technical support in the Marriott Library Knowledge Commons but don't refer students to this resource. Again, these results were very similar to the previous survey with the exception of responses regarding expedited manuscripts. In theory, the July 2021 changes in timeframes made the concept of “expedited” manuscripts unnecessary. However, the option for expediting a manuscript is currently still available on the Thesis Office website.

**Figure 2: Faculty Awareness of Resources**



**Level of usefulness:** The level of usefulness of the resources was measured using the answer set: 1) Highly Useful, 2) Moderately Useful, and 3) Not at all useful. Respondents could also indicate they had “No experience to judge” each resource. Figure 3 shows that more than half the respondents had no experience with 5 of the 10 resources identified with nearly 90% reporting no experience with the one-on-one Zoom option. On the other hand, only 12.6% had no experience to judge the usefulness of the Deadline calendar.

**Figure 3: No Experience to Judge Resource**

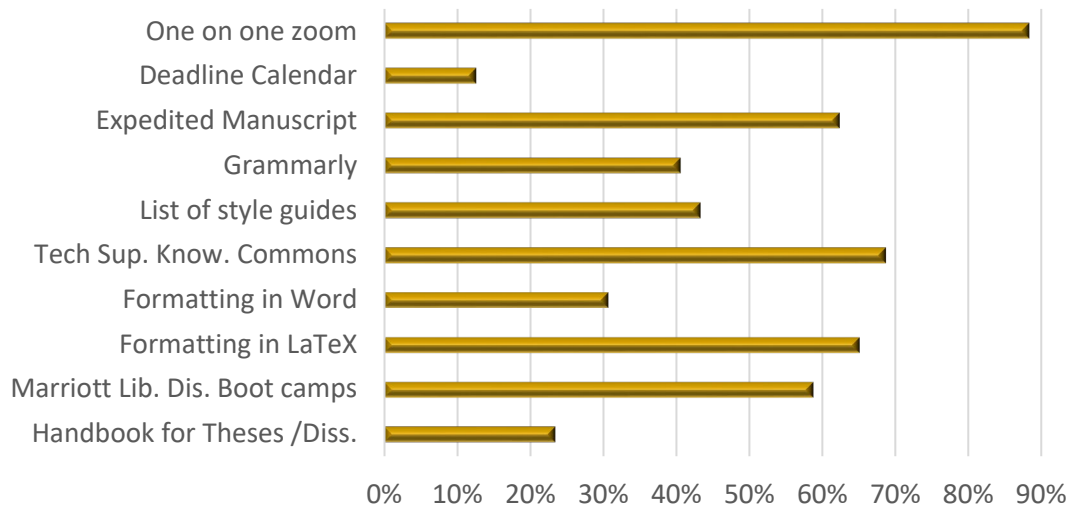
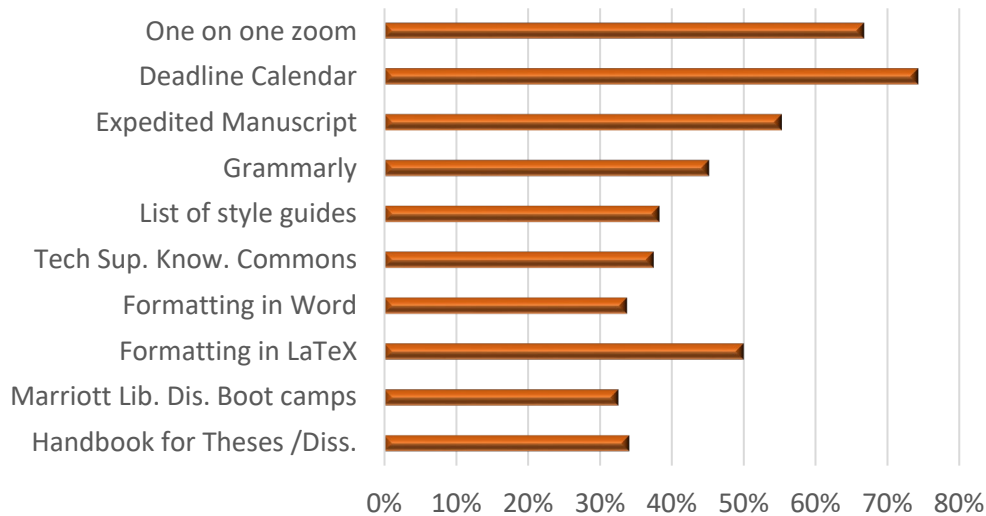


Figure 4 reflects input from faculty who felt able to judge the usefulness of each resource. Half or more of the participants found formatting in LaTeX, the expedited manuscript option, the deadline calendar and one-on-one zoom sessions to be “highly useful.” As noted in the previous study, the data suggests that once some resources are used they are often found helpful. The July 2021 changes included an emphasis on ensuring more faculty are aware of the resources available through the Thesis Office. Emphasizing this practice would likely result in more individuals finding these resources helpful.

**Figure 4: View Resource as "Highly Useful"**



**To summarize this section**, faculty were asked to identify the resources they found *most* useful. More than half the respondents named the Handbook and the Calendar for deadlines as the most useful. Interestingly, when asked which resources were found *most* useful to students, the same two resources were named. This would suggest that, of all resources provided, these two need to be kept as up to date and accurate as possible. The most damage will be done if these two most used resources are not kept current.

## DEPARTMENTAL CHANGES AND IMPACTS OF THE THESIS OFFICE

Prior to conducting the survey, some faculty had expressed concern regarding the Thesis Office, suggesting that departmental policies had been changed due to Thesis Office practices. Faculty were asked to describe recent changes that had been made in the thesis or dissertation requirements in their departments. Just over 25% of respondents indicated recent changes in requirements. The various reasons given for the changes fell into three primary categories, all related to the best use of time and resources.

For several respondents, many affiliated with professional degree programs, there was a thought that the research component of writing a thesis did not bring value to the profession and that shorter research or project based papers were a more appropriate reflection of the students learning. This was particularly true for working professionals returning for advanced degrees in their field and for students who were moving toward doctoral studies and would eventually be completing a dissertation.

Another concern was the impact on faculty workload. Moving to group projects or research projects which only require one faculty member's attention was more efficient than the required three committee members for thesis projects. When a department has both masters and doctoral level students, the faculty burden can be excessive and the student experience can suffer.

Lastly, there has been significant concern over challenges with timely completion of program requirements. Again, this was of particular focus on masters level work where students seek to complete all activities in two years. Past delays in moving work through the Thesis Office was given as a primary reason for program changes and alternate graduation options being offered. Several respondents did indicate timeliness had improved somewhat with last summer's changes.

## NARRATIVE RESPONSES

To conclude the survey several open-ended response questions were asked to more deeply explore respondents' experiences with the Thesis Office. The most common responses for each question are presented in summary form with representative quotes included for context.

**Question 1:** The first open-ended question sought to further explore the influence of the Thesis Office on department decisions.

*"How have Thesis Office policies and/or practices influenced your Department's decisions regarding student requirements for theses or dissertation completion?" (n = 64)*

Of the 64 respondents, 19 (30%) reported the Thesis Office had had no influence on departmental policies. Another group (14 – 22%) indicated compliance with Thesis Office requirements was the only option for the department and their students noting:

- *We shaped our policies to comply with the Thesis office polices.*
- *We make sure students are done early enough to deal with them.*
- *I can understand the need for conformity to standards and processes. Getting through the thesis editor is something that I instruct all graduate students that they will need to come to terms with.*

There were others who, as mentioned above, have chosen to introduce capstone projects, essays, group projects and non-thesis masters programs to avoid Thesis Office requirements.

A significant portion of responses (28 – 44%) focused on concerns with slow turn-around times, challenging submission deadlines and confusing requirements that sometimes delay student graduation. Several respondents spoke of encouraging students to submit their thesis/dissertation very early to avoid problems with degree completion. Several others report difficulty in matching the type of work produced in some fields with the formatting requirements of the Thesis Office.

Many of the concerns mentioned were addressed when the new guidelines were introduced in July 2021. Interestingly, only three individuals noted these policy updates and all three have found the changes helpful.

**Question 2:** The next question asked for feedback on the changes introduced by the Thesis Office in July 2021.

*"The current Thesis Submission Procedure indicates that students need to "submit the departmentally-approved manuscript to the Thesis Office for approval at least 2 weeks prior to the closing date of the semester." How has this timeline (in place since Fall 2021) worked for students from your department relative to moving toward graduation and future employment?" (n=73)*

Of those responding to this question, 33 (45%) indicated the changes introduced have been positive. Several comments reflect the tone of these responses:

- The faster review turnaround has been extremely helpful and balance between rigor of review and timeline of review is most certainly favored to fast turnaround.
- This is a welcome change! Hallelujah! It assured one of my recent students (plus the expedited review) to graduate on time for her post-graduate job.
- This year the process was very efficient. Last year, there were very long delays. Things have improved.

It was also clear that some faculty are not aware of the changes in policy and practice, attributing their lack of experience to not recently serving on a committee. For others unaware of the changes the submission period of "two week before the end of the semester" seemed reasonable.

A vocal minority (10 – 14%) still expressed frustration with Thesis Office practices and timelines which have delayed student graduation and created a high degree of stress for students, particularly international students. One comment included many of the issues:

- *"It has not worked. We have had to request expedited reviews and letters from the Dean to allow students to move on in a timely manner to employment. I feel that the movement of the document through the thesis office, at least as of this past fall, is still too prolonged and takes too much time on the part of the student addressing Thesis Office issues, particularly formatting. As has been the case for many years, this takes students away from doing the work that they need to do...; that is, getting manuscripts submitted for publication."*

Again, it was not always clear when a respondent was speaking about current experiences or past frustrations with delays in processing theses/dissertations or current practices.

**Question 3:** The third question sought to identify Thesis Office strengths.

*"What would you identify as the strengths of the Thesis Office in general?" (n = 62)*

There were several characteristics identified as important contributions of the Thesis Office. A quarter of the respondents indicated the value of the Thesis Office includes providing consistency and ensure quality work across campus. Some thoughts include:

- *What would you identify as the strengths of the Thesis Office in general?*
- *We do need some consistency as to what a thesis/dissertation looks like as the U. Thus, they play an important role.*
- *We do need some consistency as to what a thesis/dissertation looks like as the U. Thus, they play an important role.*
- *Addressing questions about process and enhancing the accountability and professionalism of our students.*

Several respondents noted that this role is particularly important because not all departments provide detailed direction and feedback to assist students in producing a quality document. As one person noted,

- *The Thesis Office does a good job communicating with depts. and holding workshops. Unfortunately, however, in my experience, the Thesis Office spends too much time working with students whose advisors and departments do not provide adequate instruction or assistance in preparing their theses.*

There were also several respondents who spoke very highly of Thesis Office staff and their efforts to communicate with departments, share best practices and support student success. As one person said:

- *The individuals I have interacted with over the years have been overwhelmingly cooperative and professional. Keep hiring good people who care both about the students and that their theses and dissertations are professionally completed.*

As before, there is a segment of responses (15 – 24%) who could not identify any strengths.

**Question 4:** And finally, respondents were asked to identify improvement that could be introduced.

*"What improvements or changes to the Thesis Document completion process prior to degree award would you like to see introduced in the Thesis Office?" (n = 69)*

The range of answers to this question was wider than in all other open-ended questions. Even though the Thesis Office approval processes were dramatically changed last summer, there were many comments about streamlining the process in general, particularly focusing on issues that might delay graduation. The justification provided with many of the suggestions was to not allow Thesis Office processes to negatively impact the student experience as they transition from their program into employment.

There were also strong feelings that requirements for "getting through" the Thesis Office should be made clearer to both faculty and students. There were requests for more training within the academic units so that committee members and students could better understand the process. This would also provide an opportunity to educate on the many resources available to support faculty and students to help meet the requirements. However, there were also comments regarding challenges with consistency between requirements as outlined in the online resources and what is shared by the Thesis Office directly and in trainings.

Underlying these comments and many more suggestions is the reality that, as a University of Utah faculty, we do not have consensus on the purpose and scope of the Thesis Office relative to the production of theses and dissertations. Multiple responses reflect a continuum of perspectives that are exemplified in the comments below.

### **1) Eliminate**

- Elimination of the entire requirement for a formatted written dissertation. It is a relic from the past that has no importance for our current students.
- Get rid of the thesis office in its current form. The faculty should be determining when a thesis is complete - not the thesis office. It is the faculty's responsibility to perform quality control.
- There is no need for a thesis office at the University of Utah. Please return thesis approval control back to the departments.
- Remove the process entirely, or make the formatting approval optional.....The current function of the process is as a final institutional harassment of the students on their way out the door.

### **2) Update / automate process and product**

- Enable more modern formats of the document similar to booklet formats used in Europe
- Automatic format checking the student can do on their own - like upload the thing to a website and see if it passes.
- Perhaps better technology to allow formatting to be seamless. We have technology that could do all the formatting once a document is entered. Why not use it?
- More knowledge about how to evaluate format for experimental methodologies that result in different layouts on the page and different formats from the "standard" consider how to evaluate hybrid thesis documents comprised of print document + hyperlinks to multi media content

### **3) Narrow role of Thesis Office**

- Expect that quality and content emanates from the student and their supervisory committee, and format for UU purposes is enforced by the Thesis office.
- Keep publishing the formatting requirements and offer good templates. Beyond this, have the Thesis Office spend a maximum of two minutes on each submission to ensure that margins, etc, aren't ridiculous and that a cursory glance at the general formatting is okay. Leave the rest of the oversight to thesis committees.
- The thesis office needs to massively reduce the amount of both formatting and grammar checking it is doing.

### **4) Expand the role of the Thesis Office**

- The decision by the Thesis Office to no longer review theses for grammar and content is a bad decision. It was hard enough to keep quality in theses and this decision will greatly reduce the quality. Even if it means hiring more people, grammar and content need to be reviewed.
- Most R1 campuses have a thesis office that does copyediting and quality control. That the thesis office has abdicated its responsibility for this is appalling. Before the new changes, the thesis office spent way too much time to finish working with students on theses/dissertations. They needed double the number of staff or more. The Graduate School did not hire enough staff to do the work and took no personal control for getting students through in a timely bases--even when students got their materials in on time! This is unacceptable. Unacceptable, too, is to place the quality of the final copyedits and such on the thesis/dissertation chairs. Most universities of our caliber take far more responsibility for this process than our current Graduate School. This needs to change. It is very sad that we are now an AAU university, and the quality of graduate theses/dissertation review has gotten even more lax than it was before.



## RECOMMENDATIONS 2022

**After analyzing the most recent survey responses, the following questions arise reflecting the poor common knowledge across faculty and graduate students that need to be addressed before moving forward with further recommendations on resources requiring support:**

**Critical Need of Knowledge:** Better context and framing is needed about the following information that is not common knowledge among research training faculty and students:

- What is the charge (roles and responsibilities) of the Thesis Document Office at the U of U?
- How does the role(s)/responsibility(ies) of the Thesis Office compare to other R-1 level Universities?
- Why are theses submitted to ProQuest as our thesis product distributor? What are other options and rationale for using ProQuest? Are they the best option?
- The current thesis templates are outdated with several errors generated with use by students. Are there better options for thesis templates?
- Why hasn't there been an annual survey or listserv mechanism for communicating directly with active faculty and graduate students engaged in the thesis process for follow up surveys and feedback solicitation?
- Why can't published articles as part of PhD processes be incorporated into the final dissertation document (recent concern by PhD Advisor)?

## RECOMMENDATIONS 2021

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** Create a listserv distribution list for graduate students and their mentors/program directors that includes demographic information about their College/School, Department, and Program Directors to enable easier targeted email distribution. Create and implement an annual survey distributed to graduate students completing a thesis/dissertation as part of their degree requirements. Survey mentors and program directors to gather feedback on satisfaction with currently available resources and processes for future guidance on further improvements needed, or new resources needed.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** Based on outcomes of this survey and initial motives for pursuing data collection, students largely report feeling poorly prepared for their interactions with the thesis document office and all respondents evidenced similar responses regarding awareness and value of current resources. The handbook for theses and dissertations is largely available and valued by respondents. However, respondents generally appear less aware of the other resources available to support thesis/dissertation document finalization giving a range of value-based ratings due to less utilization. Given the high level of interest in access to instruction from the Graduate School on resources and preparation of thesis/dissertation documents across all respondents, this would be a high value investment of resource and time to develop and distribute.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** Several respondents volunteered to participate in focused group discussions. We recommend following up with those respondents as a method for acquiring information from end users and stakeholders to guide development of instructional materials and gaining additional insights regarding the value and optimal modalities for currently available resources.

## APPENDIX: TABLES AND GRAPHS OF SURVEY RESULTS

### AWARENESS OF RESOURCES

#### Program Director/Faculty Awareness of Resources

	Both heard of and used or referred others to use it	Heard of but has not used or referred others	Unsure if I have heard of it	Have not heard of it
<b>Handbook for Theses and Diss.</b>	76 (68.5%)	17 (15.3%)	13 (11.7%)	5 (4.5%)
<b>Marriott Library Diss. Boot camps</b>	54 (48.6%)	27 (24.3%)	9 (8.1%)	21 (18.9%)
<b>Formatting in LaTeX</b>	37 (33.3%)	28 (25.2%)	8 (7.2%)	38 (34.2%)
<b>Formatting in Word</b>	72 (64.9%)	22 (19.8%)	9 (8.1%)	8 (7.2%)
<b>Tech Support Knowledge Commons</b>	32 (28.8%)	39 (35.1%)	9 (8.1%)	31 (27.9%)
<b>List of style guides</b>	55 (49.5%)	15 (13.5%)	10 (9.0%)	21 (27.9%)
<b>Expedited Manuscript</b>	37 (33.3%)	18 (16.2%)	8 (7.2%)	48 (43.2%)
<b>Deadline Calendar</b>	93 (83.8%)	6 (5.4%)	6 (5.4%)	6 (5.4%)
<b>One on one zoom</b>	10 (9.0%)	17 (15.3%)	16 (14.4%)	68 (61.3%)

### USEFULNESS OF RESOURCES:

#### Program Director/Faculty Helpfulness of Resources

	No experience to judge	Respondents with Experience with Resource		
		Highly Useful	Moderately Useful	Not at All Useful
<b>Handbook for Theses and Diss.</b>	26 (23.4%)	28 (34.1%)	49 (59.8%)	5 (6.1%)
<b>Marriott Library Diss. Boot camps</b>	65 (58.6%)	14 (32.6%)	23 (53.5%)	6 (14.0%)
<b>Formatting in LaTeX</b>	72 (64.9%)	18 (50.0%)	12 (33.3%)	6 (16.7%)
<b>Formatting in Word</b>	34 (30.6%)	25 (33.8%)	41 (55.4%)	8 (10.8%)
<b>Tech Support Knowledge Commons</b>	76 (68.5%)	12 (37.5%)	18 (56.3%)	2 (6.3%)
<b>List of style guides</b>	48 (43.2%)	23 (38.3%)	33 (55.0%)	4 (6.7%)
<b>Grammarly</b>	45 (40.5%)	28 (45.2%)	24 (38.7%)	10 (16.1%)
<b>Expedited Manuscript</b>	69 (62.2%)	21 (55.3%)	15 (39.5%)	2 (5.3%)
<b>Deadline Calendar</b>	14 (12.6%)	69 (74.2%)	19 (20.4%)	5 (5.4%)
<b>One on one zoom</b>	98 (88.3%)	6 (66.7%)	3 (33.3%)	- 0 -