



WHAT IS A PROJECT? Master of Counselling Program University of Lethbridge

The Master of Counselling degree normally involves the completion of an applied project as one of the culminating activities for the program.

General Description of a Project

Within the Master of Counselling program, a project is defined as the development, implementation, and/or critique of some aspect of counselling psychology. A project must have an applied focus with direct benefit to targeted client group.

The project is oriented towards practical applications, even though it must still have a solid grounding in the literature. Often, students will use the project to demonstrate or implement some aspect of counselling practice that does not currently exist within their system or place of work. Thus, a project is often an application of an existing methodology or procedure. All projects must demonstrate a depth of knowledge and understanding of the discipline, as well as the particular area of specialization selected by the student.

Some possibilities for final projects include:

- case analyses of previously documented cases involving individuals, groups, or systems;
- needs assessment, program development, or critique of an existing program
- group program manual
- training and/or orientation manual
- webpage development
- educational brochures (e.g., “what is mental illness?”, to be posted in medical offices in your community)
- course lesson plans
- binder of handouts for teachers to consult when dealing with a behavioural problem
- position paper on a certain topic (e.g., why female-to-male abuse is underreported)
- in-depth review of literature of a topic (e.g., eating disorders in senior citizens)
- theoretical analysis or critique (e.g., critique of media resources in psychology such as the library holdings of obsessive-compulsive disorder videos)
- synthesis and extension of scholarly literature (e.g., there has been no research done on the use of dogs in therapy sessions so make a rationale from the horse therapy literature why dogs would be appropriate to use in therapy for teens).

- curriculum and/or program development (e.g., a group program on bullying)
- self reflection paper (e.g., your awareness of burnout and how you overcome it).

Alternatively, students may focus on the assessment of clients needs or the development of an innovative tool or process. Or, students may choose to demonstrate how a counselling intervention, practice, product, or program may be implemented and/or evaluated but would not also do the front-end development work.

Projects will be evaluated on a pass/fail basis and will be assessed by both the project supervisor and a second committee member. No course credit is granted for the final project.

A student project must be something over which the student can exercise accountability and responsibility. The student project may be part of a larger initiative, but the student must have control over her / his part of the project in consultation with the supervisor. For example, if the finalization of the Letter of Intent or ethics approval process takes more time than anticipated, the student must be free to alter project implementation plans accordingly and not be constrained by another person's or agency's timeline.

Students are sometimes confused about the difference between a project and a thesis. The primary difference is that a thesis has a strong research component and is designed to collect data. A project is primarily the application of existing knowledge to a specific situation.

A Brief Example

Perhaps an example would help. Let's say that you became interested in the concept of building self-esteem (SE) for elementary school-aged children. A possible project on this topic might involve implementing a self-esteem program in a specific setting, documenting what was done and why, and collecting some data on the efficacy of the implementation and the general results found. Or, you might decide to create a guide for the implementation of self-esteem programs, where the "product" of your project is a step-by-step manual for other professionals in the field.

General Structure of a Project

The nature of projects will vary considerably, and therefore so will the form that the final documentation takes. However, in general, projects will be expected to integrate the following:

- Abstract
- Introduction to the Project;
- Theoretical foundations;
- Procedures used;
- The specific product;
- Synthesis and Implications of the work; and
- References and Appendices.

Perhaps an example would help. Let's say that you became interested in the concept of building self-esteem for elementary school-aged children. A thesis question might read something like "What effect does the implementation of a Magic Circle Self-Esteem program have on the self esteem of 8-year-old children?" To test this question, you would need to do a thorough review of the concept of self esteem, anchor it in child development theory, and then either locate such a program in the literature (do a critical review of the efficacy of the program, identify strengths and weaknesses, etc.) or create and pilot test a program. You would then need to either find (or create) reliable measures of self-esteem. Then, you would probably need to find at least two (and probably more) different groups of 8 year old students, do a pre-test measure of SE, implement your program, document the implementation, do a post-test, and determine if the program had any effect on SE as measured by your instrument. A qualitative thesis question might sound something like, "What issues of self-esteem do young children (aged 8) commonly face?" Then, you would need the same theoretical anchoring, but your research method would involve interviewing 8-year-olds until you found no new themes emerging. Your presentation and discussion of results would follow a similar format.

For the same issue, a project might involve designing a program based on available literature. Or, perhaps completing all of the work listed above but not actually implementing the program nor collecting data on the program. Alternatively, designing a webpage on children's self-issues parents need to be aware of as their child matures. Some students may elect to complete a number of book reviews on the topic of self-esteem and children and post the reviews in a teacher's newsletter. Remember, a final project is applied in nature with direct benefit to the community.