Thesis Evaluation Criteria

In the final phase of a Clark Honors College thesis defense, thesis committee members evaluate the quality of the overall thesis project, distinguishing among Pass with Distinction, Pass with Honors, Pass, and Fail. Evaluation generally considers the student’s performance in the following areas:

- initiative and self-direction
- quality and originality of the topic
- quality and originality of the research
- quality and style of the writing
- quality of the oral defense

Pass with Distinction is granted only to those candidates whose performance is superior in all of the above areas and who present a defense draft that requires exceptionally little revision. Additional factors to consider include:

- The student’s performance on the oral exam is superior
- The student showed extraordinary initiative and originality during the project
- The thesis is clearly in the top 10 percent of Clark Honors College theses or departmental honors theses
- The thesis is publishable, in part or whole (depending on the traditions of the disciplinary press.
- The thesis is comparable to competent graduate work at the MA or MS level

Pass with Honors is the standard decision; it should be awarded to students whose thesis work is good in all of the above five areas. A thesis that is outstanding in a few categories, but not in most or all, should be awarded Pass with Honors rather than Pass with Distinction. Between the distinguished top 10 percent and the acceptable, Pass with Honors is the evaluation earned by the majority of Clark Honors College students.

Pass is awarded to those theses that are adequate, but not up to the standards of Pass with Honors. This includes theses that may be good in a couple of the five areas but only adequate in the others. Theses earning Pass may be characterized by:

- a weak oral presentation
- acceptable research but poor written presentation of materials
- acceptable presentation of thesis but significant (and correctable) problems in argumentation or research
- content and presentation that are adequate for graduation but that lack depth or originality
- a need for significant revision, which must be approved by the thesis director

Fail characterizes work that is unacceptable in most or all of the five areas. Very few Clark Honors College theses are failed, not only because of the consistently high quality of CHC students’ work, but also because thesis committee members should discourage unprepared students from standing for oral examination. All three thesis committee members – Primary Thesis Advisor, Second Reader, and CHC Representative – receive the defense draft no fewer than seven days prior to the scheduled defense.

The committee may decide to withhold a Pass with Honors or a Pass until necessary revisions are made; a time limit should be established for completion of the revisions.