Non-Thesis Option for DSS students: Pursuing the Non-Thesis Option for graduation at the MSU Department of Defense and Strategic Studies is available to all qualifying DSS students, on par with the Thesis Option (See: “Thesis Project and Process”). The Non-Thesis option should not be viewed by students as a “less demanding” or “less time consuming” alternative to writing a Thesis. Students choosing the Non-Thesis Option must complete a Research Project to be defended as part of the Comprehensive Oral Examination. Moreover, a student’s knowledge of broad security and defense issues, verbal and analytic skills may be tested thoroughly during the Comprehensive Oral Examination. At the examination, students are also expected to demonstrate to the Examination Board their work ethic, commitment, and academic skills to successfully obtain a post-graduate degree.

Non-Thesis Research Project and Paper: The Non-Thesis Research Project offers students choosing the Non-Thesis Option an opportunity to demonstrate the analytic and writing skills gained from the DSS graduate education. Students are strongly encouraged to start the Project in their first year, especially their second semester, when they should declare their preference for the Non-Thesis Option.


Selecting the Non-Thesis Project Mentor and the Examination Board: While contemplating the subject area for their Non-Thesis Research Project, students should consider what they find intriguing and what fuels their passion in the arena of defense and security studies. In the process, they are welcome to interact with multiple Faculty Members.

Students need to get the agreement of one Faculty Member to serve as their Non-Thesis Project Mentor and on their Examination Board. This faculty Mentor should be familiar with
the student’s work.

Once the Faculty Member agrees to serve as the student’s Non-Thesis Project Mentor, this arrangement must be approved by the Non-Thesis Coordinator, Dr. Andrei Shoumikhin. The Faculty Member serving as the student’s Project Mentor and two (2) additional DSS faculty members will be the student’s main points of contact throughout the Non-Thesis Exam experience. They also will serve on the student’s Examination Board. The student’s Project Mentor and the student will establish a schedule and outline of expectations for completing the research project, typically as part of a Regular DSS seminar course or as part of a Directed Reading course. The student must coordinate with his or her Mentor any plans to change the direction or format of the Non-Thesis Research Project.

By the beginning of the graduation semester, in consultation with the Non-Thesis Project Mentor, the student will select from among the DSS Faculty two (2) additional members for the Examination Board. The student’s Project Mentor and the two additional DSS faculty members will constitute the student’s Examination Board.

When selecting their Research Project Mentor and additional two members of the Examination Board, students should take into consideration which Faculty Members would best serve the student’s needs in terms of overall guidance and constructive criticism. Some general considerations include:

- Faculty members’ current and previous research and their familiarity with the student’s interests and academic accomplishments.
- Faculty members’ familiarity with the student’s course work.
- Faculty members who will provide constructive criticism of the student’s work

**Non-Thesis Research Paper Structure:** The Research Paper usually has chapters organized as follows:

- **Abstract:**
  - Succinct statement summarizing key elements and most salient findings of the Non-Thesis Project and their potential ramifications

- **Introduction:**
  - Statement of the Problem
  - Articulation of the student’s hypothesis or point of view
  - Literature Review
  - Explanation of research methods
Use of a Regular Seminar or Directed-Reading Course Paper to Advance the Non-Thesis Research Project:

DSS allows students to integrate directly into their Non-Thesis Research Project one particular paper produced by them during a Regular or Directed Reading DSS course, especially a paper completed for this purpose and under the guidance of the student’s Non-Thesis Mentor. This course paper may serve as the methodological and/or substantive foundation of the Non-Thesis Research Project. The use of this paper in this fashion must be cited explicitly in the Non-Thesis Research Paper and discussed in advance with the Non-Thesis Mentor. The citation should follow MSU citation and attribution rules. (See also: MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 7th Edition by Modern Language Association, Mar 9, 2009).

Additional Submissions to the Examination Board: Together with the Non-Thesis Report, students are to submit 2-3 papers (of at least 7 pages in length each) completed in previous DSS courses two weeks prior to the exam.

Non-Thesis Comprehensive Oral Examination: The Oral Examination under the Non-Thesis Option is to take place during the student’s final (graduation) semester no later than the thesis-submission deadline set by the MSU Graduate College for that semester.

Exams will take place in one of the Department’s classrooms or virtually. The student is responsible for coordinating a specific time and date for the examination, with his or her Mentor and for securing the commitment of the second and third Examination Board Members to that time and date.

The examination is intended to provide the student with an opportunity to demonstrate his or her ability to think critically and articulate thoughts cogently, analyze competing schools of thought, express opinions and defend them.

At the exam, the defense of the Non-Thesis Research Project is to be followed by oral questions covering the student’s main areas of study while at DSS. The duration of the
Comprehensive Oral Exam is 2-3 hours and the student will be informed of the outcome at the conclusion of the exam.

Any student who fails the oral exam will be allowed to retake the exam the following semester. The student must register for an additional course during that semester. That is, if the student fails or otherwise does not complete the Non-Thesis Report or Comprehensive Oral Exam in the intended semester, the student must register for an additional course the following semester (suggested course: DSS 794).

Non-Thesis students may not take DSS 799: Thesis, in fulfillment of their credit requirements.

**Grading**

MSU grades for the Non-Thesis Comprehensive Oral Examination are “pass” and “non-pass.” DSS grades include “pass,” “non-pass,” and “pass with distinction”. Passing “with distinction” requires a unanimous opinion of all members of the Examination Board. “Pass with reservation” may be assigned with the agreement of a majority of the exam committee.

A *Comprehensive Oral Examination* form will be provided to the student prior to the exam. This form must be completed and submitted just prior to the exam.

**DSS administrative support**

At every stage of the Non-Thesis Process, students may rely on the advice and support of the Thesis Coordinator, Dr. Shoumikhin, and other members of the Staff. Students are welcome to contact Dr. Shoumikhin by email (ashoumikhin@aol.com) to discuss:

- Complying with MSU and DSS Requirements
- Making a choice between the Thesis and Non-Thesis Options for graduation
- Identifying areas of Non-Thesis research
- Preparing and filing all documents related to the Non-Thesis Project
- Interacting with DSS Faculty Members in establishing the Examination Board, etc.

Students are required to inform Dr. Shoumikhin regularly of their progress in the Non-Thesis Project.

**Student Responsibilities:** The Non-Thesis Process takes serious preparation to complete successfully. Students should expect to exert considerable effort to produce an acceptable Non-Thesis Research Paper. It is the student’s responsibility to do the following:
• Make a clear timeline for completing all phases of the Non-Thesis Process in consultation with the Non-Thesis Mentor.
• Take personal responsibility for the work required and the end product.
• Report progress and setbacks to the Mentor and DSS Office (Dr. Shoumikhin) periodically.
• Expect critically constructive feedback in the process of preparation and presentation of the Non-Thesis Paper and be receptive and responsive to suggestions from the student’s Project Mentor and Dr. Shoumikhin.
• Follow ethical guidelines and comply with all MSU policies and procedures.
• Most importantly, ask for help when needed!

**Faculty Responsibilities:** Faculty members serving as the Non-Thesis Mentors and Oral Examination Board Members are expected to help students understand the importance and expectations of each stage of the Non-Thesis process. They should clearly communicate their availability (or lack thereof) to students.

The Non-Thesis Mentors have special responsibilities working most closely with the student and giving the most guidance. This may be done during a Regular DSS seminar course or a Directed Reading course. Mentors are expected to meet personally with the student to discuss and facilitate the Non-Thesis process, give advice at all stages of the Non-Thesis Project, and help the student coordinate with other members of respective Examination Boards.
Acknowledgment of Non-thesis Project Requirements

A. I certify that I have read this document and understand all components.

______________________________________________  _________________
Non-Thesis Student Name                          Date

Student Signature

B. I certify that I will be available under reasonable circumstances to the student for assistance in the completion of the thesis process.

______________________________________________  _________________
Non-Thesis Mentor                                Date

Mentor Signature

It will be signed by Non-Thesis Mentors and students upon the formation of the Examination Board.
Sample Questions for the Comprehensive Oral Examination

Students who opt to take the non-thesis comprehensive oral exam should understand that they may be asked a range of questions on a variety of issues covered during their academic pursuits at DSS, for example:

- Key authors and publications that influenced your studies at DSS
- Theories explaining Waltz’ analysis of why nations go to war
- Theories of deterrence, including Schelling and Kahn
- The basic parameters of the Just War Doctrine
- The relationship between deterrence theory and U.S. Cold War arms control policy
- Key emerging strategic challenges to U.S. and global security
- U.S. approaches to counterproliferation, unilateral and multilateral
- Evolving roles of intelligence and counterintelligence
- Strategic culture of Islamic radicalism
- Methods and prospects of counterterrorism

Additionally, to establish students’ proficiency in analysis and critical thinking, they may be asked to answer general questions on defense and strategic policy, for example:

- Having studied a range of issues at DSS, which issues do you believe are the most significant for US national security? What do you think are the biggest national security challenges facing the United States today? Do you think US policymakers are addressing these issues properly?
- What US national security policies, if any, would you change and why?
- Describe an issue you studied at DSS that led you to challenge your previous assumptions about the topic. Have your opinions changed as a result?
- What is your understanding of the relationship between “defense” and “national security”?
- How do you define “strategic” in the context of your studies at DSS?