Quick Guide to the Master of Science in Landscape Architecture (MSLA)

Department of Planning and Landscape Architecture

UW-Madison

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Welcome to our Graduate Program and Learning Community!! Thank you for choosing the MSLA program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to continue your studies. We are delighted for the chance to get to know you and we hope that your time with us will be stimulating, exciting, and productive!

This guide presents an overview of the Master of Science in Landscape Architecture (MSLA) program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It describes the stages of the degree completion process, information about our buildings and facilities, and suggests opportunities for making connections within our department and across campus.

For more details about the policies and procedure that are summarized here, or to check for updates, be sure to check out the following webpages:

UW-Madison Graduate School Academic Policies and Procedures https://grad.wisc.edu/academic-policies/
UW-Madison Graduate School Guide to Student Life: https://gradlife.wisc.edu

The MSLA Student Handbook; https://dpla.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1021/2022/04/MSLA-Handbook-2022-2023-PDF.pdf Note the Handbook will be revised every year. Please check for updated versions.

MSLA DEGREE REQUIREMENTS AND STEPS TO COMPLETION

Learning Goals and Degree Requirements

The Learning goals of the MSLA graduate program include:

1. Engage critically with the scholarship and theory of landscape architecture.
2. Demonstrate advanced critical thinking and the ability to explore ideas in depth and synthesize information with a high degree of competence.
3. Demonstrate an advanced understanding of various types of spaces, functions, and dynamics, as well as interactions between people and the built and natural environment.
4. Demonstrate a deep understanding of and the ability to critically evaluate the principles, theories, technical skills and recent research findings specific to at least one of the program's specialty areas: "Restoration Ecology and Ecological Design" and "Community-Focused Design."
5. Design and conduct an original research or evidence-based design thesis and communicate the results to scholars as well as to practitioners engaged in landscape decision-making and stewardship.
6. Describe and apply principles of ethical and professional conduct

To achieve these goals, the MSLA program has two basic degree requirements:

1. The satisfactory completion of 36 course credit hours. Of these, at least 30 must be for course work. A maximum of 6 thesis research credits may be applied toward the total credit requirement for the

degree. Supplemental work beyond the minimum, or courses without credit, may be required to make up deficiencies or to provide a depth of knowledge in the student's area of specialization.

2. The preparation of a written thesis based on original research or on an evidence-based landscape design, restoration, or management project.

Together the courses and the thesis will help you to understand what we do and do not know about your area of interest and give you a taste about how we discover and acquire new information and skills and apply them in landscape design, restoration, or management.

The Academic Advising Team: Graduate Services Coordinator

The Graduate Student Services Coordinator advises both prospective and continuing students on issues concerning Departmental and Graduate School policies and procedures and campus resources (e.g., enrollment tools, navigating campus offices, leadership and professional development opportunities). Feel free to contact them whenever you need further clarification on any policies or procedures, such as issues concerning satisfactory academic progress, academic deadlines, graduation completion, program-related forms, advising/course holds and permissions, and course offerings.

The Academic Advising Team: Major Professor and Academic Advisory Committee

During the course of your graduate program, you will work closely with a Major Professor (aka Advisor) and a Faculty Advisory Committee. They will offer advice and assistance as you work your way through the program and help you to successfully achieve the two degree requirements listed above.

The **Major Professor** is your principle advisor and serves as the Chair of your Advisory Committee, which includes at least two additional faculty members. Your Major Professor must be a member of the Department and of the University Graduate Faculty and attached to the MSLA Program.

The Graduate School requires that each graduate student be assigned a Major Professor as a condition of admission. As part of the MSLA admissions process, the Selection Committee helps match qualified applicants with an available faculty member who shares the candidate's interests as stated in the application.

The welcome letter from the Department will provide the name and contact information of your initial advisor/Major Professor; you can also find this information on your MyUW webpage. Most often you will continue to work with this professor through graduation. However, if your interests and/or research direction change, you can switch to a different Major Professor if that individual agrees. Be sure to notify both your former and new Major Professors; your Advisory Committee, if it has been assembled; and the Graduate Program Coordinator if you are making a change.

The **Advisory Committee** includes at least two Graduate Faculty members in addition to your Major Professor. The Graduate Faculty includes all assistant, associate and full professors belonging to a unit which offers

graduate degrees. Some members of the Academic Staff may also hold Graduate Faculty Status. In addition to the Major Professor, the Advisory Committee can include members of the PLA Department or come from other departments on campus. The idea is to assemble a compatible team with a combination of strengths that relate to your research interests and your future plans.

Your Major Professor can certainly offer suggestions as to who would be good candidates for your committee, but it is up to you to invite them. One way to go about assembling your team is to make an appointment with each prospective member, explain your topic area, and then ask if they are interested and available to serve. It is often helpful to contact faculty connected with courses you are taking or plan to take, but do not hesitate to ask someone whom you do not know, but whose interests and experience are related to your topic!

It is not unusual to have more than the minimum number of Advisory Committee members, especially if you have broad interests. Some students find it helpful to include University Staff who are not members of the Graduate Faculty, or even area professionals. Note, however, that the more Advisory Committee members you have, the more difficult it is to schedule meetings.

It is important to form the committee as soon as possible after deciding on your thesis topic. It is best to do so within the first year and no later than the end of your third semester in the program

Together, you, your Major Professor and your Advisory Committee track your progress toward degree completion, assist you with course selection and academic planning, and help you develop your thesis topic. The graduate program coordinator also keeps a record of your progress.

You will likely meet with your Major Professor several times each semester. As you develop your topic and later as you put your results together and complete your thesis, you will often meet as frequently as once a week. Unexpected developments may require even more frequent contact. You may also meet individually with other members of your Advisory Committee for advice regarding their specific areas of expertise.

You are **required** to meet with your full Advisory Committee a minimum of four times:

- An introductory meeting when the committee is first established to talk about your goals and the preliminary topic ideas and desired coursework that you have been discussing with your Major Professor. At this time, it is also helpful to discuss everyone's expectations regarding roles and responsibilities.
- The Certification Meeting, during which you present your Course Plan and Thesis Proposal to the Committee for Approval. This process also includes an assessment of your readiness to undertake the project. The assessment can take several forms, including but not limited to a written or oral exam.
- At least one (and often several) "Check-In" Meeting(s) while your work is in progress to be sure everyone is on the same page with regard to the goals of and expectations for your project
- The Thesis Defense, during which you present your work to the Committee and answer questions about your findings and their significance to the field of landscape architecture.

Course Plan

In order to meet the MSLA course requirement, you must complete a course plan as approved by your Advisory Committee, earn a minimum of 30 course credits, and achieve a minimum GPA of 3.00 for all graduate-level work (courses numbered 300 or above, excluding research, audit, credit/no credit, and pass/fail courses). The course plan includes a set of core courses and a group of courses specific to your program focus and/or future plans. The courses included in plan must together meet the minimum Graduate School course requirements: https://policy.wisc.edu/library/UW-1245

Core Courses

All Landscape Architecture graduate students are required to take the following set of core courses:

- Land Arch 710 (Theories of Landscape Change) and Land Arch 720 (Critical Inquiry into Landscape Design Expression)
- Three semesters of Land Arch 940 (Graduate Seminar)
- Land Arch 740 (Research Methods)
- At least two courses within a focus area selected by the student and their advisory committee.

The core courses are designed to provide you with a foundational understanding of the theories, problem-solving and research approaches related to landscape design, planning and management in general, and your chosen area of interest in particular.

Land Arch 710 (2 credits) and Land Arch 720 (2 credits) are offered in the same semester, usually in the fall, each being one half of a semester long. Make sure to register for both. Land Arch 740 (3 credits) is generally offered in the spring. Note: Land Arch 710/720 and Land Arch 740 may not be offered every year, so be sure to register for these courses whenever they are available.

Land Arch 940 is offered in both the fall and spring semesters. In the fall, the course serves as an introduction to the MSLA Program, the resources of the University and to the research and other interests of the Department's faculty. In the spring version of Land Arch 940, students present drafts of their thesis proposals or of the final results of their thesis for review and feedback. The group also reads, discusses, and analyzes current journal articles in order to investigate and share the areas of theory and practice that underlie our various interest areas.

Ideally, students take Land Arch 940 during their first fall semester, and then during two spring semesters. In this way, the spring semester includes students at varying stages in their programs. The advanced graduate students can offer guidance to the new students on how to be get the most out of their studies. This often includes offering advice about which optional classes to take (or not to take); how to find a thesis topic; successful approaches to networking with fellow students and with organizations to obtain contacts and jobs; how to get the most out of committee meetings; the importance of attending and presenting at conferences; and so on.

Courses Specific to Your Academic Goals

We offer two focus areas within the MSLA Program which represent the current interests of the faculty. You can find current information about courses that support each focus area on our website:

Community Focused Design: https://dpla.wisc.edu/community-focused-design-program/

Restoration Ecology and Ecological Design: https://dpla.wisc.edu/restoration-ecology-and-ecological-design/

It is also possible for a student in cooperation with their Major Professor and Advisory Committee to create a unique course of study.

The advisory committee may strongly recommend/require that you take more than the minimum number of courses in order to be better prepared for your chosen thesis and or career path. (And, of course, you can take courses just because they interest you; but be aware that doing so could extend your time to degree)

Your course plan is approved during your degree certification meeting. You can make subsequent changes in the plan with the approval of your Advisory Committee. If such changes occur, you or your Advisor must inform the Graduate Services Coordinator of the change. The new plan will be appended to the certification form on file in the Department office.

Original Scholarship Requirement: Research or Project-Based Thesis

To obtain a Master's of Science Degree in Landscape Architecture (MSLA) from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, you must be able to demonstrate a high-level of competency in the theories, methods, applications and ethics that underlie the design, planning, and management of landscapes and the cultural, natural, physical, spatial and ecological systems and interactions that comprise them. In addition to your classroom performance, the major factor we use to determine if you have met our learning goals is the satisfactory completion of a work of scholarship; either a research-based thesis or a project-based thesis (creating evidence-based design solutions for complex problems in urban, rural and natural settings). The major milestones needed to fulfill the thesis requirement include:

- Completion and Approval of a Thesis Proposal
- Completion of a Thesis
- Successful Completion of the Thesis Defense
- Submission of the Thesis to Memorial Library

Steps Towards Thesis Completion

Choose a Thesis Topic

Some students begin the MSLA program with a specific thesis topic in mind. For example, they may be joining a particular faculty member on a funded research project the objectives of which are clear. Most of our first-year students enroll with a general interest, for example restoration ecology or designing healthy cities, but without a specific question or problem in mind. The goal of this section of the guide suggests a process to help you find a topic.

Articulate Your Personal Goals

Discuss your responses to all three of the following topics with your major professor as you are getting acquainted during the first weeks of your first semester. This information helps to determine preferences, opportunities, constraints, thesis approach and scope

1. Desired Learning Outcomes and Skills (research, practice, problem-solving, team building, graphic and/or oral, communication, teaching, …)
2. Logistics
   - Time Constraints—Do you need to finish in 2 or 2.5 academic years?
   - Tuition and Living Expenses—Do you need to work while taking classes?
   - Research expenses—Can you self-fund equipment, travel, etc.?
   - Travel—Do you need to conduct your thesis project in the Madison area? Do you have access to a car or other means of travel?
3. Interests and Passions—What ideas and problems most interest you?

Create a list of possible topics

Sources of Potential Thesis Topics

- Turn your interests and passions into a list of research questions or landscape design solutions
- Visit with your advisor as well as with other faculty members to learn about their current research interests
- Participate in an Existing Research Project
  - Address one aspect of a larger question
  - Continue one or two years of a multi-year project
- Use information generated by a past project as well as new information to address a new or related question
- Read recent issues of professional or research journals to discover current topics of interest and thoughts about next steps
- Visit with area professionals working in both the public and private sectors to gather ideas
- Volunteer for local organizations
- Join a professional organization (ASLA, SER, Natural Areas Association, etc.)
- Attend conferences—these often provide student discounts—to learn about current investigations
- Expand on a course assignment
- Keep a “plot Book” handy—a notebook in which to write down potential topics as they occur to you.
- Check out local news stories to discover local issues in need of solutions.
- Read past MSLA theses to understand the range of successful projects

Examples of Recent Topics

- Grassland birds at Sauk Prairie State Recreation Area: Assessment of existing grassland bird communities and a proposed restoration plan to maximize habitat
- Conceptual Design for the Class of 1918 Marsh at the University of Wsinconsin-Madison
- Ecological Restoration Plan for Yahara Hills Golf Course, Madison, WI
- Attitudes Towards and Accessibility of Bird-Friendly Gardening in Low Socioeconomic Status Urban Yards
- Five years of Bison at Nachsua Grasslands Shows Minimal Impacts on Tallgrass Prairie Vegetation
- Exploring How Green Roof Features Attract Birds in the City of Madison and Conducting a Hypothetical Intensive Green Roof Design
- Evaluating the Impact of Imazapyr in the Soil on the Seedling Biomass Production and Survival of Two Native Forb Species
- Playpath Design for Waunakee, WI

Choose Your Thesis Topic and Additional Committee Members

Develop a short list of the topics that most interest you determine the feasibility of each, based on your personal goals and discussions with your major professor. It often helps at this stage to write short mini proposals for each of your leading thesis topic candidates, using the format described below. The goal is to narrow your focus and choose one or more topics that will become the core of your thesis. Your major professor (and your advisory committee, if you already have selected its members) will be a great source of advice during this process; meet with them often!

If you have not done so already, once you have chosen your preliminary topic it is time to form your advisory committee.

Write a Formal Thesis Proposal

Once you have selected your topic, the next step is presenting a written **Thesis Proposal** to your Advisory Committee and gaining their approval to move forward. The proposal is essentially a summary of your thesis plans.

The format of your proposal will vary, depending on the nature of your thesis. In general, the proposal should include:

1. A statement of the question(s) or problem (s) you plan to address
2. An explanation of the importance of the question or problem vis-à-vis landscape design, planning and or management and how your work will contribute to addressing the situation
3. An overview of how previous scholars have addressed similar issues (The context--often in the form of a literature review)
4. The methods you intend to use to answer the question (s) and/or address the problem (s)

5. The anticipated results and procedures you plan to use to analyze/interpret/apply them
6. A completion timeline

Your major professor and advisory committee will help you with the specifics of the format and content of your proposal. One of your required courses, Land Arch 740: *Research in Landscape* Architecture also covers this topic in some depth.

Present the Proposal, to the Advisory Committee, Obtain Approval of Advisory Committee During the Certification Process

Each student must schedule a thesis proposal defense as part of degree certification, ideally toward the end of their second semester, and no later than the end of your third semester in the program. Students should obtain a copy of the Certification Memorandum for associated forms and details— (available as a pdf) through https://dpla.wisc.edu/academics/graduate-programs/forms/

Gather Information/Conduct an experiment/Propose Design, Management, etc Strategies/ Answer the Questions/Solve the Problem

Once your thesis proposal is approved, the next step is to carry out the plans it outlines. (answer the questions and/or solve the problems.) Depending on the topic, this may take two semesters or more to accomplish. Students doing research that can only be accomplished during the growing season should plan to spend at least two summers collecting data. (This generally means that you should plan in graduating in 2.5 years.)

Often, once you start applying the methods and analyzing the information outlined in your thesis proposal, you may discover that you need to modify your plans—modify your question, revise your methods, or correct an error. In some cases, you my even decide to entirely change directions. One thing to remember, even if your results are not what you anticipated, your work, assuming it has been well-planned is, valuable. For example, it can help future researchers decide how to modify their projects.

Once you have gathered the information you need (done the experiments, gathered the observations, collected information, and so on), it is time to write your thesis. Again, the format will vary, but usually is an expansion of your proposal. Once again you need a problem statement, a discussion of its context (its importance, how it relates to the work of others, and a description of your methods. Often you can recycle bits of your proposal as you write these sections, but usually in the process of carrying out the proposed research, you will have made changes.

The new section of your thesis will include:

A description of your results
An analysis of your results
A conclusion.

Depending on your thesis, the results may include qualitative and quantitative data, design graphics, maps, or photographs. In all cases the results include a text in which you explain their significance/importance.

Present and Defend the Thesis: Pass and Obtain Approval of Advisory Committee

Each student must schedule a thesis defense during the semester in which they intend to graduate. This step includes asking the Department to submit a Warrant Request to the Graduate School on behalf of the student. A warrant is a document issued to your programs by the Graduate School at your program's request after you have met all degree requirements. Warrants are valid for one semester and are signed by the program chair, advisor, or your committee. This request must be submitted a minimum of 3 weeks before the thesis defense or the degree deadlines for the semester in which the student intends to graduate.

Revise Thesis, if necessary,
Obtain Approval of Major Professor
Submit copies to Memorial Library and to Department.

Finally, each student must prepare and submit one bound copy of the thesis to the Department of Landscape Architecture. In addition, you must deposit an unbound copy of your thesis in the Memorial Library. You or your designate must bring your unbound thesis to Memorial Library, Room B137. The library does not accept theses by mail. Please bring your student I.D. number. Make sure you have included the Advisor Approval Page (see link below). The Library will notify the Graduate School of deposit. Visit the Grad School site on preparing your Master's thesis: https://grad.wisc.edu/current-students/masters-guide/

Your advisor and other committee members may also request bound or digital copies of your thesis.

Degree Completion Road Map

It generally takes 2.5 years for a full-time student to complete the MSLA degree. Following is an example of how that may be achieved.

First Year, Fall (semester 1)

- ☐ Coursework: (8-9 credits) LA 710/720 (or when available), LA 940, or an additional 1-2 courses in focus area.
- ☐ Thesis: Begin thinking about thesis research projects in consultation with advisor, think about thesis advisory committee members. LA 990
- ☐ General: Begin mapping out future course work and explore research methods course options.

First Year, Spring (semester 2)

- ☐ Coursework: (8-9 credits) LA 740, LA 940, and courses in focus area.
- ☐ Thesis: Begin work on thesis proposal, consult examples of successful proposals, and begin literature review. LA 990
- ☐ General: By the end of this semester schedule degree certification and thesis proposal defense (although many will do this in their third semester).

First Year, Summer Session

- ☐ Coursework: As needed, to maintain assistantship or fellowship (may include research LA 990 credits), to take special classes to make up deficiencies or to remain on track for planned graduation.
- ☐ Thesis: Conduct fieldwork, collect data or do archival research.
- ☐ General: Check in with advisor, revise thesis plans as needed after beginning data collection. Many students take one of our summer field courses as well,

Second Year, Fall (semester 3)

- ☐ Coursework: (8-9 credits) additional courses in focus area; may include research credits.
- ☐ Thesis: Continue data collection, begin data analysis, and write up literature review and methods chapters. LA 990
- ☐ General: Schedule thesis proposal defense (degree certification) as early as possible, but no later than the 12th week of the semester.

Second Year, Spring (semester 4)

- ☐ Coursework: (8-9 credits) LA 940 (including presentation) and additional courses.
- ☐ Thesis: Continue data analysis and writing. Schedule your thesis defense no later than three weeks prior to the spring degree deadline. Don't forget to request your warrant from the Graduate Coordinator at least three weeks before your defense. LA 990
- ☐ General: Also, submit a bound copy of your thesis to the Department and your advisor.

Second Year, Summer Session

- ☐ Coursework: As needed, to maintain assistantship or fellowship (may include research LA 990 credits), to take special classes to make up deficiencies or to remain on track for planned graduation.
- ☐ Thesis: Conduct fieldwork, collect data or do archival research.
- ☐ General: Check in with advisor, revise thesis plans as needed after beginning data collection. Many students take one of our summer field courses as well,

Third Year, Fall (semester 5

- ☐ Coursework: Register for any needed courses remaining and/or finish thesis.
- ☐ Thesis: Finish Writing, Schedule Presentation and Defense LA 990

For detailed information about the University Graduate School academic policies and procedures regarding course waivers, substitutions, transfers from other programs and maintaining satisfactory academic progress, please see the following link: https://grad.wisc.edu/academic-policies/