

2002

# An assessment of thesis alternatives for Landscape Architecture programs in the United States

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AN ASSESSMENT OF THESIS ALTERNATIVES  
FOR LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE PROGRAMS  
IN THE UNITED STATES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Landscape Architecture

in

The School of Landscape Architecture

by

Evan Warfield Brandon

B. Business Administration, Mississippi State University, 1994

May 2002

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my committee, Sadik Artunc (the chair), Van Cox and Bruce Sharky for their encouragement, guidance, and assistance throughout the entirety of this endeavor. I would also like to thank all of the professors and faculty from all of the universities that contributed to this collection of information.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The School of Landscape Architecture at Louisiana State University has entertained the thought of offering alternatives to the thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Landscape Architecture. In recent discussions with graduate faculty, it was agreed that the idea of researching thesis alternatives in more detail and organizing a collection of information about the consequences of such actions would be beneficial in the decision making process.

Through surveys and interviews of numerous graduate faculties at other universities, students, and administrators and through careful analysis of program curricula, this thesis explores the positive and negative consequences a MLA program might incur by offering alternatives to the thesis requirement.

## INTRODUCTION

### **What prompted the issue?**

For decades, landscape architecture faculty, university administrators, and students have debated over the consequences of requiring a student to complete a thesis before receiving a master's degree. In one such conversation between a professor and myself, he proposed the idea of my engaging in a formal research study to attempt to ascertain the pros and cons of offering alternatives to the thesis requirement. Both the professor and I agreed that such a study could be advantageous for both the program and the students and could possibly aid in determining the most appropriate educational requirements for a master's degree candidate in Landscape Architecture.

### **What questions need to be answered?**

This thesis, through various avenues of research, attempts to answer the following questions: Within graduate education of landscape architecture, what are the most accepted alternatives to the thesis requirement, and what are the positive and negative consequences a landscape architecture program encounters in offering alternatives to the thesis?

### **How can those questions be answered?**

In order to analyze the various complexities behind the debate, several methods of research will be utilized. A literature review will be essential in presenting a brief history of master's programs, the thesis process, and the relationships to landscape architectural education. The majority of research gathered by this author will be through the responses from a survey distributed to a significant number of MLA program's faculty in the United States. This information will be used to ascertain the different master's degree requirements each program has established and what effects these requirements have had on their programs.

Other areas of research will include: 1) interviews with graduate coordinators from various non-design oriented programs on the Louisiana State University campus in attempt to research how the programs have administered their thesis requirements and to see how each prepares the students for the thesis, 2) a curriculum analysis of several 'thesis-only' oriented programs to study how each program prepares the students for the thesis, and 4) informal interviews of second-year graduate students, third-year graduate students, and alumni from the LSU Landscape Architecture program in effort to understand their perspective of the thesis and its alternatives.

Finally, after the data has been tallied, a careful analysis will follow each area of research. Cross-referencing interview results with survey findings, student responses with literature sources and analyzing other similarities of research will ultimately lead to suggestions for MLA programs in general, and more specifically, the MLA program at Louisiana State University.

## HISTORY

In order to formulate any educated conjecture as to the ideal direction the graduate level Landscape Architecture program should follow, one must first obtain a clear understanding of the history of graduate education in the United States. To obtain this understanding, one appropriate source of information for this research is literature. As in most literature research, the broader the topic, the more information can be found, and as the topic focuses, the amount of literature dwindles. In this case, for example, when searching for information concerning the history of the master's degree, dozens of written sources emerge, but when the focus moves toward the history of the thesis, the amount of literature decreases. Even more specifically, when searching for literature that specifically focuses on the role of the thesis in landscape architecture education, very few written works can be found.

### **What is the role of a thesis in graduate education?**

What is interesting about this particular research is how the literature about the history of graduate education, in general, seems to be so closely related to the information gathered through other sources of research as to the role of the thesis in landscape architecture. For example, most of the literature containing information about the history of a graduate program and its function in higher education is written in effort to support one of several positions of an argument – an argument similar to the debate regarding alternatives to the thesis. And this is where the disagreement begins. According to the several literature sources gathered for this study, it is obvious there is very little consensus - no congruity as to the role or purpose of a master's degree in higher education. Case in point – Judith S. Glazer, an Associate Dean of the School of Education and Human Services at St. John's University in New York, authored



a book entitled The Master's Degree: Tradition, Diversity, Innovation. In this book, she assumes a position in the debate that can best be described with the following quotation.

“A new paradigm of this degree has evolved in the United States, partly a function of an egalitarian system of postsecondary education that has provided universal access regardless of financial need or academic ability. In a society like ours that honors credentials, the master's degree has come to signify professionalism across many disciplines and specializations. The dominant paradigm is practitioner oriented, emphasizing training in skills, career development, and pragmatic goals. It is linked to the needs of the student and the demands of the marketplace and driven by externally imposed standards, and it emphasizes practice rather than theory, skills rather than research, training rather than scholarship” (Glazer, 83).

She also prefaces the previous statement by stating; “Diversity makes it impossible to discuss a typical masters program” (Glazer, 15) – foreshadowing to the fact that these issues may well be discussed for many years to come. How can one define the role of a thesis in graduate education, if the role of graduate education has yet to be conclusively defined?

One area of information that seems to be the consensus within the group of literature sources is the origin and progression of the master's program and of the thesis. According to Glazer and others, the master's degree originated in the 13<sup>th</sup> century as a license to teach and later became a requirement. The master's degree was introduced in the United States in 1642 when Harvard instituted the degree for those seeking a teaching career. In 1734, the master's degree program expanded its requirements to include the thesis (Glazer, 7).

### **How does this incongruity affect graduate education in landscape architecture?**

When narrowing the focus to specifically analyzing the role of the thesis in graduate education in landscape architecture, another problem arises: **defining a thesis**. Several writing guides and literature sources use the terms ‘thesis’ and ‘dissertation’ interchangeably. Assume the position of the Graduate School of Louisiana State University. A document, entitled Guidelines for the Preparation of Master's Theses and Doctoral Dissertations, is given to

every student attempting to complete a thesis or dissertation. On the first page of this document, the Graduate School states, “the master’s thesis should demonstrate a capacity for research, originality of thought, and creditable literary quality; in few disciplines...the master’s thesis should represent creativity, originality, and mastery of one’s craft and art at a professional level” (Graduate School, ii). Compare this definition with the graduate school’s definition of a dissertation. “The doctoral dissertation should demonstrate mastery of research techniques, originality of thought, the ability to conduct independent research, and, again, creditable literary quality” (Graduate School, ii). Notice the difference – “a capacity for research” as apposed to “a mastery of research.” Now the question that must be addressed is two-fold. Does the average approved thesis, produced by a graduate student in landscape architecture, fulfill these requirements? Does the average thesis “demonstrate a capacity for research”? Is the average master’s candidate expected to have a “mastery of research?” Is the thesis the most appropriate way to attempt to meet these requirements?

In Standard 5.5 set by the Landscape Architectural Accreditation Board, a master’s level program “shall provide, in addition to the Professional Curriculum (Standard 3), study in one or more areas advancing the knowledge or capability of the profession.” These four requirements include:

- “Program is characterized by special areas of strength that provide opportunity for study beyond the level associated with entry to the profession.”
- “Program provides an introduction to research and/or scholarly methods and their relation to the profession of landscape architecture.”
- “Program allows student to independently pursue special interest areas with faculty guidance.”
- “Program provides opportunity for students to individually define and pursue a major, integrative investigation of a focused problem area.”

Once again, does the average approved thesis, produced by a graduate student in landscape architecture, fulfill these requirements, and is the thesis the most appropriate way to attempt to meet these requirements?

At this point, opinions seem to divide, and the debate resumes. One of the most conclusive pieces of literature comes in the form of a compendium entitled Graduate Education in Landscape Architecture, prepared by the Lane L. Marshall, once Chair of the American Society of Landscape Architects Council on Education. In sum, this publication is a collection of written opinions from numerous landscape architects, representing public, private, and academic areas of the field in response to a paper addressing several substantial issues being dealt with in the field. This paper was written by Al Rutledge, Chair of the Landscape Architecture Department at Iowa State University and a member of the Council on Education, in order to stimulate discussions on these issues (Marshall, 2).

Among the concerns addressed in this compendium is the issue of the role of graduate education in landscape architecture. According to Marshall, “The most frequently mentioned roles for graduate education in landscape architecture include the notions that it should perpetuate and extend the knowledge base of the profession... and should go beyond basic skill development to include some research understanding and or skill development in an area of specialization” (Marshall, 3). Marshall goes further to explain that even though most of the respondents agreed in terms of extending the body of knowledge, including some research understanding and development in an area of specialization, there was not a clear consensus as to how this would be effectively mandated (Marshall, 4).

Marshall also cites the presences of incongruity between programs by referring to an earlier publication.

“According to the recent publication A Guide to Educational Programs in Landscape Architecture, editor Hamid Shirvani lists 34 schools offering graduate degrees. Sixteen are accredited...only ten schools (among the total 34) use the word “research” or the phrase “original contributions” when describing their objectives; three of those ten are accredited“(Marshall, 38).

The following examples are responses to Rutledge’s paper and are cited to further illustrate the contrary opinions regarding the role of a thesis/research in a master’s of Landscape Architecture degree. Please note that the title following each respondents name is in derived from the information collected in 1987.

Edmond Kagi, Senior Principal of the SWA Group in Houston, Texas stated, “Educators should know that professional practice seeks and values focused design talent, technical competency, or proven managerial capacity above all else... There’s not much room here, however, for research...or “related fields” specialties unless they include a solid framework of traditional landscape architectural knowledge and skills...(Marshall, 103).

In the response of Christopher Degenhardt, President of EDAW, Inc. he states, “The research element in master’s level programs needs to be maintained.... Research has never been a strong component of our profession, and we have suffered for it. There is a wealth of areas that would benefit from more systematic investigation. The absence of a research orientation threatens the profession with stagnation and challenges its right to be termed a ‘profession’” (Marshall, 130).

Jot D. Carpenter, a former professor of Landscape Architecture at Ohio State University stated in his response, “No other discipline in our academic setting assumes master recipients are prepared to pursue research and advance the body of knowledge. Why should we be unique in the university setting? Professional knowledge and skills should be the goal of all MLA recipients (Marshall, 160). He goes on further to say, “it does not seem

appropriate to expect master's students to be able to prepare research proposals or pursue research which creates new knowledge. In other disciplines, the Ph.D. candidate is expected to make such contributions to the body of knowledge" (Marshall, 165).

Joan Iverson Nassauer, Director of Graduate Studies at the University of Minnesota proclaims, "Productive research and scholarship provide the support structure for a strong graduate program" (Marshall, 174).

Donovan C. Wilkins, professor and Graduate Program Coordinator of The School of Renewable Natural Resources at the University of Arizona declares, "Trying to squeeze everybody in to the research/thesis mold is counterproductive and inappropriate. It almost surely stifles more important contributions to the field than it yields...requiring a student to develop a demonstrable expertise, on the other hand, is something that can't be tossed off so lightly, so mechanically" (Marshall, 199).

### **Where does graduate education go from here?**

A myriad of conflicting positions makes determining the most appropriate course of action for assessing the value of a thesis requirement as well as a viable alternative a daunting task. That is why it is so important to not terminate research based on previous opinions alone. That is why accumulating original research regarding the positive and negative consequences a program encounters in offering alternatives to the thesis is essential in forming a clearer, more concise and confident justification for changing a program's degree requirements or changing the way a program prepares its student for the thesis.

## **RESEARCH**

### **Why is it important to continue the research?**

Incongruity between opinions as to the role, nature, and consequences of the thesis makes it even more important to conduct a study that will probe the issues and bring forth fragments of data that can be analyzed to form more educated opinions.

This chapter contains four areas of research results. The first area of information was collected through a survey sent to the twenty-nine MLA programs in the United States. The second area of research was collected through interviews with various graduate coordinators of non-design masters programs to analyze how non-design oriented programs have administered their thesis requirements and to see how each prepares the students for the thesis. The third area of research is an in-depth study into the curricula of the ‘thesis only’ MLA programs, to analyze several methods used in preparing the student for the thesis. Lastly, the fourth area of research was conducted through informal interviews with several second-year graduate students, third-year graduate students, and alumni of the School of Landscape Architecture at LSU in order to gain a better understanding of a student’s view of the thesis and its alternative requirements.

### **What can be learned from other MLA programs in the United States?**

The first area of research was collected through a survey sent to the twenty-nine other MLA programs in the United States to learn what alternatives to the thesis are in practice and exactly how well those alternatives perform. Of the twenty-nine programs surveyed, sixteen graduate programs responded.

Three distinct paths toward completing the MLA requirements surfaced in the responses – a thesis only option, a final comprehensive studio project, and an additional course

work alternative. Figure 1 graphically demonstrates the relationship between which alternatives are most common accepted by the landscape architecture programs that responded.

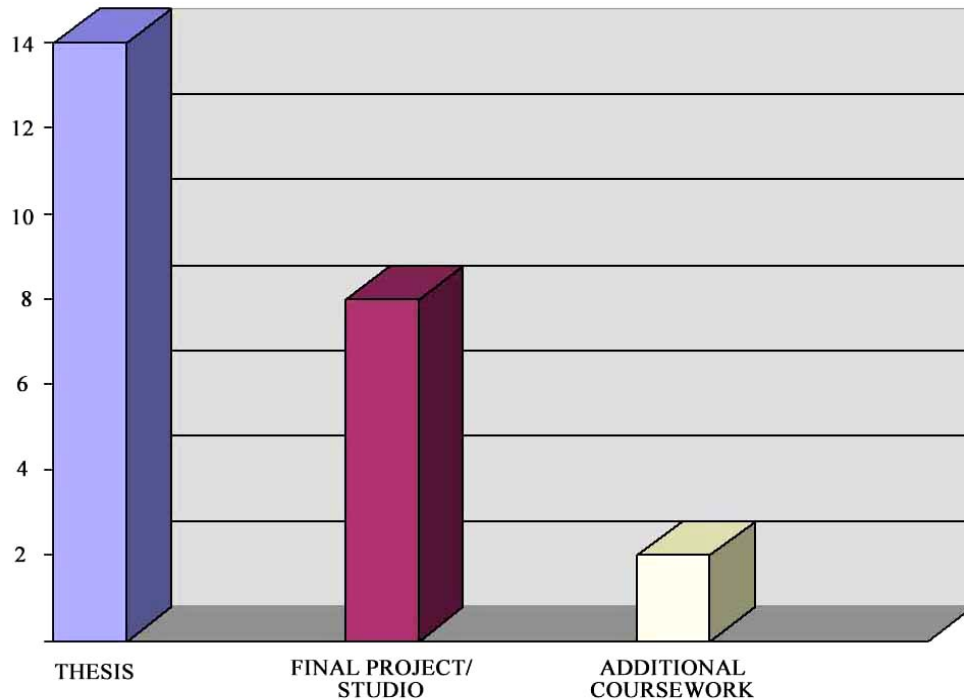


FIGURE 1: MOST ACCEPTED REQUIREMENTS OF THE 16 RESPONDENTS

Of the sixteen programs, fourteen either require a thesis or deem it one of the requirement alternatives. This fact points toward the notion that the thesis is still seen by most as a significant part of graduate education in landscape architecture. One can also assume that because the thesis continues to hold such prominence within graduate education, it is important not to discount it as a requirement because of outside pressures.

Half of the programs that responded offer the final/comprehensive studio project alternative, and five of those programs added the final/comprehensive studio project alternative - all within the past five years. The primary reason these programs cited for adding the final/comprehensive studio project alternative was to become more design oriented. It

seems evident that a trend might be forming within the MLA programs, possibly in response to the market demanding a more qualified designer – noting back to comments made by landscape architects in the compendium previously outlined in the literature research.

Two programs offer the additional course work alternative. One possible reason that this number is significantly lower could be because of the difficulty this alternative would present in meeting the requirements set by the Landscape Architecture Accreditation Board.

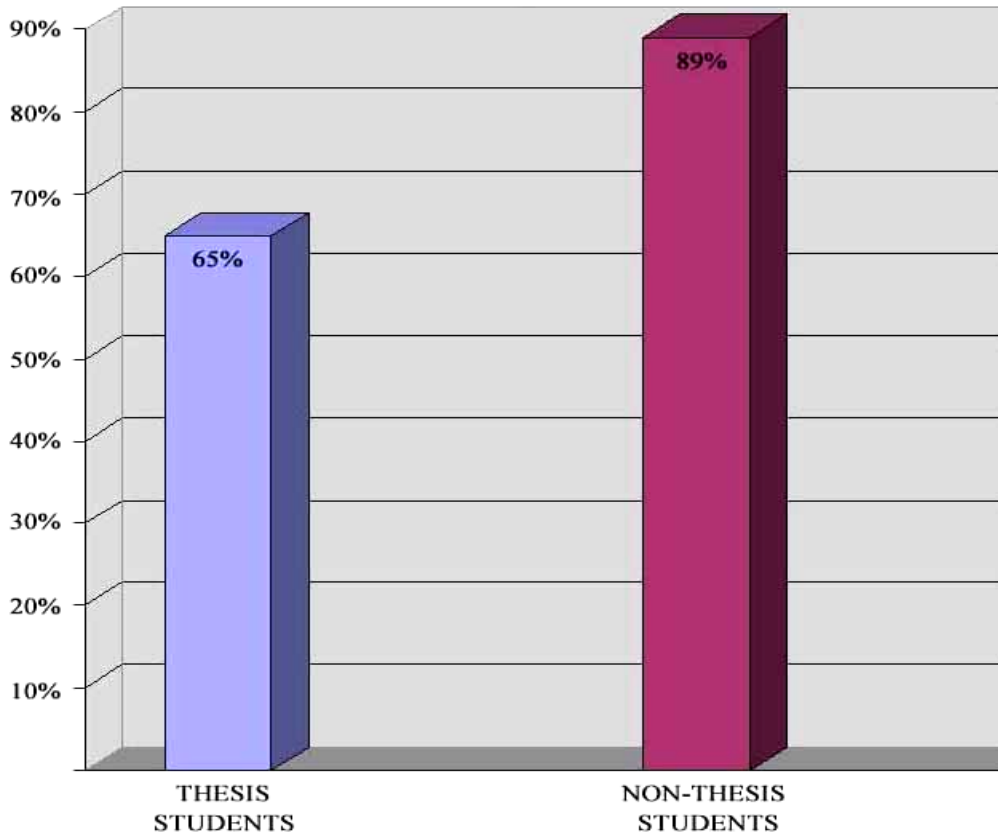
Of the programs that offer a non-thesis alternative, an average of 80% of the students choose the non-thesis alternative. Why is this, exactly? Granted, there might be numerous plausible answers to this question, but if one were to cross-reference this information with that given in the informal interview of students one might assume the following. Quite possibly the student chooses a non-thesis alternative because s/he feels, due to his or her lack of background in writing and research, the thesis would be a far too daunting task to accomplish. Or the student may see a thesis work as not practical in relation to his or her career objectives. For whatever the reason, it is known that a severe lack of motivation and work satisfaction will usually cause lower performance.

Of the students who choose the non-thesis alternatives, 89% graduated in four semesters in a two-year program or six semesters in a three-year program. Those who did not graduate on time, the average two-year track increased to barely over 4 semesters, and the average three-year track slightly increased to 6.5 semesters.

Of the students from the surveyed programs that chose to write a thesis, an average of 65% graduated in four semesters in a two-year program or six semesters in a three-year program. Of those who did not graduate on time, the average two-year track increased to 4.5 semesters, and the average three-year track increased to 7.5 semesters.



Figures 2 and 3 offer a graphical representation comparing graduation statistics of the students who chose to write a thesis versus student who chose the non-thesis alternative. Figure 2 represents the ‘on-time’ graduation rate of the students writing a thesis in comparison to the ‘on-time’ graduation rate of the students engaging in either the final/comprehensive studio project alternative or the additional coursework alternative.



**FIGURE 2: COMPARISON OF STUDENTS GRADUATING ON TIME UNDER THESIS VS. NON-THESIS ALTERNATIVE**

Figure 3 represents the average additional amount of time spent by the student writing a thesis in comparison to the average amount of time spent by the student working to complete a final comprehensive studio project alternative or the additional coursework alternative.

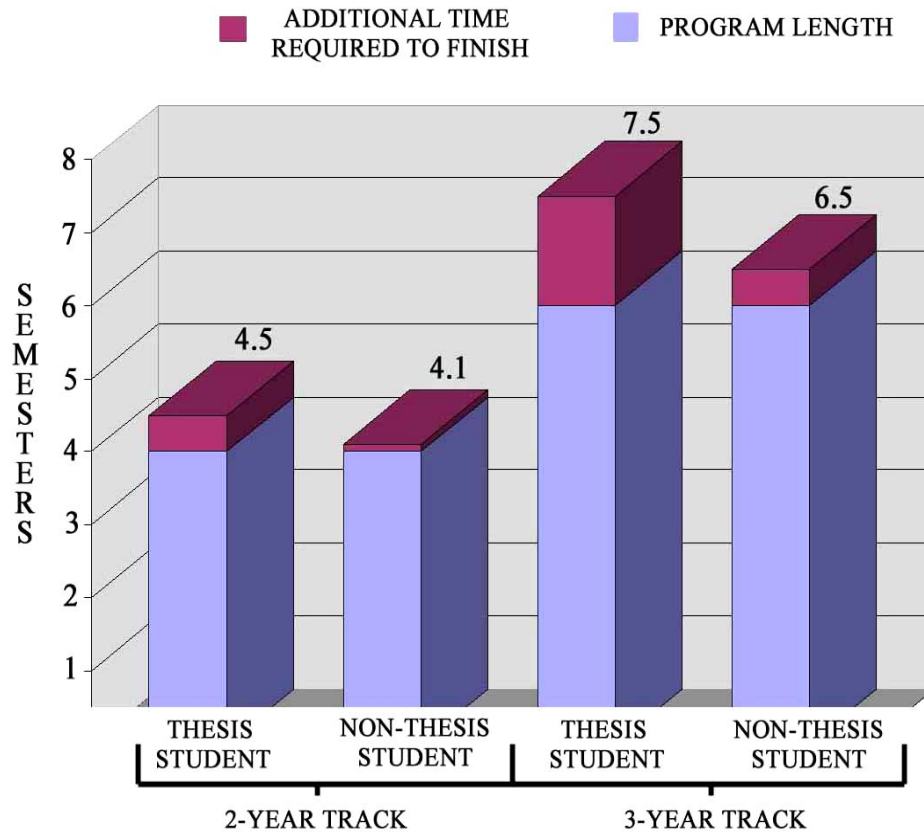


FIGURE 3: COMPARISON OF AVERAGE NUMBER OF SEMESTERS TO GRADUATE BETWEEN THESIS VS. NON-THESIS STUDENTS

It is valuable to note however, the results shown in figure 2 are significantly different between the individual programs. Seven of the sixteen programs that responded to the survey have a thesis only requirement. Of those seven, four programs graduate a rate of 70% or more of their students on time, while the other three programs graduate 50% or less of their students on time. Of those programs that graduate 70% or greater number of students on time, two programs offer eighteen possible credits of thesis/research courses, which emphasize writing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> years, and one program requires a total of seventeen credits of thesis or research and writing related courses that begin in the spring of the first year. Compare this with the three programs that graduate less than 50% of their students on time. One program

requires six hours of writing and research credits not beginning until the fourth semester, one program requires nine credits of research and thesis preparation courses not beginning until the fourth semester, and the third program requires a total of 15 credits of research courses with no mention of writing.

Even though several simple deductions can be made from the raw data alone, it is important to study some of the information more thoroughly. According to a multitude of dictionaries and reference books, a thesis is simply defined as a “proposition maintained or defend in argument.” Some sources go further in saying a thesis is, “a formal and lengthy research paper, esp. a work of original research written in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master’s degree” (Webster, 1389). Even though the reference books form a consensus as to the definition of a thesis, it is important to understand the presence of an innumerable amount of possibilities within those definitions. For instance, at first glance, one might conclude that MLA programs that begin the thesis process earlier in their curriculum and in a deeper fashion, their students finish the thesis and graduate earlier. However, before conclusions can be drawn, one must first be certain that each program requires similar thesis procedures, and if these procedures vary, it is important to consider that information before formulating substantive conclusions.

For example, the two programs that graduated the highest number of students on time have somewhat different procedures than the other five. The Landscape Architecture program at the University of Washington allows group theses, while the Rhode Island School of Design requires a thesis as a supplement to a final project, and the entire process does not involve the graduate school. It is important to note that the differences among the other programs vary slightly. The Landscape Architecture program at the University of Georgia requires a

committee of five and the Landscape Architecture program at Florida International University requires a minimum of 100 pages for the thesis document. Other than these two discrepancies, each program's procedures are nearly identical.

When asked how does the program's requirements separate the graduate students from the undergraduate students: thirteen programs cited extensive research courses as a requirement for graduates, and twelve programs cited independent study courses as a requirement for graduates. Several programs felt their graduates were more prepared for the post-graduate work through internships, the capstone course, and additional course work. The majority of those surveyed felt course work prepared their students for actual post-graduate work better than the thesis, although the majority of those surveyed felt the thesis added to the body of knowledge more than additional course work. However, several respondents felt the addition to the body of knowledge was realistically not significant because so few students ever publish their work. Lastly, several responses noted they believe the thesis improves the student - it improves the student's abilities to conduct independent projects.

The last question of the survey asks the reader to list what s/he feels are the pros and cons of the thesis and its alternatives. The advantages most commonly cited about the thesis are as follows:

- The thesis contributes to the body of knowledge and moves the profession forward.
- The thesis forces the student to learn to use literature and previous research and knowledge.
- The thesis prepares the student for complex projects.
- The thesis could help faculty in research.
- The thesis is much better preparation for Ph.D. students.

The disadvantages most commonly cited about the thesis are as follows:

- University requirements are tedious.
- Students do not have the background to write a thesis.
- Students need more design.
- The thesis is too time consuming.
- The thesis is a burden on faculty.
- The thesis causes student isolation from peers.
- The thesis serves little practical preparation for post-graduate work.
- Theses usually are not published and do not add to the body of knowledge.

The advantages most commonly cited about the final/comprehensive studio project are as follows:

- It stresses design and improves design skills.
- It is less time consuming than a thesis.
- It is more valuable to students going into private practice.
- It is a culmination of skills.
- Students are more attracted to studio time with faculty. They learn more.
- It is practical, much more applicable.
- It is desired by most firms.
- It can be great for portfolio.

The disadvantages most commonly cited about the final/comprehensive studio project are as follows:

- It is not research.
- There is no addition to body of knowledge.
- The final/comprehensive studio project tends to be less independently directed.

- The final/comprehensive studio project does not separate graduate students from undergraduate students.

The advantages most commonly cited about the additional course work alternative are as follows:

- Students are allowed to refine their skills in specific areas.
- Students may be allowed to diversify their skills.
- It saves faculty time – efficient from teaching point of view.
- It is much easier to manage.
- It can broaden a student’s background – by taking courses outside of LA

The disadvantages most commonly cited about the additional course work alternative are as follows:

- It may not encourage student to synthesize what they have learned.
- It may not encourage student to think independently.
- It treats graduate student the same as undergraduates.
- It does not focus on research.

**How can the disadvantages of the thesis and alternatives be alleviated?**

Determining possible suggestions to alleviate the disadvantages of the thesis and its alternatives can be extremely valuable when beginning to formulate opinions about how to improve the quality of education for the students along with the teaching experience of the professors. The following are general ideas to consider when discussing the disadvantages of the thesis and alternatives. It is important to note that these suggestions are merely ideas to be considered. Due to the diversity of the programs and the innumerable amount of variables to be considered by a program, the feasibility of each idea can only be determined by each individual program. No one solution applies to the whole of graduate education in landscape architecture, and each problem may be alleviated through more than the solutions suggested below. Specific suggestions as to the course of

action the LSU School of Landscape Architecture should take are stated in the following chapter – Conclusions.

Possible solutions to the thesis disadvantages listed by faculty and students:

- To alleviate the problem of the tedious requirements of the graduate school, a program should take notice of the Rhode Island School of Design's approach. Do not require the thesis to be a part of the graduate school's requirements. Make the thesis or alternative a departmental requirement, allowing for additional time to complete the requirement. This option may also aid in solving one of the students' most common complaints – too much stress.
- One option a program may choose to alleviate the problem of a student's lack of writing and research background may be to offer thesis alternatives and mitigate the research and writing requirement by diffusing it through several semesters. Therefore, the benefits of research may still be reaped. With the addition of alternatives, faculty would be allowed to advise each student individually as to the most appropriate path to take. This possible solution could also alleviate the problems of the thesis being too time consuming and a burden on faculty because the faculty would be allowed to serve on fewer thesis committees.
- The problem of students needing more design could be alleviated through requiring the thesis to be a supplement of a design project or requiring the thesis to be design oriented. This solution might also prevent the student from feeling that their thesis is not applicable to their career. The Rhode Island School of Design has taken this approach as well.
- To alleviate the problem of student isolation from peers, a program may follow the lead of the University of Washington and allow group theses.

Possible solutions to the final/comprehensive studio project disadvantages listed by faculty and students:

- The problem that a final project and/or studio does not promote research and add to the body of knowledge may be alleviated by incorporating research throughout the program - making it an integral part of the entire curriculum.
- The problem that a final studio project tends to be less independently directed can be alleviated by promoting a less structured/formalized final studio, allowing the student more freedom to pursue his or her interests.
- To alleviate the problem that a final studio project does not separate graduate students from undergraduate students, a program may require significant research and writing to be a part of the final studio/project.

Possible solutions to the additional coursework disadvantages listed by faculty and students:

- To eliminate the problem of the lack of independent study under this alternative, a program may restructure its curriculum to include more required independent study courses.
- The problem of lack of research and the problem of the graduates being treated like undergraduates can be lessened by incorporating research and writing classes throughout the graduate students' career. Slowly acclimating the student to writing a research might improve the students overall abilities and make them more comfortable in larger research and writing projects.

### **What can be learned from the non-design oriented graduate programs?**

The second area of research came through interviews with the graduate coordinators of several non-design oriented master's programs. This research merely reinforced the belief that "diversity makes it impossible to discuss a typical master's program." However, several



important pieces of information can be used to better direct the graduate program in Landscape Architecture at LSU.

Every program seems to have different requirements and different reasons for choosing those requirements. Some programs have added a non-thesis option to graduate more students on time, whereas, other programs have eliminated non-thesis alternatives for various reasons. For example, Edward Henderson, the Chair of the Philosophy Department, summarizes his program's current requirements by saying,

“We added a non-thesis option many years ago, although few students choose it. It was added because students found it difficult to focus their thesis efforts narrowly enough to be able to complete a thesis on a timely basis. They tended to refuse faculty efforts to narrow their sight. Students often put in two or three years and then left without a degree to show for their efforts. We thought a non-thesis option would enable them to get an acceptable degree. As it turned out, most students wanted the thesis degree, and the faculty learned to direct them more successfully.”

Immediately, one's attention is drawn to the statement, "...the faculty learned to direct them more successfully." In a follow-up interview with Professor Henderson, the question was raised – "How did you [the faculty] learn to direct the students more successfully?" In response, Professor Henderson stated, "We learned to make (and we helped) the student narrow, narrow, narrow the topic. We also became more insistent on their having regular meetings with us to present what they had written." It seems this information corresponds with the MLA programs that were more successful in graduating students on time. Beginning the thesis process earlier in the student's career and increasing the amount of faculty interaction might be advantageous in improving both the process and product of a thesis. Another important piece of information was uncovered in this interview. Concerning the subject of preparing the student for the thesis or non-thesis alternative, Professor Henderson explains,

“We size up the students and advise them informally which path to take...For students who have had a minimal undergraduate work in philosophy and who aspire to move on to doctoral programs, we may urge them to do the non-thesis degree in order to build up their backgrounds. In other cases, we may think a student is incapable of writing a thesis successfully and of going on to a doctoral program, consequently, we might advise that student to take the non-thesis route and accept the M.A. as the terminal degree.”

At the very least, this approach could be advantageous to the faculty by eliminating ‘futile’ theses and freeing up more faculty time for directing those the faculty hopes will more successfully contribute to the body of knowledge – ultimately, turning adequate theses into important contributions to the body of knowledge in the profession.

Another example comes from the Graduate Director of the Geography Department, Paul Farnsworth. When asked about the requirements of a Master of Geography program, Professor Farnsworth replied by saying,

“15-20 years ago we used to have non-thesis options and it created a two-tier system, with those students who took the non-thesis option being viewed as “lesser” than the thesis students by BOTH the faculty and the students themselves. In reality, there seems to have been some truth to this characterization as well. As a result we did away with the non-thesis option and now view the thesis as the most valuable part of the degree.”

Professor Farnsworth further adds, “A master’s without a thesis is just another bachelor’s degree.” Further into the interview, Professor Farnsworth discussed how the graduate level geography program prepares each student for the thesis. Once again, his information coincides with the other, seemingly successful, graduate programs. The students are required to take an “intro to grad study” course in the first semester, followed by an independent readings course, where the student is required to begin the research and prepare a thesis proposal.

### **What are the political realities behind how a program is viewed or ranked after switching to requirements that include non-thesis alternatives?**

Another important piece of information gained through conversations with other graduate coordinators, program directors and graduate school administrators was how LSU allows each program's faculty to make curriculum decisions and thesis requirement decisions. According to John Larkin, Dean of the Graduate School, the Graduate School administration believes the faculty for each department should and would make the best decisions for that department. Since every situation is different, no respect for a program would be lost due to a change in the thesis requirements. Even though these opinions are not conclusive, and might not represent the entire graduate education community, this information seemed to be common among those researched.

### **What can be learned from the MLA students?**

The last area of research collected is the result of several informal interviews with second-year graduate students, third-year graduate students and alumni of the LSU School of Landscape Architecture. This study was performed to better understand the student's point of view concerning the advantages and disadvantages the thesis and each alternative have in relation to what the student needs. One interesting aspect of the information was just how similar the comments are between each group interviewed. The most commonly cited comments by students about the advantages of the thesis include the following:

- It gives the student a focused area of study.
- It allows the student the chance to study something not offered in classes.
- It teaches students to focus.
- It builds character in the student.

The most commonly cited comments by students about the disadvantages of the thesis include the following:

- It causes too much stress.
- There is a lack of needed structure.
- Six months of work seems useless toward career.
- It does not seem practical for our field.
- The lack of a background in writing and research make the task much more difficult.
- It is too time consuming.

The most commonly cited comments by students about the advantages of the final/comprehensive studio project are as follows:

- The student receives additional design practice.
- The student has the opportunity to put everything learned into practical application.
- It gives the student a focused area of study.
- It is less time consuming.
- There is more structure.
- The student feels better prepared for entering practice.

The most commonly cited comment by students about the disadvantages of the final/comprehensive studio project is, “it seems to make the master’s degree the same as a bachelor’s.”

While the most commonly cited comments by students about the disadvantage of the additional coursework alternative was the same as the final/comprehensive studio project, students and alumni cited additional advantages. These include:

- Additional coursework can improve specific skills.

- It allows the student to take classes outside of landscape architecture – broaden the student’s education.
- It allows the student to specialize in certain areas.

It is important to note the similarities between the profiles among the students interviewed. Possibly reflective of the typical graduate student in Landscape Architecture, the vast majority of those interviewed do not have a background in landscape architecture or design, and many are in career changes. In addition, a very small percentage of those interviewed either returned to teaching or planned on teaching in the future. Even though a number of LSU graduates in Landscape Architecture have returned to teach, the majority is interested in pursuing a career in private practice or had already begun that pursuit. It is evident, the comments made by those interviewed were mostly not in favor of the thesis requirement. While some may say these students obviously did not study the curriculum requirements of the program before choosing LSU, it can safely be said, an overwhelming majority of these students did not and could not possibly understand the multitude of issues associated with the thesis. Not until a clearer understanding of each individual’s role in the profession is formed, could most graduate students in Landscape Architecture at LSU be able to decide the most appropriate way to fulfill the graduate requirements.

## CONCLUSIONS

Landscape architecture is a dynamic and diverse field. Due to its diversity in nearly every area, education has been forced to adjust accordingly. This might be one reason why half of the surveyed programs have changed their degree requirement in the past five years.

Two very important general conclusions of this thesis research are closely related to each other:

- It is important to understand there is no one solution or combination of solutions that can be applied to every program.
- Each program must determine its own role within the profession and make decisions about procedures or thesis requirements based on that role.

### **How can this research benefit the Landscape Architecture program at LSU?**

More specifically, several suggestions can be made in effort to improve the relationship between professors, administrators, practitioners, and students, while still maintaining the requirements of Standard 5.5, set by the Landscape Architecture Accreditation Board.

1. Based on information from other graduate programs at LSU and other MLA programs in the United States, it would be advisable for the Landscape Architecture program at LSU to initiate the thesis process much earlier in the student's career and with much more faculty involvement. Due to the average MLA student's lack of research and thesis experience, s/he typically needs a much more structured process in completing the thesis requirement. For example, it may be advisable to begin the process in the second semester of the students' graduate career – allowing the first semester to be an introduction to the field. The first research and writing class should be more

structured and well defined – requiring a much clearer product of the student. This will allow the student to become better accustomed to what is expected in a more comfortable fashion. As the student gains confidence in his/her research and writing ability, following research and writing courses will not need to be as structured.

Ideally, if the student is required to choose a topic and formulate a proposal by the end of the third semester, s/he should be better prepared to accumulate more research and complete a better quality thesis by the sixth semester.

2. Adding the final/comprehensive studio alternative and/or the additional course work alternative could be advantageous for both the student and the program at LSU. If the Landscape Architecture program at LSU responded similarly with the programs surveyed, the program at LSU would most likely graduate a higher percentage of students on time. Granted, graduation rates could be improved several ways. However, enhancing the quality of education is equally important if not more important. If the LSU School of Landscape Architecture chose to add the final/comprehensive studio/project alternative or the additional coursework alternative, to maintain or improve the quality of education, several adjustments throughout the program's curriculum would be needed.

- Research and writing is an integral component of graduate education. Among other things, it separates the graduate students from the undergraduate students; enhances the abilities of the student, and contributes to the body of knowledge – moving the profession forward. Therefore, it would be essential to incorporate research and writing as a significant part of the final

project/studio and/or to include considerable writing and research classes throughout the students' career as discussed in the previous suggestion.

- If the final/comprehensive studio/project alternative was instituted, the project would need to be independently determined, but under the guidance of an advisor or committee – carried out similarly to the current thesis procedures. Independent study promotes originality of thought and along with significant research, differentiates the graduate student from the undergraduate student and attempts to add to the body of knowledge.

3. If the Landscape Architecture program at LSU added the additional coursework alternative to the requirements, it would be imperative to completely restructure the current graduate curriculum. A more advanced design studio emphasizing research and independent study would be important. Additional research requirements would need to be added to existing classes – teaching the students to research and write throughout their entire graduate career. This could be beneficial to the student's receptiveness of research and writing. As opposed to the current situation – 2.5 years of building a minimum competency of skills required by a landscape architect and very little writing and research, followed by one semester of extensive research and writing – the alternative situation would allow research and writing to be equally distributed throughout the students graduate career, theoretically leading to a better writer and researcher because the student has three years of experience instead of one large dose in one semester (refer to suggestion 1). If the additional coursework alternative were added, and research and writing were distributed more evenly throughout the first two years of the three-year program, the student would be allowed



to either broaden his or her education through third-year electives or specialize in an area through third-year electives. The student could spend his or her third year improving graphics, construction and/or computer knowledge – areas that most graduate students in Landscape Architecture at LSU need improvement. In addition to the third-year electives a research and writing component could be added to extend the first two years of education. Most likely, if the student is much more comfortable with writing and research by his or her third year, an additional research course should not pose a problem with the students. This class could be treated as a writing and research studio where original thought and contributions to the profession could be synthesized.

4. Based on information provide by Professor Henderson and personal experience, it would be in the faculty's best interest to advise each student as to which path s/he should take. If alternatives to the thesis are instituted, encouraging those students who could produce a quality thesis to pursue that requirement and having more time to better direct those students could significantly contribute to the body of knowledge and advance the profession. This suggestion can be advantageous in several areas.
  - Primarily, this course of action would free up copious amounts of time for the faculty. If a professor were only advising one student on his or her thesis, not only would that professor be allowed to pursue other interests with more freedom, but s/he would be allowed to work much more closely with the students attempting to complete his or her thesis. Theoretically, if a professor is able to spend twice as much time with a student contributing to his or her thesis twice as much, the thesis should be of a higher quality – possibly

causing many more theses to be published and allowing them to contribute more to the body of knowledge.

- Another benefit, equally as important, is, by creating alternatives and advising the student as to which path to take, the program will then become better personalized to the individual LSU student. Instead of forcing every student into the “thesis-mold”, the faculty would be allowed to analyze each student’s abilities, strengths and weaknesses during their first year or semester of graduate school. From that point, the faculty could select an alternative course of action which could not only enhance the student’s educational experience, but could also use the strengths of the student to accomplish research, writing and original thought in a much more beneficial way than the thesis would have.

5. Based on information provided in the survey responses, making the thesis requirement not involved with the LSU Graduate School’s requirements would allow the students more time to prepare their thesis and would greatly reduce the stresses each student undergoes in trying to finish their thesis before the Graduate School’s deadlines. The reduction of stress and benefit of not dealing with the tedious requirements of the Graduate School could theoretically cause the student to concentrate on the more important concerns, such as more detailed research or more accurate analysis, therefore producing a higher quality thesis.

**What is the objective of this thesis?**

One somewhat surprising benefit from completing this study bears direct influence on myself. Before engaging in this research, I assumed the same position as a number of

graduate students in Landscape Architecture. I felt that the most appropriate way to finish my graduate career would be through, either a culmination of my previous studies in a practically applied project, or through the broadening of my education through the opportunity to participate in courses outside of the School of Landscape Architecture. As with most of my peers, I had not yet formed any opinions about my educational or professional objectives until I was exposed to the various issues surrounding the educational requirements.

This thesis has made me come to realize that adding to the body of knowledge, advancing the profession, and learning to be able to produce an independently directed project is also crucial to the field and beneficial to myself. However, changes may need to be made to the graduate program's requirements to accommodate those seeking a Masters of Landscape Architecture degree.

The intent of this thesis includes two general objectives. The primary objective was to accumulate a general knowledge of the many attitudes and opinions held by faculty, administrators, practitioners, and students as to the role a thesis plays in the master's of landscape architecture program. When trying to determine the most appropriate course of action that involves several parties, it is crucial to be able to understand the several points of view before making any decisions. By compiling literature information and field data, this thesis begins to accumulate a small sampling of the various opinions in the field.

The secondary objective was to gather and analyze several advantages and disadvantages of the thesis and its most popular alternatives. By analyzing the survey data and interview responses, combined with the literature information, several strategic ideas emerged. It was hoped that this information could possibly lead to more extensive field research to support a more conclusive study of the ideal Masters of Landscape Architecture degree

requirements - in turn, leading to a much more mutually beneficial relationship between professors, administrator, practitioners, and students.

**What are the limitations of this study?**

Several limitations to this study prevent this thesis from being entirely conclusive as to the affects the alternatives have on the programs, students, and profession. The main limitation is the disappointing response rate from the graduate programs that were mailed a survey and contacted via email and/or telephone for follow-up. Another limitation in this study is one that has haunted all other previous studies of graduate education – “diversity makes is impossible to discuss a typical master’s program.” For example, comparing a graduate program in Geography or Philosophy to one in Landscape Architecture might seem completely inappropriate. That is why it is important to carefully select pertinent information and use it in relation to the specific Landscape Architecture department. One more noticeable limitation, as in most theses, is time. Due to the breadth of this subject, a complete analysis of the plethora of variables could not be feasible for a student to complete in the time allotted. Quite simply, an overview, in hopes to strike curiosity and provoke more research, will benefit others seeking to shed additional light on this important topic.

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## APPENDIX A: SURVEY

Standard 5.5 of the Master of Landscape Architecture graduation requirements for Louisiana State University: “The School of Landscape Architecture requires each of its master’s degree candidates to write a thesis. The students are largely self-directed in this endeavor. Each is free to pursue the topic of his/her choice, develop a suitable methodology, and select the members of the thesis committee. Each thesis committee is composed of a chairperson from the School of Landscape Architecture and two or more faculty members who may come from outside the department. [Students are required to follow the format of the Graduate School.] In addition, an 8000 level seminar course is offered to aid the students in focusing their research and ideas. “It is my intent to explore the possibility of offering alternative options to the thesis process.

1. What are your program’s current accreditation requirements to meet standard 5.5? (please circle one or more)
  - a. Thesis only
  - b. Final / comprehensive studio project option
  - c. Additional course work option
  - d. Others (please briefly describe)
  
2. If the current requirements are a result of problems with old requirements, what were the previous requirements for meeting standard 5.5?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. If changes were made to the previous requirements, why were these changes made?

4. How many years have the current requirements for each option been in effect?

Thesis	_____
Final studio project	_____
Additional course work	_____
Others (name)	_____

5. If options are available, what percentage of graduate students choose:

Thesis	_____ %
Final studio project	_____ %
Additional course work	_____ %
Others (name)	_____ %

=====  
100%

6. What percentage of students graduate on time under each standard 5.5 requirement option?

	2-year track	3-year track
Thesis	_____	_____
Final studio project	_____	_____
Additional course work	_____	_____
Others (name)	_____	_____

7. What has been the average length of time for each student to graduate under each option?

	2-year track	3-year track
Thesis	_____	_____
Final studio project	_____	_____
Additional course work	_____	_____
Others (name)	_____	_____

8. For programs that have a thesis only requirement, can you speculate what percentage or number of applicants per year chooses a MLA program that offers a thesis alternative?
  
- 8b. In your opinion, do you believe students tend to select MLA programs that do not require a thesis in favor of programs that offer a thesis option?
  
9. Based on your experience please describe how your current standard 5.5 requirements differentiate the graduate students from the undergraduate students in the following areas: (briefly write under each heading or on back)

*Provide the student an introduction to research and/or scholarly methods*

*Allow them to independently pursue special interest areas with faculty guidance*

*Prepare them for post-graduate work and improving the profession*

*Contribute to the profession by adding to the body of knowledge*

*In any other way*



10. In your own opinion, please briefly write the Pros and Cons of each option.

PROS

CONS

---

Thesis

Final studio project

Additional course work

Other (name)

## **APPENDIX B: UNIVERSITIES SURVEYED**

**Below is the list of the 29 other MLA programs in the United States. Each was sent one survey.**

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

AUBURN UNIVERSITY

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

CALIFORNIA STATE POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT BERKELEY

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AT DENVER

CORNELL UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

MORGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

TEXAS A & M UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS - ARLINGTON

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE & STATE UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

**Below is the list of the schools that returned the survey.**

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

MORGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

TEXAS A & M UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS - ARLINGTON

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE & STATE UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

UNKNOWN RESPONDENT

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN

## VITA

Evan Warfield Brandon was born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee. After receiving his Bachelor of Business Administration degree from Mississippi State University, he will receive the degree of Master of Landscape Architecture from Louisiana State University.

In the future, he plans to become a licensed landscape architect.