

Northwest University's School of Global Studies
MA in International Community Development, and
MA in Community Economic Development

Fieldwork and Thesis Guide



The College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Fieldwork

The ICD/CED thesis is based on research that you carry out in an actual community. The “project” part of the thesis is something you design in response to actual needs in that community. The process by which you come to understand the community to think about ways to meet their needs is your fieldwork.

The fieldwork site is the context where you will carry out a minimum of 80 hours of individual field research for your thesis, primarily through qualitative research methods. The site is the physical location you will be in (i.e., Kampala, Uganda, or Federal Way, Washington). However, you will almost always be operating in the context of a specific organization as well (i.e., Living Hope Orphanage of Kampala or The Enterprise Initiative in Federal Way), so that organization constitutes a key element of the site as well. The general guidelines for an appropriate site are these:

- It must provide an opportunity to learn in-depth about the specific type of service/social change activity that your thesis is likely to address.
- It must grant you access to 10-15 respondents in your research focus, each of whom you will interview at least once. These may be employees of the organization, clients (with the organization’s permission), broader community members, or experts in your field of interest.

If you are already involved in the context of service pertinent to the ICD/CED degree and to your future interests, you may opt to undertake a thesis project that addresses a need in that context.

Above all, you’ll want to consider a site that fits with your general research and vocational interests. In other words, be sure to choose a site that will help you to explore something you really care about, and which will help you to become better equipped to do the sort of work you are called to do. It does not need to be a perfect match—simply be close enough to keep you engaged and curious. Your research direction should provide opportunities for you to engage with people who know what you need to know (the “respondents” referred to above). Ideally these will be either people who actually do the sort of work you want to do in the future, and/or those who are integral members of the social context/community you are researching. In the spirit of contextualization and copowerment, it will be important to stay open to anyone with “local knowledge” of the context—anyone who can help you learn and think creatively about the particular research questions you are grappling with.

When possible, choose a fieldwork site at which you can make even a small contribution as you carry out your research—either through the actual research you are doing for your project, or general volunteer work. You may consider adapting your research process, for example, in such a way that your data might actually aid the organization in its work. (Ask the organization in advance about this.) Or, you might simply volunteer your time/work in a way not directly tied to your observations and site research; the volunteer work simply gives you a role to play while

you are making your observations. While you should seek ways to be useful in the midst of the fieldwork process, keep in mind that, eventually, the project you will complete in the next semester will also be aimed at helping the organization or the community it serves—albeit with a more systemic, long-term approach.

While it might be ideal to find that perfect site that will integrate all your interests, there are other factors to consider, such as:

- **Practicality:** What can you reasonably do, given your life circumstances (i.e., full-time school, job, family, etc.)?
- **Affordability:** While international travel might be your ideal, it may simply be too costly given your financial situation as a graduate student.

The primary praxis in fieldwork is learning through participant observation: that is, direct experience, observation, and interviews. So as long as you find a fieldwork context that is interesting AND proves to be something you can do given the realities of your life, you've got a perfectly suitable fieldwork site.

You will need to be proactive about finding this site. Some ideas regarding where and how to look:

- Network, network, network. Ask everyone you know. And ask them to be on the lookout for possible contacts, too.
- Talk to fellow students; they may well be able to find opportunities in the organizations where they are doing their own projects.
- Reach out to the ICD/CED alumni network.
- Look close to home: Consider your local church, school, community center, or local government office.
- And of course, work closely with the instructors of both your Research and Fieldwork courses.

The ICD/CED program does have connections to sites that could provide opportunities. Most students, however, find their own site to match their unique interests. In any event, you are responsible for making the contact with the organizations that interest you and establishing the terms of your research and service.

Timeframe: The ICD/CED program schedule is set up on the assumption that most students will complete their 80 hours of fieldwork experience in the roughly three-month time frame of the Fieldwork course. You can accumulate the 80 hours of fieldwork over the course of up to four months. With the approval of the Fieldwork instructor, you could begin this process as early as the start of your third semester, and extend your fieldwork by a few weeks into the fourth

semester. (It is in the fourth semester that you will begin processing your research data and creating your thesis.)

As you consider the approach you will take to fulfilling field research hours, remember that you may count only those hours when you are actively engaged in some aspect of the research process. This includes observing or participating in the field context, arranging research opportunities, conducting interviews, doing text or internet research on your research topic, or processing/recording data. The time spent in plane travel or sleeping, for examples, cannot be counted. Note too that you cannot count any fieldwork hours prior to the start of the Fieldwork course.

The Fieldwork Proposal: The Fieldwork Proposal is a description of your proposed site and the activities you will carry out there. It includes all the details of the site including the name of a primary site contact(s) (see below), as well as substantial information about the history, philosophy, and affiliations of your chosen organization. This will be due at the start of the Fieldwork course in the third semester, but you will have opportunities to work on the proposal as part of the Research course in the second semester.

Most importantly, the Fieldwork Proposal includes a description of the particular research questions you will be exploring through field research. Your research must be focused on some general areas of challenge faced by people in your chosen context, or set of questions to be answered, such as:

- How can the Linnert Foundation create a match between the values of corporate donors, to specific development need in the Amazon Basin? What innovative strategies might it use to link developed world resources with developing world needs? What unique approaches can the foundation consider to engage human resources as well as financial resources? What are the opportunities for copowerment and collaboration between the foundation, and indigenous groups in the rain forest?
- Does Parker Elementary effectively address the needs of children at risk? Why have indicators of student success been showing a consistent decrease in the past decade? In a context with a high incidence of poverty, what are the strategies that have been tried to encourage student success? Why has there been little success in engaging the broader community in efforts to alleviate the potential drawbacks of the socio-economic risk factors of that community? What does success look like, and who defines that? Who are the stakeholders in the problem, and what if any voice do, they have to speak into the solution?
- What would be a contextualized model for sustainable income generation that could operate alongside Calcutta Mercy Ministry's new rural health clinics? What new experiments and innovations in development-based entrepreneurship could be taken into consideration for future clinics? What local resources are present that could be considered as opportunities for future economic development?

These questions should eventually lead into your thesis, so you need to have that eventuality in mind as you formulate your research questions. At the same time, you will need to choose a field site that will likely yield the sort of data you need to eventually design a project of some sort that is contextually relevant, and responsive to actual needs. Keep in mind that your research questions should be “open” enough that there is room for surprise; don’t begin with questions that you more or less know the answer to. It is also important to note that, almost always, you will add to and adapt your questions in the process of asking them. Such is the nature of qualitative research: Theory is emergent.

Again, everyone will be creating some project component of their Thesis. Your qualitative field data should contribute to that project in some way, so you will need to think about what your possible project options are, even as you are doing your field research.

Please note well: The Fieldwork Proposal must be submitted and approved by BOTH your site contact AND your program advisor before you can proceed with the implementation of the plan. Please obtain the site supervisor approval first before giving the form to your advisor. A brief letter or copy of an email will suffice; simply send a copy to the Fieldwork course instructor with your proposal.

Site Contact Role: For the fieldwork experience you must identify one person who will serve as your site supervisor. This person serves as the primary (or one of the primary) contacts for your engagement with the fieldwork activities. Usually this will be a person who serves in the main organization you are associating with during fieldwork, or may be a member of the broader community you are researching. This is a person who will serve as a general information resource, and is usually a gatekeeper of sorts into the organization or community of your fieldwork site. In addition to being the “point person” for your research experience, they will also need to sign your Fieldwork Proposal, and approve your final report of the research hours and interviews that you turn in at the end of the fieldwork process.

The site contact can be as involved as you want them to be—or more to the point, as involved as they want to be! Ideally, a site contact:

- Helps the student to define the components of the field experience, including any service work.
- Provides occasional advice/guidance as needed during the fieldwork period.
- Serves as the main contact for the fieldwork site (if an organization is involved), or help the student coordinate various fieldwork experiences (if multithesis sites are involved).
- Provides authorizing signatures for the student’s project proposal, and sign the report of fieldwork hours.
- Helps the student to identify project design opportunities

So you can see that the site contact role can be minimal. In great part, how you shape the experience and what you draw from it is up to you and not those who oversee you. However, do be aware that there is great value in learning from the experience of those in the field. So if you have opportunity to solicit more input from your site contact in the form of regular advice, vocational counsel, or even guidance on your eventual THESIS work, it could be a good component of your learning.

In any case, you will want to provide your site contact with clear information about their role. At the same time, you must solicit their expectations of you—and this is something you would be wise to put in writing. To this end, there is a form provided in the Fieldwork and Thesis Guide. This form should be filled out by the student and the site contact; the student then makes sure that copies are sent both to the site contact and to the Fieldwork course instructor.

The Record of Hours, Record of Interviews, and the Fieldwork Report: You will be asked to submit a detailed log of your fieldwork hours throughout the fieldwork semester. In addition (and at the same times), you will also be submitting a record of the interviews you undertake.

When your fieldwork is done, you will be asked to submit a report that summarizes the fieldwork experience, including a recap of the data gathered and an initial estimation of research conclusions. You will be asked as well for some subjective “processing” of the experience on a personal level. To this end you should plan to take extensive field notes as part of your research data-gathering process, and also to keep a regular personal/reflexivity journal throughout the fieldwork timeframe.

Your general field notes may take any form that is useful to you. Your thesis advisor may ask to see/hear them at the end of the field experience, so make sure they are in a form that allows such access. Field data includes written/print notes, transcripts, audio recordings, video, photographs, drawings, and collected artifacts among other things. So be creative in how you gather data. The personal/reflexivity journal too is not something you will turn in for evaluation. However, in the final semester of the program (and as part of the thesis project process) you will absolutely need to be able to refer to a record of such things as your subjective reactions and personal growth in the fieldwork experience.

Note that one component that is required in your field notes will be transcripts from your 10-15 required interviews. You will need these transcriptions because they will become valuable sources to integrate into your thesis project. Transcriptions of your interviews need to be completed only for those sections of the interview that yield potential data for the thesis project process.

During your fieldwork you will also be asked to share your experience with your instructor and your peers through regular forum posts. Through this venue you will be encouraged to find points of connection and resonance between their experiences and your own, as well as offer insights into one another’s learning processes.

Thesis Project/Paper

The thesis course is intended to give you an experience of focused, extensive research and problem-solving. It is also meant to help you become an expert (or “master” if you will), in a particularly subject germane to ICD/CED program foci. The thesis should reflect that level of mastery.

Your thesis can take the form of a more practical project (or project proposal), or a more traditional thesis research paper.

Thesis Project/Proposal: This option is an opportunity to pilot, develop, or propose a specific intervention in a particular context. This might take the form a business plan or more detailed project proposal, or it could be starting an organization, launching an initiative, or piloting an activity. The standard amount of work for a written project/proposal is 8,000-12,000 words. Alternative activities such as launching an initiative or piloting a project would offset the required volume of words. In that case, precisely how much work is sufficient for this course, and how that work will be properly documented for the Thesis course, will be agreed upon with the instructor.

Thesis Paper: This option is a more traditional research paper. This paper must include a research question, a literature review, and at least 30 sources (peer-reviewed articles, books, etc.) in addition to ICD/CED course resources.

Both options should consider the following elements:

1. Title page
2. Table of Contents
3. Introduction
4. Thesis paragraph, including:
 - a. Brief summary of problem
 - b. Thesis statement
 - c. The “roadmap”
5. Overview of the field research
 - a. Fieldwork context
 - b. The type of qualitative research you conducted
 - c. The research questions
 - d. The relationship between the data gathered, and the thesis
 - e. Some reflexive commentary about your connection to the topic

The thesis should also include some of the following elements, with some discernment for how you order/incorporate them:

- Detailed description of the context about which you are writing
- Extended explanation of the challenge/problem you are proposing to address

- Full development of your proposed solution/approach (this is the heart of your thesis), including:
 - A general rationale for your approach
 - A detailed section for each component of your strategy/design
 - An explanation of how/when/whether your solution will be applied
 - An explanation of how the project demonstrates the ideas above
- Conclusion
- Appendices
- List of Works Cited (always after the appendices) that includes the sources listed for the project component as well as the thesis component. Sources:
 - Incorporate a minimum of 20 program sources. This could include such sources as course textbooks, articles, forum discussions, videos, presentations, etc.
 - Include at least 20 additional (mostly peer reviewed) sources that were not required for any ICD/CED course.
 - Include multiple references to at least 5 of your interviews and list these sources in your Works Cited pages

External Reader

In all cases, you must secure an “external reader” for your thesis—one who knows the chosen thesis topic well. Ideally this person will serve as a mentor at best, or a consultant at least, to help guide your research and writing. They will read the final draft of the thesis and offer written feedback as part of the evaluative process. This role is NOT to be confused with that of an editor or proofreader. You will need those sorts of writing helpers to be sure, but the role of the external reader is to act as a sounding board for ideas and THESIS content, a general consultant in the research process, and a reader of the final draft of the THESIS. This person may also serve as your site supervisor, but the roles are not necessarily the same.