MS AFLS Special Project or Thesis Requirements

The MS AFLS degree program requires that students complete a 3 hr special project. The purpose is to foster student problem solving and understanding of science in an area of defined emphasis. The MS AFLS program does not offer thesis credits but accepts thesis credits from other academic departments as fulfillment of the special problem requirement. Students pursuing a thesis problem must meet the expectations and requirements of the academic department administering the thesis credit.

Requirements for special problem activities are determined by the student in consultation with the major advisor and advisory committee. There are no defined limits on project content or guidelines for acceptable work other than it must meet the approval of the student’s advisory committee. Students should develop a proposal for the project and have it approved by the major professor and advisory committee in advance of the work, or by the second semester of enrollment. Students are limited to a maximum credit of 6 hr of special problems with no more than 3 hr for a specific problem. Additional special problem credits should address different definable problems.

The amount of time devoted to the special problem is also left to the discretion of the advisory committee, but ideally it would be reasonably associated with standard credit hours for university graduate credit. Certainly, different students work at different paces and progress toward a graduate project should not be based on simple time allocation. For comparative purposes, a 3 hr lecture course would include ~45 hours of contact time with the professor, and an additional one to two hours of independent study outside the classroom, perhaps more. Thus a 3 hr lecture course would involve as much as 135 hours of student work. A 3 hr lecture-laboratory course would involve as much as 150 hours of student work. This is not to suggest that special problems should be limited to a specific requirement of time, indeed a graduate education should require a high level of information synthesis and creativity regardless of the time required.

Understanding science, specifically the scientific method, and the breadth of agricultural, food and life sciences are overarching goals of the MS AFLS degree program. This does not mean that students and advisory committees are limited to empirical research in the special project. There are many forms of academic scholarship that demonstrate creativity and synthesis beyond simple experimentation. Knowledge of the scientific literature, appreciation for the scientific method and demonstrated ability to synthesize information and articulate its relevance to the agricultural, food and life sciences are guiding principles for the development of appropriate student special problem projects.