Course Description

The MA in Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics requires a Capstone Course in which students produce a research paper of an estimated 20 to 25 pages with references. This is a significant endeavor that will require considerable effort from the very start of the semester. Though the paper does not need to be published, it should be of publishable quality, and we hope that some students will eventually pursue publication. Graduate Studies requires this of all students, and an impressive final product can always be presented as a writing sample in future job and graduate or professional school applications. Here the focus must be on current scholarship, rather than on personal experience.

Possible Topics

Paper topics can be selected in any area of our program, and can draw on a variety of disciplines and approaches. The discussion below is not intended to be exhaustive or even to scratch the surface of possibility, though it does lay out the broad topical domains.

(1) Students select a topic drawing on the research methods of the humanities (e.g., philosophical & ethical analysis, clinical ethics, literature, history, public policy, law, narrative medicine, religious studies, etc.). For example, a student focusing on literature must do in depth analysis and research on the primary writings of a figure such as William Carlos Williams, Anton Chekov, John Stone, etc., and draw on existing scholarship. It would be possible to delve deeply into the narrative medicine movement, drawing on the work of key physician contributors such as Rita Charon, Kathryn Montgomery Hunter, Howard Brody, and John L. “Jack” Coulehan. A student might wish to explore a literary tradition that addresses a major bioethical concern, such as anti-aging. As another example, a student might wish to work in the history of medicine, so long as it focuses on some aspect of medical ethics or healthcare policy. Or a student might want to investigate “compassionate” care or other features of a healing clinical relationship, including, for example, professional empathy and altruism and theories of how clinicians can best respond to the dynamic of hope in patients and their families. Images of the “good” clinician with regard to virtues and character are relevant. Papers might also focus on analysis of a case in bioethics, drawing on moral traditions and healthcare law. Questions of healthcare justice and rationing, fertility and reproduction, genethics, global health, pediatric care (including NICU decisions), organ procurement and transplant, definitions of death and their implications, disability ethics, death and dying, psychiatry and mental illness, aging and dementia, surgery, cancer care, and personhood are all valid. The key to success is to select a topic of deep interest.

(2) Students can also select a relevant topic focusing on literature and methods of the social and behavioral sciences. Topics might connect research in the social and behavioral sciences to implications for encouraging organ donation, hospice use, genetic counseling, or other conundrums that require research to explore and develop new solutions. Topics can be broad and applied, for instance conceiving of empathy as a response to features of the patient-provider relationship, or they can be basic, as in the case of considering how empathy, for
instance, activates or is activated by neurophysiology. In all cases, topics chosen should reflect a research question in which the goal is to consider the interaction of two or more concepts (e.g., how does the physician’s experience of empathy relate to the patient’s physical health?). With this sort of project, students will craft a research “proposal paper,” be expected to work with their mentor to identify a research topic, conduct a literature review on the topic, formulate a research question, generate hypotheses, and develop methods for testing study hypotheses. Such a paper does not involve the generation of new data, but it does require mastery of the existing science and a recognition of what gaps in knowledge need to be filled.

(3) A formal literature review is a unique genre. You work with one of the reference librarians and learn to use the relevant database(s). There are certain formal methodological aspects to this genre. It is important to get started right away with formal review.

But whatever you decide with regard to approach, you do need to run an informal literature review though some venue like www.scholar.google.com which is especially good because it includes everything under the sun. This does not mean that you need to write a literature review, but it can help you have a sense of what is out there to draw on.

The best research is often driven by the selection of a topic about which the student is truly eager to learn. Select a topic within the first three weeks of the course, and get engaged with it right away by doing literature searches. Discerning what available materials are of higher quality will take some time.

Faculty Mentors

Selecting a Faculty Mentor

Within the first three weeks of the course, each student should select a Center faculty member as a mentor for this research paper. This involves a process of elective affinity, and for this reason we are inviting faculty members into this course to talk with students about some of their general interest areas. The student should set up an initial meeting with the faculty member to establish rapport and consent to mentor, and to explore faculty suggestions for core research references. It may be that a faculty member will suggest some other professor, although we hope to share responsibilities for mentoring across the full-time faculty (Professors Roess, McCrary, & Post). Depending on the topic, part-time faculty can also be solicited, such as Professors, Michael Vetrano, Sarah Putney, Catherine Messina, Richard Bronson, Brooke Ellison, and Jack Coulehan, but they may or may not be available for more than one student. Please have a faculty mentor in place by February 15th and report this to Dr. Roess for record keeping.

Writing Your Research Paper

For those who opt for 1:

1. Introduction
A successful thesis-driven piece of scholarship will always begin with a very clear big question replete with careful definition of terms. Why are you asking this question? Then state your answer to the question in a clear thesis statement. This is best placed in the first paragraph of the paper. You will need to work on this and revise as needed, but do not ever lose sight of your thesis statement. You do not want to veer off course, because the rest of the paper is an argument supporting your thesis. Every sentence in your paper ought to be connected to
your thesis in some way. It might help introduce your audience to the nuances of the topic you are discussing so that they will understand how your thesis differs from claims made by others.

A good paper usually includes a second paragraph that discusses in brief why the question and thesis are important. Is the thesis important for solving a major problem? Is it innovative? Who might be impacted by your paper? What is your audience?

A third paragraph usually describes how you are planning to structure the paper, and some mention of key sources. It is a good idea to ask about every topic or point in your paper, “how will adding this information help my reader understand my thesis?” If you cannot answer this question, then the information is probably better left out.

The outline and headings (i.e., the organization of the paper) should be designed to move your thesis forward in a constructive way. Outline your thoughts before you begin to write.

2. Main Body

Be certain to use headings well. Headings are a roadmap for the reader. They are like signposts on the highway. They should not be complex or long, so choose a few effective words. Subheadings can sometimes also be quite helpful. Headings should be in bold, and subheadings should be in italics.

Develop your ideas and use transitions to link the major strands of your exposition. Remember, though your interlocutors may be able to follow certain moves you make because they are familiar with the literature the public will not. Make sure that an intelligent person who is not an expert in your topic could easily follow your argument. If you jump around without an indication of why, it will be extremely difficult for your reader to follow you.

When agreeing or disagreeing with an author don’t merely state that you agree or disagree but make a case for why you do. Clearly identify the views of the author whom you will be discussing. Highlight important distinctions and concepts of which the author makes use. It is essential to use citations when doing this. This will indicate to your interlocutors precisely the point at which you disagree, while introducing the public to an important aspect of the conversation you are engaging in and of which they may not be aware.

If you plan to disagree with an author’s position then raise at least one objection that you would advance against the view as you understand it. While the public may be interested in simply learning alternative views on the matter, your interlocutors will want to know why your position differs from those already accepted. If you plan to agree with the author’s position, then be sure to explain why it is important that you agree. Others may have raised objections to the position with which you agree. Explain these objections and then explain how it is that the position you endorse overcomes them. Once again, proper citation is essential to this aspect of your paper.

When in doubt, break up long sentences and split up long paragraphs. Semi-colons are hard to use well, so avoid them unless you are sure of your grammar, and avoid page-long paragraphs that beg to be broken up into two or three.

Be care to select quoted phrases, sentences, or segments of several lines with scholarly precision. Only quote the material that makes your point best, and always reference it. There is no need to quote excessively, and you should help the reader understand what you want them to get from a block quote, rather than leave it dangling at the end of a paragraph. We will talk about quotes and style in class. Block quotes are okay if used wisely, but they should rarely, if ever, exceed five to ten lines.
So often, a student really gets clear on their thesis in the final and concluding paragraph of the paper. Therefore, it can be very useful to try placing that final paragraph up at the front of the paper as you go through drafts, and incorporate it into the thesis section. Then write a second conclusion in a later draft.

Conclusions
Conclude with a summary of your paper. Also, be sure to point to another Big Question (or two) that your paper has not answered, but that seems now to be the next one you would want to see answer in your topic area (and why).

Style
(1) Your citations should be in the standardized format (e.g. MLA, Chicago, APA) that your faculty mentor suggests. He or she will best know what standards suit the type of paper you are writing.

(2) When in doubt, break up long sentences and split up long paragraphs. Semi-colons are hard to use well, so avoid them unless you are sure of your grammar. Avoid page-long paragraphs that beg to be broken up into two or three.

(3) Be certain to use headings well. Headings are a roadmap for the reader. They are like signposts on the highway. They should not be complex or long, so choose a few effective words. Subheadings can sometimes also be quite helpful. **Headings** should be in bold, and **subheadings** should be in italics.

(4) Be care to select quoted phrases, sentences, or segments of several lines with scholarly precision. Only quote the material that makes your point best, and always reference it. There is no need to quote excessively, and you should help the reader understand what you want them to get from a block quote, rather than leave it dangling at the end of a paragraph. We will talk about quotes and style in class. Block quotes are okay if used wisely, but they should rarely, if ever, exceed five to ten lines.

(5) So often, a student really gets clear on their thesis in the final and concluding paragraph of the paper. Therefore, it can be very useful to try placing that final paragraph up at the front of the paper as you go through drafts, and incorporate it into the thesis section. Then write a second conclusion in a later draft.

For those who opt for 2:
Your written proposal must include an abstract that summarizes the research question, study methods, expected results and discussion. In this case, the body of the paper the student ultimately writes will consist of (1) an INTRODUCTION that reviews the literature and concludes with a description of the research question and study hypotheses; (2) METHODS section that describes the design of the study, variables and any measures, and protocol/procedure for evaluating the study hypotheses; (3) EXPECTED RESULTS section that explains which statistical tests will be used to determine whether the data conform to the hypotheses, and expectations for what the pattern of data will show if it conforms to the study hypotheses; (4) DISCUSSION section that will describe how the expected pattern of results support the study hypotheses, the implications and interpretation of study results that support hypotheses, the implications of finding evidence that contradicts study hypotheses, directions for future research, limitations of the design, and conclusions. The final section of the paper will include a reference section and any tables and figures. Style guidelines can be specific to the discipline from which the study question originates (e.g., American Psychological Association—APA style for Psychology topics), or can follow the preferred style of the mentor.
The criteria for successful papers in the second option will include (1) Importance of Topic to be Investigated; (2) Innovation or the creativity/novelty of the research idea; (3) Integration of students’ own ideas with the existing literature on the topic; (4) Writing Clarity; (5) Synthesis of important themes from course work, clinical experience, and/or independent research or study that demonstrates proficiency with the conceptual goals of the Master’s Program; (6) Adherence to chosen style guidelines, such as APA style; (7) Grammar and Spelling. These seven steps will be explained in more detail with your mentor.

For those who opt for 3:

Discuss with Dr. Post/Roess and follow published examples.

Course Schedule—-we will meet together as a full class on only 6 occasions

Week 1 (January 25)
This is an introduction to the course including the process by which students will be working with faculty on a topic of their own choosing, schedule for deliverables, emphasis on peer review and student responsibilities to one another, a conceptual model of an excellent research paper, and the significance of good research in service to humanity. We will also discuss writing of your paper on day 1.

Week 2 (February 1)
Faculty come into class to discuss with students in what kinds of topics students can expect to investigate if they intend to work with them. Students should have 15-20 minutes to ask each faculty member questions.

Week 3 (February 8)
Faculty continue come into class to discuss with students in 15-20 minute slots what kinds of topics students can expect to investigate if they intend to work with them.

[Week 4 (February 15): You must report the name of your faculty mentor to Michael Roess for record keeping.]

Between February 15 and March 23 —— you are to be meeting with your faculty mentors, which includes (1) gathering sources for your project with them (2) giving them an outline that they will approve (3) submitting a penultimate draft and (4) arranging a date by which you will hand in your final draft to them. You should not hand in a final draft until the entire class has had a chance to respond to your draft during weeks 9-11.

Weeks 8-11 (March 21, March 28, April 4, April 11 as needed)

During weeks 8-11, all students will formally present from a penultimate draft made available to their peers. This should be a fully developed draft, not an outline. It should be emailed to the student’s mentor and to Dr. Post at least two days before your scheduled presentation. Students will present for 20 minimum minutes without interruption, followed by 20 minutes of discussion with peers and mentor. PowerPoint is required. The student is expected to make improvements on this penultimate draft before submitting a final draft to the mentor (cc Dr. Post).

Week 8 (March 21)
Presentations Round 1
Week 9 (March 28)
Presentations Round 2

Week 10 (April 4)
Presentations Round 3

Week 11 (April 11)
Presentations Round 4 as needed

Students can submit a final draft of their 20-25 page paper to their faculty mentor at any point after their class presentation and before May 9th.

Grading:
Papers will be graded by the faculty mentor only. The overall course facilitator (SGPost) will not interfere with this process. The course facilitator, however, will be responsible for the assessment of class participation (P/F). Class participation, diligence, and engagement with peer’s drafts are important.