**[The Evolution of a Thesis Topic](https://web.archive.org/web/20160627175937/http:/blogs.evergreen.edu/messages/2014/01/06/the-evolution-of-a-thesis-topic/" \o "The Evolution of a Thesis Topic)**

[JANUARY 6, 2014](https://web.archive.org/web/20160627175937/http:/blogs.evergreen.edu/messages/2014/01/06/the-evolution-of-a-thesis-topic/) / [JANA FISCHBACK](https://web.archive.org/web/20160627175937/http:/blogs.evergreen.edu/messages/author/fischbaj/)

*By Jana Fischback, 2nd Year Student and MES Communications Assistant.*

Ah, the master’s thesis. When I first began the Graduate Program on the Environment, I met fellow students in my cohort who already knew exactly what they wanted to research for their thesis. Some had worked in a certain field for a while and developed a research question that way. Others were passionate about a specific subject and knew their thesis would focus on one aspect of that. They talked of collecting data “in the field” and doing lab work. Of harmful algal blooms and mycorrhizal fungi. Not my thing. But that’s the beauty of the MES degree. All of the students have such varying interests, you end up with a true interdisciplinary outlook, learning a little bit of everything environmentally-related and meeting some very interesting people.

I was never really interested in doing research at all, honestly. I came from a background in social sciences, never paying much attention to the “science” part. I had only done one similar project during my senior year at WSU for my public relations capstone course. But that was with four other highly motivated students, with a lot of help from our advisor. So choosing a thesis topic where I would have to gather new raw data and analyze it myself seemed daunting. Plus, I was interested in so many things, how on Earth would I choose? Maybe something related to transportation – [a miles traveled tax for electric vehicles](https://web.archive.org/web/20160627175937/http:/www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/08/01/oregon-gas-mileage-tax/2608067/)? The [effect of a vegetarian diet on a person’s carbon footprint](https://web.archive.org/web/20160627175937/http:/shrinkthatfootprint.com/food-carbon-footprint-diet)? Whatever it was, I wanted to make sure that a) it was doable; nothing too ambitious that wasn’t realistic for my short time period and b) it would result in something useful for someone, hopefully an organization with some research needs that I could partner with.

We all started thinking about what our topics could be during the spring quarter of our first year, in the core class Research Design & Quantitative Methods. I was interning with [Climate Solutions](https://web.archive.org/web/20160627175937/http:/climatesolutions.org/) at the time, and really hoped an opportunity to work with them would present itself. While I loved working there, and learned a lot about [biocarbon](https://web.archive.org/web/20160627175937/http:/climatesolutions.org/programs/NBI), it wasn’t what I wanted to study.

After that I started an internship at the City of Tacoma’s [Office of Environmental Policy and Sustainability](https://web.archive.org/web/20160627175937/http:/www.cityoftacoma.org/cms/one.aspx?portalId=169&pageId=18996), and again, hoped through my projects there I would come up with a long list of interesting thesis topics. It would be hitting two birds with one stone – doing my thesis work at my internship! A girl can dream. However, an opportunity did arise when my boss assigned me to be a part of a steering committee for a local non-profit organization that was launching in Tacoma.  Called [SustainableWorks](https://web.archive.org/web/20160627175937/http:/sustainableworks.com/), they offer subsidized home energy audits and retrofit work throughout Washington State.

In the meantime, I had emailed Jean MacGregor, who teaches the Environmental Education elective for MES, to see if she had any insight on what I could research. I told her I was primarily interested in climate change, especially people’s attitudes and behaviors. She recommended I look into something called “social marketing,” specifically Doug McKenzie-Mohr’s idea of [Community-Based Social Marketing](https://web.archive.org/web/20160627175937/http:/www.cbsm.com/public/world.lasso). I read his book Fostering Sustainable Behavior over the summer and was hooked immediately. This was it! I would plan a social marketing campaign, implement it, and evaluate my findings. Whoa…. But that would take much more than six months. And, what would this campaign be about, anyway?

Back to SustainableWorks. I met with their staff person who was leading Tacoma’s launch, and found out that she was earning her master’s degree, as well, at Antioch University in Seattle. I mentioned my thesis dilemma and the idea of social marketing, and lo-and-behold, she had heard of it and had actually taken a course all about it! She was excited at the idea of me helping SustainableWorks with a campaign, and has been incredibly supportive since.

So there you have it: the evolution of a thesis topic. My tentative title is “Motivations for and barriers to home energy efficiency investments for homeowners in Washington State.” Hopefully my findings will help SustainableWorks plan a social marketing campaign in Tacoma and beyond. And, I’m actually excited about it. Now I see that it’s quite likely that I’ll need the skills from working on this thesis for my future career. Even if I don’t, the fact that I conquered this task will be impressive to employers. It will also be nice to be an “expert” in the topic.

To keep me going on this daunting project, I’m going to use a recent conversation with a friend as motivation. She works in the human resources department of a LED manufacturer on the East coast, and she said they essentially toss out all of the candidates who have non-thesis master’s degrees. Sure, she’s mostly looking at engineers, but it shows that many employers really do value the hard work that goes into a thesis project. In a little more than 6 months, I’ll have a solid 80-page report to be proud of.  Time to get working on that introduction!

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