

MFA in Design

Concentration: Design Studies

Program Handbook

2020 - 2021

MFA in Design
Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar
P.O. Box 8095 Doha, Qatar



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Administration

Amir Berbić
Dean, VCUarts Qatar
+974 4402 0675
berbica@vcu.edu

Cherif Amor
Interim Associate Dean for Academic Affairs
+974 4402 0588
mcamor@vcu.edu

Andrew Mascari
Associate Dean for Administration
Director of Financial Planning and Operations
+974 4402 0705
ajmascari@vcu.edu

MFA Design Faculty

Rab McClure
Director
Associate Professor
+974 4402 0740
rmcclure@vcu.edu

Rebecca David
Administrative Business Coordinator
+974 4402 0735
erebecca@vcu.edu

Marco Bruno
Associate Professor
+974 4402 0706
mbruno@vcu.edu

Giovanni Innella
Assistant Professor
innellag@vcu.edu

Reema Abu Hassan
Adjunct Professor, Creative Impact Coordinator, First Year
abuhassanrs@mymail.vcu.edu

Stella Colaleo
Adjunct Professor, Creative Impact Coordinator, Second Year
scolaleo@vcu.edu

Michael Wirtz
Head of Research and Library Technology
Associate Professor
mawirtz@vcu.edu

Yasmeen Suleiman
Materials Library Curator
Assistant Professor
suleimany@vcu.edu

Fall 2020

August	2-4	Eid al Adha – Offices closed (<i>Subject to change</i>)
	16	Academic/ Administrative Council (AAC) Retreat
	17	Opening of Academic Year
	18-20	New Student Orientation Program, including registration
	23 (Sunday)	Fall classes begin
	23-27	Add/Drop and Late Registration
September	4	Deadline for students for online graduation application (December graduation)
October	4-8	Midterms
	11-15	Fall Break (<i>For students/ faculty. Administrative offices remain open</i>)
	27	Spring semester registration opens
	29	Last day to withdraw from a Fall 2020 course (with W grade)
December	3 (Thursday)	Last day of classes
		Deadline for Faculty to submit Change-of-Incomplete-Grade Forms to R&R
	6-10	Final examinations
	13 (Sunday)	Final grades due in eServices
	18	Qatar National Day

Spring 2021

January	TBD	Offices re-open
	5 (Tuesday)	Spring classes begin
	5-11	Add/Drop and Late Registration
	29	Deadline for students for online graduation application (May graduation)
February	9 (Tuesday)	National Sports Day – Offices closed/ No classes to participate in Sports Day
	21-25	Midterms
	28-Mar 4	Spring break
March	25	Last day to withdraw from a spring 2021 course (with W-grade)
	30	Fall semester advance registration begins
April	12 (Monday)	<i>Ramadan (until May 11). (Subject to change)*</i>
	20 (Tuesday)	Last day of classes
		Deadline for Faculty to submit Change-of-Incomplete-Grade Forms to R&R
	21-22	Reading Days
	25-29	Final examinations
May	1 (Saturday)	QF/ Education City Convocation
	2 (Sunday)	Final grades due in eServices
	3 (Monday)	VCUarts Qatar Commencement

Projected – 2021*

Ramadan: April 12 – May 11

Eid al Fitr: May 13-15

Eid al Adha: July 20-22

VCU Graduate Bulletin

In-depth descriptions of all graduate programs at VCU are provided in the individual school and program sections of the Graduate Bulletin. The Graduate School website (www.graduate.vcu.edu) provides links and contact information for all graduate programs offered at VCU. The website also provides updates that occur throughout the academic year.

Refer to the website's Program Search feature for a complete listing of all graduate programs, as well as application deadline dates, and special admissions requirements and contact information. Applicants are encouraged to contact the school/department sponsoring the intended program of study at the telephone numbers and/or e-mail addresses provided. Other important contact information is provided on the Graduate School (<http://www.vcu.edu/graduate>) website as well.

General academic regulations for all graduate students

The VCU Graduate Bulletin website documents the official admission and academic rules and regulations that govern graduate education for all graduate programs at the university. These policies are established by the graduate faculty of the university through their elected representatives to the University Graduate Council. It is the responsibility of all graduate students, both on- and off-campus, to be familiar with the Graduate Bulletin as well as the academic regulations in individual school and department publications and on program websites; however, in all cases, the official policies and procedures of the University Graduate Council, as published on the Graduate Bulletin website and on the Graduate School website, take precedence over individual program policies and guidelines. The archived (<http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/bulletins/archives.aspx>) copies of current and past bulletins reflect all policies and procedures in effect at the beginning of the stated academic year. The online Bulletin is updated regularly to reflect changes that occur throughout the academic year. Students who maintain continuous enrollment are subject to the curricular requirements of the Graduate Bulletin in effect at the time of admission, and to subsequent policy changes approved by the University Graduate Council for immediate implementation. Students who do not maintain continuous enrollment must reapply for admission and will be subject to the requirements of the Graduate Bulletin in effect at the time of readmission, and to subsequent policy changes approved by the University Graduate Council for immediate implementation. (See policy on Exceptions. <http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/bulletins/graduate/?uid=10045&iid=30070>)

Graduate students should contact the Graduate School at any time regarding questions relating to graduate study at VCU.

Mission Statement

The MFA in Design program is interdisciplinary because designers face complex problems that defy easy categorization. We train students to understand audiences, collaborators and clients in original and authentic ways, combining aspects of fine art studio practice, graphics, digital craft, architecture, fashion and product design, to form a hybridized education. Designers, increasingly, need to navigate between and blend disciplines, maximizing resources and working adaptively to create new environments, visuals, messaging and products. Our program's strength lies in its ability to support each student's unique interests, providing a custom education, tailored to each individual.

Our program sets high expectations, requiring a high degree of discipline and rigor in pursuit of nuanced, meaningful work. Our students are inquisitive and open-minded, eager to explore and experiment. In the program they develop acuity with a variety of tools, materials and processes, combined with a grounding in theory and research. By these means we empower each student to develop a unique research focus and body of work.

Program Goals

1. **Creative Production:** Students will produce authentic and innovative work, which is personally motivated but broadly accessible, leveraging each individual's unique voice.
2. **Integrated Research:** Students will integrate practice and theory, producing rigorous research writing alongside systematically developed tangible outcomes. The program provides multiple opportunities for both individual and collaborative research activities with an applied focus.
3. **Critical Perspective:** Students will seek nuanced solutions via patient, thoughtful progress, developing habits of iterative development. Students will practice vigorous, cross-disciplinary exchange, honing their ability to communicate effectively and persuasively.
4. **Cultural Impact:** Students will engage and raise social awareness. Students will practice depth of understanding as a pathway to meaningful innovation.

Student Learning Outcomes

1. **Research Writing:** Students will demonstrate the ability to craft a persuasive written argument, citing appropriate examples from design history and theory.
2. **Visual Fluency:** Students will demonstrate visual fluency in digital and physical fabrication, employing techniques along a spectrum from traditional to technologically advanced.
3. **Material Fluency:** Students will demonstrate awareness of, and a working sensibility with relation to, a range of materials, including wood, plastics, metal, fiber, and ceramics.
4. **Vigorous Exchange:** Students will demonstrate the ability to critically discuss complex issues with peers and faculty trained in diverse disciplines.
5. **Cultural Awareness:** Students will demonstrate the ability to integrate ideas from historical, social and cultural movements; from policies and theories; and from the dynamics of historical, social and cultural change.
6. **Interdisciplinarity:** Students will demonstrate the ability to synthesize knowledge from different disciplines to solve design problems.
7. **Iterative Development:** Students will exhibit systematic work habits, repeating cycles of analysis, experimentation, production, reflection, and documentation.

MFA in Design

Concentration: Design Studies

Typical Course Sequence credits

Semester 1 credits

DESI 611	Design Studio One	6
DESI 520	Design Research Methods	3
DESI 510	Materials and Methods	3
DESI 511	Digital Design and Fabrication Technology	3

Semester 2

DESI 612	Design Studio Two	6
DESI 601	Interdisciplinary Design Seminar	3
DESI 512	Visual Communication	3
	*Approved Studio Elective	3

Semester 3

DESI 613	Design Studio Three	6
DESI 605	Design Strategies and Ethics for Business	3
DESI 620	Thesis Research and Formulation	3
	*Approved Studio Elective	3

Semester 4

DESI 690	Thesis Studio	9
DESI 621	Design Research and Entrepreneurship Studio	3
DESI 630	Teaching Practicum – or –	3
DESI 631	Design Internship	3

Total Credits 60

* The 6 credits of approved electives can be selected from a variety of 500- to 600-level courses offered at VCUarts Qatar, VCU in Richmond, another Education City university or another internationally accredited university anywhere in the world.

Probationary course work

Probationary course work may be required prior to gaining full admission to the program. The amount and type of undergraduate course work will be determined at the time of application, and no graduate credit will be awarded for this probationary course work. The decision to grant full admission will be based upon successful completion of the required course work.

Course Descriptions

DESI 510 Materials and Methods Studio

Semester course; 6 studio hours. 3 credits. Prerequisite: permission of program director.
Studio course that develops skills in the use of materials, methods and technologies relevant to a broad range of activities pertaining to design.

DESI 511 Studio in Digital Design and Fabrication Technology

Semester course; 2 lecture and 3 studio hours. 3 credits. Prerequisite: permission of program director.
A studio-based examination of design research methods with emphasis placed on new technology of three-dimensional digital design and fabrication. The studio will utilize recently installed and existing facilities, faculty and resources at Digital Fabrication Lab at VCUarts Qatar.

DESI 512 Studio in Visual Communications

Semester course; 2 lecture and 3 studio hours. 3 credits. Prerequisite: permission of program director.
A studio-based examination of design research methods with emphasis placed on time-based media production. The course is designed to provide a lab/studio opportunity for students to develop media skills while focusing on individual production, collaborative projects and critical discussion. The studio will utilize recently installed and existing facilities, faculty, and resources at Media Lab at VCUarts Qatar.

DESI 520 Design Research Methodologies

Semester course; 2 lecture and 3 studio hours. 3 credits. Prerequisite: permission of program director.
A studio-based examination of design research methods with emphasis placed on linking knowledge, comprehension and application of historic and emerging methods of experimentation to generative and iterative studies.

DESI 601 Interdisciplinary Design Seminar

Semester course; 3 lecture hours. 3 credits.
A seminar to examine theories and practices related to the contemporary designer's role in the technological, psychological, cultural and aesthetic environment. The seminar will include exploration of historical and contemporary art, architecture, communications, cultural theory and design criticism. The course involves intensive professional debate of various aspects of interdisciplinary design practice, ongoing group discussion, and exercises in critical writing. Professionals at the university and outside of the university will be invited for participation.

DESI 605 Design Strategies and Ethics for Business

Semester course; 3 lecture hours. 3 credits.
An investigation of precedents and potentials for application of design methods and processes to the development of business strategies and ethics.

DESI 611 Design Studio One

Semester course; 12 studio hours. 6 credits.
A topical studio focusing on research, experimentation and problem-solving methods from a cross section of design disciplines.

DESI 612 Design Studio Two

Semester course; 12 studio hours. 6 credits. Studio course focusing on interdisciplinary, team-based approaches to identifying and solving advanced design problems.

DESI 613 Design Studio Three

Semester course; 12 studio hours. 6 credits.
Prerequisites: successful completion of 30 credits of graduate study and permission of the program director. Studio course focusing on experimentation, analysis and development of creative projects that directly contribute to a design brief to be used as a basis for the final thesis.

DESI 620 Design Thesis Research and Formulation

Semester course; 2 lecture and 3 studio hours. 3 credits.

Prerequisites: successful completion of 30 credit hours of graduate study and permission of the program director. Students examine applied research methods with emphasis placed on comprehension and analysis of case studies and then apply design research methods to test original proposals in a studio environment. Through development of design processes, students define an individual or team project of complex scope and intensity.

DESI 621 Design Research Studio: Leadership and Entrepreneurship

Semester course; 1 lecture and 6 studio hours. 3 credits.

Prerequisites: successful completion of 30 credit hours of graduate study and permission of the program director. Students evaluate emerging leadership methodologies by applying lessons from case studies and emerging fields of knowledge. Course provides collaborative and presentation opportunities.

DESI 630 Teaching Practicum in Design

Semester course; 1 lecture and 6 practicum hours. 3 credits. Prerequisite: completion of 18 credit hours of graduate study. Exploration of philosophical, informational and technical aspects of design education. Observation, instruction and practice in teaching. Topics include effective teaching strategies, curriculum development, learning styles and evaluation techniques. Graded as P/F.

DESI 631 Design Internship

Semester course; 1 lecture and 6 studio hours. 3 credits.

Prerequisites: successful completion of 30 credit hours of graduate study and permission of the program director. Provides supervised practical work experience that is coordinated with professional designers under the guidance of the design faculty. Internship placement is based upon research interest. Graded as P/F.

DESI 690 Thesis Studio

Semester course; variable hours (2 studio hours per credit; 1 seminar hour per 3 credits). 1, 3, 6 or 9 credits. Prerequisites: successful completion of 30 credit hours of graduate study and permission of the program director. This course will support and assist the student in the development and completion of the final thesis project. Executed under the supervision of a graduate adviser and review committee. Graded as S/U/F.

DESI 692 Interdisciplinary Design Research/Individual Study

Semester course; 3-9 studio hours. 1-3 credits. May be repeated.

The structuring, research, execution and presentation of an independent project in interdisciplinary design under the guidance of a faculty member.

Enrollment

Students accepted into the MFA in Design program at VCUarts Qatar are required to attend full-time and enroll in 15 credits per semester. Exceptions to this rule must be approved by the MFA Director. In the event of an exception, continuous enrollment is required, according to the following university definitions:

Continuous enrollment – Pre-candidacy

Once admitted to a degree program, a graduate student is expected to comply with minimum enrollment of one course per 12-month period from the beginning of his/her program.

Continuous enrollment – Candidate

A graduate student who has completed course requirements for a degree must register for at least one credit at VCU each fall and spring semester until the degree is awarded. Students must be enrolled during their graduation semesters.

Candidates must complete all degree requirements within six years. A petition for extension must be approved by the MFA Director.

Phases

1. Pre-Thesis preparation: First Year, Fall Semester

During the first semester of study, each graduate student begins discussion with faculty and the MFA Director to test possible thesis topics. A student may research and explore ideas for elaboration in an independent study, or look ahead and choose an appropriate elective for the spring semester. Students may take graduate elective courses outside of the department as a means of developing interests related to possible thesis topics, and to make contact with potential external advisors.

2. Candidacy Development: First Year, Spring Semester

Within DESI 601 Design Seminar, students will begin to identify topic interests and will be advised to schedule meetings with faculty, during office hours, to discuss ideas. Students are strongly encouraged to research and visually explore topic ideas independently. After mid-semester, students typically narrow to a single topic proposal, seeking advice from targeted faculty as they formulate a summary visual presentation and thesis proposal ahead of the Candidacy Review.

3. Reading and Data Collection: Summer between First and Second Year

Students work independently over the summer months to advance their thesis work; examples of appropriate activities include critical reading, information and data collection, internships, special projects, workshops or residencies, and independent, thesis-related coursework. Students should not expect to be in contact over the summer with 9-month faculty advisors, however the MFA Director remains available for consultation year-round.

4. Thesis Development: Second Year, Fall Semester

The fall semester of second year is a critical stage for thesis development. By the third week students are required to confirm members of their thesis committees with the MFA Director. MFA faculty will meet by the fourth week to approve committee assignments and make recommendations for adjustments as needed. Most critical reading and research should be completed by mid-semester. In DESI 620, Design Research and Formulation, students complete a draft of the written portion of their thesis, while conducting exploratory studio-based research in DESI 613, Design Studio Three. Students are responsible for scheduling regular consultation with thesis committee members, especially their Main Thesis Advisor.

Reviews

Graduate students undergo three formal reviews while enrolled in the MFA in Design:

- Candidacy Review
- Thesis Review
- Thesis Defense

Candidacy Review

Graduate students are subject to a candidacy review upon completion of 15-30 credits of graduate work. The purpose of the candidacy review is to assess the progress of the graduate student and determine whether the appropriate skills and knowledge have been achieved to proceed to the thesis stage.

Each graduate student applying for candidacy assembles his or her work to date. All projects completed by the student should be represented. The faculty will assess the work and vote on the student's admission to candidacy. Assessment of the work will be based upon knowledge, skills, insight, originality, scope, depth, completeness, quality, and organization. The student cannot proceed to the thesis phase without achieving candidacy. Candidacy Review will result in one of the following decisions:

- The student meets program requirements, is recommended for candidacy, and continues in the program.
- The student does not meet program requirements, is recommended for additional study, and has candidacy deferred until the next semester.
- The student does not meet program requirements, is not recommended for candidacy, and does not continue in the program.

Thesis Review

Following a successful candidacy review and completion of three semesters' coursework, each student will present an updated thesis project proposal for review by thesis committee members, the MFA Director, and MFA faculty.

The Thesis Review presentation should include:

- Definition of an original design question/problem and area of focus
- Description of research methodologies to be employed
- Review of current research on the problem
- Plan for studio-based research activity capable of yielding a significant & complex body of work
- Plan for exhibiting the work publicly, in a self-explanatory format

Thesis Defense

Each student will meet with members of his/her committee at an appointed time to defend his/her thesis according to the following format:

1. Brief Overview by Thesis Defendant: Candidate summarizes the thesis and its importance
2. Question and Answer Period: Committee members ask thesis-related questions
3. Committee Deliberation Period: Candidate leaves defense room, committee deliberates and votes, and then the candidate returns to receive the committee's thesis verdict:
 - a. Pass without Revisions
 - b. Pass with Minor Revisions
 - c. Pass with Major Revisions
 - d. Fail

Thesis Guidelines

The MFA in Design at VCUarts Qatar requires a two-part thesis: students produce both a written document and an exhibition of creative work. Each student's thesis committee will offer advice regarding format and content for both components, tailored to the unique aspects of each student's research goals. The outline that follows this section is offered as a starting point for the written portion of the thesis. Alterations may be necessary to accommodate the wide variety of research topics possible in our interdisciplinary program.

The Visual Nature of the Thesis

The written portion of a VCUarts Qatar MFA thesis will be an inherently visual document. Images, information graphics, diagrams, process sketches, and other visual representations are expected to be included as part of the documentation. The ratio of images to written text will depend on the nature of each student's thesis – some topics will require more visual representation and others will lend themselves to more textual elaboration. Each student will need to work closely with members of his or her thesis committee to determine the proper balance between visual and textual information.

Length of Thesis

The length of the thesis will depend on decisions made by the student and his/her committee. The written document must adequately address topics outlined below, but the nature of the topic, the use of visual materials, and formatting decisions will affect the length of the finished document. Thesis documents are required to contain no more than 6,000 words.

Textual Format

The format of the thesis should follow the Chicago Manual of Style. Within those guidelines, the Note-Bibliography format is preferred, and either footnotes or endnotes are acceptable.

Thesis Outline

1. Abstract
 - 1.1 A pithy, captivating, written summary of thesis content that provides an overview of research motivation and outcomes, not to exceed 300 words.
2. Table of Contents
 - 2.1 A list of thesis sections and subsections with corresponding page numbers.
3. Introduction
 - 3.1 An overview of thesis scope and purpose.
 - 3.2 The introduction should include the following information, either as formal subsections or embedded within:
 - 3.2.1 Problem Statement – A clear explanation of the problem that defines the thesis exploration.
 - 3.2.2 Justification – A rationale for the study, explaining its importance in the field of design, and within the greater society and culture.
 - 3.2.3 Delimitations – A definition of parameters controlling the course of research. Essentially this is an explanation of what the research isn't. For example, if a student's course of research included a survey of opinions regarding a particular design, the delimitations section may indicate that the research is only intended to summarize opinions as they are relevant to the design problem and not intended to add to a generalizable, scientific body of research.
 - 3.3 The introduction should be primarily written, but may also include images, illustrations, and diagrams.
 - 3.4 The Introduction should constitute approximately 20 percent of the thesis document.
4. Background
 - 4.1 This section provides the reader with context needed to understand the research problem and thesis investigation. The student should summarize and reference other precedents and research related to his/her investigation.
 - 4.2 The Background section should include the following information integrated into the text or delineated in subsections:
 - 4.2.1 Historical/ theoretical background (literature review) – This section provides context to the thesis problem by outlining relevant historical or theoretical precedents. This is information that contextualizes the problem within the history of design or culture. This section could also cite studies or research providing evidence that contextualizes the research problem. Ordinarily, this is a written analysis, but it could also include images and graphic content.
 - 4.2.2 Precedents/ antecedents – This section outlines other investigations into the problem or similar problems. This section should provide context by curating examples and analyzing ways other designers, artists, researchers, etc., have addressed similar situations. This section requires a combination of written and visual material.
 - 4.3 The Background section should constitute approximately 30 percent of the thesis document.
5. Investigation
 - 5.1 Documentation of exploration conducted throughout the thesis process, as well as presentation of the final outcome.
 - 5.2 The Investigation section should include the following information, either set into subsections or incorporated into one larger section:
 - 5.2.1 Methodology – An explanation of process and exploration undertaken during the course of the thesis, including written and visual content.
 - 5.2.2 Outcome – Presentation of the final thesis research outcome. Typically, this section documents content from the student's MFA thesis exhibition.

- 5.3 The Investigation section should constitute approximately 30 percent of the thesis document.
6. Conclusions
 - 6.1 An analysis of how the thesis exploration (outlined in the Investigation section) relates to the contextual information (outlined in the Background section).
 - 6.2 The Conclusions section should include the following information, either integrated into the discussion, or set out in subsections:
 - 6.2.1 Findings – A detailed discussion of discoveries made during the course of research.
 - 6.2.2 Evaluation – Reflection on how the student’s research discoveries relate to historical and theoretical precedents outlined in the Background section.
 - 6.2.3 Further Directions – An outline of potential next steps and future possibilities identified during the course of research, but which fell outside the scope of the thesis.
 - 6.3 This section should be primarily textual but can include images and other graphic representations of information as appropriate.
 - 6.4 The Conclusions section should be approximately 20 percent of the thesis document.
7. List of Works Cited
 - 7.1 A list of all works cited, using the format from the Chicago Manual of Style.
8. Acknowledgements
 - 8.1 An area designated for acknowledging people who helped the student during the course of research. Assistance or support from external foundations or institutions should also be credited here.
9. Appendices
 - 9.1 Required appendices include:
 - 9.1.1 Thesis exhibition documentation.
 - 9.1.1.1 Photographic documentation and associated information from the MFA Thesis Exhibition, to include title, date and location of the exhibition, as well as captions for exhibition photos.
 - 9.1.2 Institutional Review Board approval/exception documents (if applicable).
 - 9.2 Additional appendices may be necessary if a topic requires clarification beyond that outlined above. Possibilities include:
 - 9.2.1 Glossary
 - 9.2.2 Translations of key phrases or words
 - 9.2.3 Topical clarifications
 - 9.2.4 Tangential research

Thesis Committee Roles

Main Thesis Advisor

- Provides consultation and thesis advising throughout the student's second year.
- Meets with the student on a regular basis; e.g. twice a month during fall, and weekly during spring semester.
- Provides grade input to DESI 690 Thesis Studio instructor(s).
- Relays decision of Thesis Committee to student following Thesis Defense.
- Initial and final reader of thesis drafts.
- Must be a full-time VCUarts Qatar faculty member.
- Must attend Thesis Review and Thesis Defense.

Associate Advisor(s)

- Assists and contributes with the advising and evaluation process. The Associate Advisor should be capable of stepping into the role of Main Advisor if necessary (VCUarts Qatar faculty only).
- Meets with the student on a regular basis, e.g. monthly.
- Reads and comments on thesis drafts.
- An Associate Advisor may come from outside VCUarts Qatar, but must agree to responsibilities outlined above for meeting and reading, and must meet requirements for designation as Graduate Faculty. Consult with MFA Director.
- Must attend Thesis Review and Thesis Defense.

Reader

- Responsible for reading and commenting on thesis drafts following Thesis Review.
- Serves as an objective reviewer of the written document.
- The Reader may come from outside VCUarts Qatar, but must meet requirements for designation as Graduate Faculty. Consult with MFA Director.
- Must attend Thesis Review and Thesis Defense.

MFA Director

- May be part of a student's thesis committee in any of the above-mentioned roles, and is also an ex-officio member of all MFA in Design thesis committees.
- Serves as Academic Advisor for all MFA in Design students.
- Attends Candidacy Review, Thesis Review, and Thesis Defense for all students.
- Coordinates with MFA faculty to provide requirements and schedule for Candidacy Review.
- Coordinates with MFA faculty and thesis committee members to provide requirements and schedule for Thesis Review and Thesis Defense.
- Is available year-round as a resource to students, committee members, and faculty.

Grammarian (appointed as needed)

- Reviews and comments on the thesis document during the draft stage. The student's thesis committee will determine if a Grammarian is required. If need, the committee may either name a current committee member as Grammarian, or appoint another qualified individual.
- A Grammarian who is not also serving in a role listed above will not be a member of the thesis committee and will not be required to sign final thesis approval documentation.
- The VCUarts Qatar Writing Center may not be consulted by graduate students and may not serve this role.

External Advisors (optional)

- Students are encouraged to identify informal external advisors, who are not formally part of the thesis committee, who are not required to read thesis documentation or attend formal reviews, and who consequently do not sign final thesis approval documentation. Students should take care to acknowledge contributions of external advisors in the Acknowledgements section of the thesis document.