2015/2016

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Courtesy Appointments:
Welcome

Welcome to the PhD program in the department of Sociology at USC. This guidebook explains the procedures and requirements of the PhD program, but the Student Services Coordinator (Stachelle Overland) and the Director of Graduate Studies (Lynne Casper) are available to assist you in dealing with any of the complexities and in answering questions you may encounter as you navigate through the program. As you enter the PhD program, two faculty advisers will also be initially assigned to you. You should turn to them for advice, suggestions and seek their guidance any time you encounter difficulties. To maximize your graduate training, we encourage you to take courses or pursue independent studies with a variety of sociology professors. Doing so will allow you to cast a wide net when identifying a primary advisor, which you should do no later than the end of your second year. Section IV offers important tips on how to seek mentorship.

At the beginning of the fall semester, an orientation with the Student Services Coordinator and the Director of Graduate Studies will provide an overview of the graduate program. This will be followed by an informal reception, held on campus, which will provide an opportunity to meet and chat with faculty, staff and graduate students.

We strive to maintain a friendly, supportive and collegial environment. There are several shared spaces: the collective TA room; the conference room on the 3rd floor, and the 2nd floor communal lounge. Much of what you will learn in graduate school will come from conversations with others. The first year cohort is responsible for maintaining the graduate lounge. At present, we have enough desks to provide students with their own desk or with a desk they share on alternate days with another student. You will be assigned a desk in the first week of the fall semester each.

Graduate students are represented by four elected representatives (representing first, second, third and fourth and beyond year graduate cohorts). These representatives are expected to attend the monthly faculty meetings and graduate meetings, except when personnel or admissions matters are discussed.

USC Sociology graduate students also have a vibrant tradition of organizing professionalization workshops, colloquia, and invited speakers. Our department maintains an AKD chapter, and sociology graduate students are represented on the Graduate and Professional Student Association at USC.

Sincerely,

Lynne Casper                                     Stachelle Overland
Professor,                                      Graduate Advisor
Director of Graduate Studies
I. Requirements Overview

You are expected to be a full-time student, meaning that you will take at least 8 units per semester until your formal coursework is finished. Many students are currently taking 12 units per semester, prior to taking Qualifying Exams. In rare circumstances, students may request extra units. Students should not register for extra units without gaining prior approval. Please contact the graduate advisor via email if you wish to register for extra units. You will receive an answer within a week or so.

Core Requirements

A minimum of 60 graduate units is necessary for the Ph.D., among which are the following required courses: SOCI 510, SOCI 520, SOCI 521, SOCI 524, SOCI 610 and SOCI 621.

Areas of Specialization

In addition to six required courses mentioned above, students are required to specialize in two areas and to complete at least four units in each of these areas. Standard Exam Areas in the department include:

- Culture
- Demography
- Economic Sociology
- Family
- Gender
- Globalization
- Health & Medicine
- Immigration
- Labor & Occupations
- Organizations
- Political Sociology
- Religion
- Science & Technology
- Social Stratification
- Social Movements and Civic Engagement
- Social Theory
- Urban Sociology

Students wishing to take an exam in an area not listed above may submit a one-page petition to the Director of Graduate Studies (no later than spring semester of the second year of graduate study). The petition should include a justification for the distinct exam category, and must be co-signed by the faculty member who will lead the exam committee.

5-Member Guidance Committee

The 5-Member Guidance Committee will conduct the Qualification Examination and evaluate the Empirical Paper of each PhD student. Students must create a guidance committee during their second year of graduate school.

Students will choose 4 sociology faculty members, including a Guidance Committee Chair, serve as their internal departmental guidance committee. The 5th member will be selected from USC faculty outside the Sociology Department, and will be chosen by the student with advice from her Guidance Committee Chair. Among internal guidance committee members, two of the four faculty members must have specific expertise in the two areas chosen for the Standard Qualifying Exams. That is, there will be one “expert” faculty member serving as the Lead Examiner for Qualifying Exam One and a second expert faculty member serving as Lead Examiner Two.

Empirical Paper

Success in the field of sociology requires involvement in the conduct of empirical research. Relatively early, therefore, each student is required to complete an independent research project, which is supervised by two members of his or her faculty guidance committee. If a master’s thesis or some other research project has been completed at another university, it may — subject to permission of the student’s guidance committee — be submitted in lieu of the empirical paper. Students are also required to make a public presentation of this or other independent work, either at a professional meeting or in some other academic forum.
Qualifying Examinations

All students are required to complete written and oral qualifying exams on their two specialty fields in the fall semester of their third year of graduate study. The completion of the Empirical Paper is no longer a prerequisite for the Qualifying Exams.

Advancing to Candidacy

Students advance to Ph.D. candidacy upon the completion of their empirical paper and qualifying examination.

Dissertation

The dissertation is the final step in the acquisition of the Ph.D. degree. After advancement to candidacy, students are expected to submit a formal prospectus to their dissertation committee within six months.

II. Curriculum

If you wish to follow a sequence other than those recommended above, please consult with the graduate director to plan your schedule.

Before taking Sociology 521, you must have successfully taken an undergraduate statistics course. If you have not met this prerequisite, you will need to take and pass Sociology 314 (undergraduate statistics) before enrolling in Sociology 521.
Suggested Schedule: Year One

FALL

Required Courses:

- SOCI 510 Sociological Theory I
- SOCI 525 Proseminar
- Elective Seminar

Activities:

- Establish a professional relationship with at least two faculty members
- Identify an area of focus for your Empirical Paper
- Attend sociology department colloquia
- Select two faculty members to supervise your Empirical Paper
- Look for outside funding possibilities
- Draft a quant proposal.

SPRING

Required Courses:

- SOCI 521 Quantitative Methods I
- or SOCI 610 Sociological Theory II
- SOCI 520 Qual Methods

Activities:

- Establish a professional relationship with at least two faculty members
- Identify an area of focus for your Empirical Paper
- Attend sociology department colloquia
- Select two faculty members to supervise your Empirical Paper
- Submit “Empirical Paper Sign-Off: Part One” form to graduate advisor
- Look for outside funding possibilities
- Draft a quant proposal

Required Forms:

- “Empirical Paper Sign-Off: Part One” (to be signed by two sociology faculty who agree to supervise your Empirical Paper)
Suggested Schedule: Year Two

FALL

Required Courses:
· SOCI Quant Methods 2
· SOC 621 Quantitative Methods and Stats II (only for students in 521-621 sequence)
· 1-2 Elective Seminar(s)

Activities:
· Begin research for your Empirical Paper
· Select a chairperson for your Guidance Committee
· Establish professional relationships with faculty who you would like to be on your Guidance Committee
· Meet with Director of Graduate Studies to discuss second-year screening
· Submit abstract of Empirical Paper for presentation at a professional conference
  o Submission deadlines:
  o ASA — January
  o SSA — October
  o PAA — September
· Look for outside funding opportunities
· Draft a grant proposal

Required Forms:
· "Appointment of Ph.D. Guidance Committee" (to be signed by four sociology faculty and one outside member who agree to supervise your research and Qualifying Examinations)

SPRING

Required Courses:
· SOCI 524 Participant-Observation and Interviewing II (for students choosing 520-524 sequence, OR Ethnography of Organizations II, when available)
· SOCI X — Emperical Paper Seminar
· 1-2 Electives

Activities:
· Continue working on Empirical Paper
· Present Empirical Paper at a professional conference (e.g., PSA, ASA, PAA)
· Submit "Empirical Paper Sign-Off: Part Two" form to graduate advisor
· Identify Guidance Committee members to oversee your Qualifying Exams
· Compile reading lists and study for Qualifying Exams
· Submit "Request to Take Qualifying Examination" form to graduate advisor
· Look for outside funding opportunities
· Draft a grant proposal

Required Forms:
· "Empirical Paper Sign-Off: Part Two" (to be signed by two faculty who can verify the presentation of your Empirical Paper at a professional conference)
· "Request to Take Qualifying Examination" (to be signed by staff and Guidance Committee who agree that you are ready to take Qualifying Exams)
Suggested Schedule: Year Three

Fall

Required Courses:
- Specialty concentration electives

Activities:
- Take and pass the Qualifying Exams
- Schedule a date/time for your Qualifying Exams oral defense (all five members of the Guidance Committee must attend this meeting)
- Meet with Guidance Committee to orally defend your Qualifying Exams
- After you pass and defend the Qualifying Exams, select a Dissertation Committee (at a minimum two sociology faculty and one outside member)
- Submit “Request for Change of Committee” form to graduate advisor
- Look for outside funding opportunities
- Draft a grant proposal
- Prepare Empirical Paper for Journal Submission

Required Forms:
- “Request for Change of Committee” (to be signed by three or more members from your Guidance Committee who agree to continue to supervise your Dissertation research)

Spring

Required Courses:
- Specialty concentration electives

Activities:
- Prepare your Dissertation Prospectus
- Look for outside funding opportunities
- Draft a grant proposal
- Plan for future employment (attend ASA, present papers, submit journal articles, familiarize yourself with the job market, prepare a CV)
Suggested Schedule: Year Four

FALL

Required Courses:
· Specialty concentration electives

Activities:
· Schedule a meeting with your Dissertation Committee for final discussion and approval of your Dissertation Prospectus (no later than six months after completion of the Qualifying Exams)
· Work on Dissertation following the steps outlined in your Prospectus
· Keep in close contact with your Dissertation Chair
· Advise entire Dissertation Committee about problems and progress
· Submit “Approval of Dissertation Prospectus” to graduate advisor
· Look for outside funding opportunities
· Draft a grant proposal
· Submit papers to journals

Forms:
· “Approval of Dissertation Prospectus” (to be signed by Dissertation Committee)

SPRING

Required Courses:
· Specialty concentration electives

Activities:
· Schedule a meeting with your Dissertation Committee for final discussion and approval of your Dissertation Prospectus (no later than six months after completion of the Qualifying Exams)
· Work on Dissertation following the steps outlined in your Prospectus
· Keep in close contact with your Dissertation Chairperson
· Advise entire Dissertation Committee about problems and progress
· Submit “Approval of Dissertation Prospectus” to graduate coordinator
· Look for outside funding opportunities
· Draft a grant proposal
·

Forms:
· “Approval of Dissertation Prospectus” (to be signed by Dissertation Committee)
### III. Screening

Every PhD student in the program will be screened by the Graduate Committee at the beginning of the third semester, and thereafter, by the entire faculty towards the end of every spring semester. Screening allows both the faculty and the graduate students to evaluate student progress and goals, and identify opportunities as well as problems.

#### Annual Review

The annual full-faculty review of graduate students occurs late in the spring semester. The department began this process in 2008 due to the problem of several graduate students taking too long to complete the PhD (7 years+), but it provides a useful collective assessment of all the graduate students. The intention of the review is to help provide you with feedback that will advance your progress in the program. During the annual spring screening, the entire tenure track and tenured faculty meet to discuss the progress of each student, and the faculty mentor or chair is responsible for preparing some brief remarks about the particular student’s progress, promise and any problems that may be arising. Based on this screening, a student will normally be recommended for continuation in the program, and informed if she/he is making satisfactory progress. The DGS will communicate this information to the graduate student via a letter. The letter will usually include some frank assessments and directives that are intended to help the student (e.g., become less involved in student and professional organizations; make timely progress on finishing the empirical paper/dissertation proposal, etc.). There may also be concerns expressed about the student’s slow pace in the program, or questions raised about the quality of work. In these cases, a student may be told that she or he is not making satisfactory progress, and if this occurs, the student may be advised to reach a particular benchmark goal by a particular date in order to remain in the program (e.g., successfully finish the empirical paper, or take Qualifying Exams by a certain date, etc.).

#### Third Semester Screening

The first official screening required by the university occurs in the beginning of the third semester. The first year of graduate study is, in effect, a probationary period. Graduate students should have completed at least four required courses before this screening. To facilitate the screening, the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) gathers the grades from the coursework, and obtains informal written feedback from the sociology faculty who have taught the students. This information is discussed confidentially in the Graduate Committee meeting, and the DGS then synthesizes this information in a letter to the graduate student. This narrative assessment may include suggestions for how a graduate student might participate more actively in seminar discussion, or it might be a frank assessment of the student’s intellectual strengths or weaknesses, or perhaps feedback on the student’s work habits. Grades will be considered, but we are generally seeking a more nuanced screening. The Graduate Committee will make a recommendation as to whether the student should continue in the program, or consider other options. After the graduate student receives the letter, she or he makes an appointment to meet individually with the DGS. This is a time to talk about any concerns, and begin thinking ahead to the student’s emerging field of specialization, and the formation of the Guidance Committee. At this meeting, you should be ready to identify the two areas of specialization that you intend to pursue. The DGS will want to know which faculty you intend to have on the Guidance Committee. The process sounds daunting, so if you are worried about it, talk to other graduate students who have gone through the process.

#### Forming the Guidance Committee

The semester in which you are screened is also the time to form your five-person Guidance Committee. This will consist of your chair, three other faculty members from the department, and one faculty from outside the department. You will want to begin cultivating these faculty relationships during your first year in graduate school.

To establish the committee you will need the sociology department form “Appointment of Ph.D. Guidance Committee.” The Guidance Committee is there to offer guidance in your studies, course selection, reading lists, etc., and they will advise you about how to best prepare for the Qualifying Exams. The Guidance Committee, and particularly your chair, can help advise on when you are ready to take the Qualifying Exams. Ideally, these should be taken in the spring semester of the third year, and no later than the first semester of the fourth year. The Guidance Committee should include at least one faculty member from each of your specialty areas. After you have passed the Qualifying Exams, it is likely that you will ask three of the Guidance Committee members to supervise your dissertation. You also have the option of retaining all five members on your dissertation committee. Keep this in mind as you put the Guidance Committee together. And once again, remain proactive in staying in contact with your faculty advisors. The Guidance Committee is there for your benefit, but it is your responsibility to seek guidance from them.
Seven Years and Beyond

The Deans in the Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences have recently begun to require a mandatory “Plan for Dissertation Completion” for all PhD students who have been in the program for seven years or more. This requires the student to fill out a schedule for completing the dissertation, in consultation with the dissertation chair. The Graduate Advisor and DGS review these, and they are then sent to the deans. Students who take seven years or longer to complete the PhD will be closely monitored by both the Graduate Committee and the Deans, and will be under pressure to make timely progress.

IV. Mentorship, Advising and Faculty Committees

The Sociology Department will assign you two main advisors before you begin your first year of graduate school. Your responsibility is to meet with your advisor each semester as you’re deciding about your classes, and then as many times as is necessary during the year to update her/him about your progress. It’s also important to talk with other faculty as well as your advisors, to broaden your perspective in ways that will help your work speak to more subfields in the discipline of sociology. Spend time talking with various professors. Read their publications and take graduate seminars with different faculty, as these are important ways to develop intellectual relationships. If it is not possible to take a graduate seminar with those with whom you’d like to work, consider asking about the possibility of doing a Directed Reading with them focused around your common interests. It is wise to develop working intellectual relationships with people early in your graduate career, as this will also help you constitute your various committees.

During your second year, you should identify a main advisor. They need not be one of your two initial advisors. Your advisor will serve as the Chair of your guidance committee and, in many cases, will also be the Chair of your dissertation committee. The Guidance Committee is a committee of 5 people who help you prepare for the Qualifying Exam. Decide during the second year what your fields will be and then use this decision to build your committee. It is possible to make changes to your committee—up to and including your advisor—at any time prior to filing the paperwork to take your qualifying examinations. In fact, your guidance committee does not become official until you actually request to take the qualifying examinations.

The Dissertation Committee consists of three or more people who oversee the dissertation process. You will be working under the direction of your Dissertation Committee chair for roughly two years, occasionally even longer. Find out well before your qualifying exams if this is indeed a good scholarly match for you. Indeed, this is the primary person with whom you will be working and under whose guidance your work will flourish. It is not necessary to bombard your chair with questions and visits, however make sure that you check in at least once during a semester and be in touch with your chair about academic opportunities such as conference participation, publishing venues, and fellowship possibilities, especially after the qualifying exam. Again, while you may change a dissertation chair it is generally rare to do so; relationships take time to develop and you ought to discuss a change thoughtfully with a potential new chair, and ideally with your current chair, before making a change.

The Ideal Mentor:

- Reads and returns work promptly, with constructive comments.
- Develops with the student a list of short- and long-term research and professional goals.
- Clarifies expectations and policies.
- Communicates regularly about research progress, scheduling changes, and workshops or seminars that will aid in the student’s professional development.
- Provides students with opportunities to develop and practice professional skills required for research, teaching and service.
- Helps students develop an innovative dissertation topic.
- Helps students develop a marketable job dossier.
- Supports the variety of professional interests a student may have in research, industry, teaching and service.
- Facilitates networking.
- Knows course and milestone requirements.
- Treats students respectfully as future colleagues.
- Encourages students, and provides emotional and moral support.
- Acknowledges that students have responsibilities outside the academy.
The Ideal Student:

- Chooses his or her mentor thoughtfully and wisely by becoming familiar with the professor’s research and professional interests.
- Has developed short- and long-term professional and research goals, and shares these goals with his or her mentor.
- Is aware of his or her own strengths and weaknesses.
- Submits work promptly and comes to meetings prepared with specific goals, questions and tasks to be accomplished in that meeting.
- Communicates regularly with faculty about his or her progress, changes in focus, and professional needs.
- Asks for clarification of the mentor’s expectations and policies.
- Respects the mentor’s time and reputation.
- Asks the mentor for information and advice about workshops that will enhance professional development.
- Knows the requirements for the degree program, and asks the mentor for help in successfully completing those requirements.
- Takes the mentor’s advice seriously.

V. The Empirical Paper

By now, you have heard about “the empirical paper.” In other departments and universities, this is sometimes called “the MA thesis” or “the qualifying paper.” Why do we have this requirement? This is intended to give you experience in formulating an original research question, and in conducting original research, analysis and writing. Think of it as a dry run to conducting in-depth dissertation research.

The empirical paper should represent a piece of original empirical research and analysis, and it must be written in a format appropriate for submission to a professional publication (Note: the requirement is that the paper should be “publishable,” but not published. Several recent empirical papers have been published in well-regarded sociology journals). Additionally, there is an oral component, as you must present this research paper at a professional conference or an academic setting. This is to give you experience in sharing your research with others.
The empirical paper is supervised by an “Empirical Paper Committee” (2 tenured or tenure track faculty in the department). You will begin the empirical paper in either the Participant Observation and Interviewing I & II course sequence (or Ethnography of Organizations, if it is offered), or the Quantitative Methods and Statistics I & II course sequence. The two supervising faculty should come from your Guidance Committee (the committee of 5 faculty which you will form in your second year).

**How do you shape a research question and project?**

1. Devise a research question grounded in a theoretical debate
2. Use particular methods that allow you to collect or identify empirical data that will answer this question
3. Prepare and submit an IRB Human Subjects application if needed
4. Collect, analyze or locate and interpret the data
5. Write a paper that communicates what you have learned
6. Present the paper in a professional conference or setting that encourages critical commentary and feedback

People often choose research questions based on personal biography and passion, and also because they want to provide a social good, or stimulate social change. Those are perfectly valid and reasonable places from which to start, but you also want to formulate a research question that is engaged with relevant theoretical debates. All good research seeks to answer a significant question (e.g.) is this a topic of intellectual interest? Why does it matter?

What should the final written paper look like? It should be a relatively short paper (approximately 30 pages), and article-like in both length and form. Discuss prospective journals with your advisor, and peruse articles in particular journals to get a sense of these parameters.

Who doesn’t have to do the Empirical Paper? If you completed an MA thesis in another program prior to beginning the PhD in Sociology at USC, or if you have published a paper based on original empirical research, you may want to submit that paper for consideration in meeting this requirement. That will still require the approval of two faculty members constituting the Empirical Paper Committee, and an oral presentation at a conference or similar setting. The paper must be written in clear English. It is accepted (and this may require some revisions), it will not be necessary for you to complete a new study.

Here are the steps for submission and approval of the Empirical Paper (regardless of whether it is new or previously completed elsewhere).

1. Recruit your 2 faculty member “Empirical Paper Committee” during your first year.
2. Ask these 2 faculty members to sign “The Empirical Paper Sign-Off Record” form. Obtain their signatures, agreeing to supervise, by the end of your first year. These forms are available from the Graduate Advisor or on the department website. Once signed, return the form to the Graduate Advisor.
3. Formulate your research question and study, and conduct the research in the context of the appropriate courses. This begins spring of the first year if you are doing a quantitatively-oriented paper, and fall of the second year if you are doing an ethnography and/or interview study.
4. Stay in contact with your empirical paper committee, discussing the project as it progresses. When they read and approve the final paper (by the very latest, fall of your third year), ask these two faculty to sign the form again. Return the form and one copy of the final paper to the Graduate Advisor.
5. Present the paper at a professional conference or setting. It’s a good idea to present a “paper in progress” at the Pacific Sociological Association annual meetings, which are usually held in a west coast city during the month of April. You must submit an abstract of the paper in October in order for it to be considered on the program for April. If your paper is accepted into the program, you can generally count on department support to help cover the costs of conference attendance and travel. It’s perfectly fine and perhaps even advisable to present a conference paper before it is completed and accepted for final approval. Note that you should check with your committees as to the range of quality of papers presented at specific conferences, standards vary from conference to conference. After you present the paper, be sure to get the Empirical Paper Committee members to sign your form.
Advisable, but not Mandatory

If you write a strong paper that represents original research, you should try to get it published. Talk to your faculty advisors about this possibility. It’s usually a long process, and one that involves rethinking, and revising the paper substantially. It can be very gratifying to have your work published. In terms of your career, it is also very useful for you to have a solo-authored publication based on your empirical paper research. Regardless of whether you pursue publication, be sure to get your Empirical Paper signed off by the fall of your third year.

What to do after the Empirical Paper?

After you have completed the Empirical Paper and gathered both faculty members’ signatures of completion, remember to give the Empirical Paper Sign-Off Record form back to the Graduate Advisor. Turn this form in before the semester in which you expect to take Qualifying Exams. Next, you turn your attention to studying for Qualifying Exams.

VI. The Qualifying Exams (QEs)

Each student in the program must take a Qualifying Exam in two standard areas during the Fall semester of their 3rd year. The purpose of the Qualifying Exam is to allow students to show their competence in multiple areas of sociological inquiry, theory, and empirical research.

Graduate students must complete at least four units in each of their Qualifying Exam areas of specializations, and must complete a total of at least 32 units before taking the Qualifying Exam.

5-Member Guidance Committee

Students will choose 4 Sociology faculty members, including a Guidance Committee Chair, to serve as their internal departmental guidance committee. The 5th member will be selected from USC faculty outside the Sociology Department, and will be chosen by the student with advice from her Guidance Committee Chair.

Among internal guidance committee members, two of the four faculty members must have specific expertise in the two areas chosen for the Standard Qualifying Exams. That is, there will be one “expert” faculty member serving as the Lead Examiner for Qualifying Exam One, and a second “expert” faculty member serving as the Lead Examiner for Qualifying Exam Two.

The Standard Qualifying Exam

The Standard Qualifying exam gives students an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of a general area of sociological
study. In effect, students show that they are prepared to teach introductory and more specialized courses in the area, and that they have a foundation on which to develop more focused research. Standard Exam questions should balance core knowledge in the area of focus with the many alternative pathways that more specialized interests might follow.

**Written Qualifying Examination**

Two internal Guidance Committee members (including the Lead Examiner) will work with the student on Qualifying Exam One, and the other two Guidance Committee members will work with the student on Qualifying Exam Two. These two-faculty-members exam committees will consult with the student on the preparation of a reading list, and will develop exam questions, administer the exam, and evaluate the exam. Hence, the Guidance Committee will be composed as follows:

- Soci Faculty Member A: Lead Examiner, QE 1
- Soci Faculty Member B: Reader, QE 1
- Soci Faculty Member C: Lead Examiner, QE 2
- Soci Faculty Member D: Reader, QE 2

Within 10 days following the completion of the written exam, the two faculty members assigned to each exam will provide the student with a **brief written evaluation** of the written exam, including suggestions regarding further preparation for the oral examination. In cases of substantial disagreement in the evaluation of the written exam, either of the two faculty members may call upon a third member of the committee to review the exam and participate in preparing the written evaluation.

The student may choose any one of the four internal Sociology members to serve as the Guidance Committee Chair. The 5th faculty member, the “outside” member (non-sociologist) will review the written exam only at the time of the oral examination.

The format of the Standard Exam typically consists of 4-6 questions per area, with the option for students to choose from questions on the exam (i.e., the exam may consist of six questions of which the student will answer three). The student will write three 8 page, double-spaced, typed essays, choosing from the six questions. Although the questions on the Exam may be quite similar to those on Exams from previous years, these questions will **not** be given to the student in advance.

**Exam areas are as follows:**

- Culture
- Demography
- Economic Sociology
- Family
- Gender
- Globalization
- Health & Medicine
- Immigration
- Labor & Occupations
- Organizations
- Political Sociology
- Religion
- Science & Technology
- Social Stratification
- Social Movements and Civic Engagement
- Social Theory
- Urban Sociology

Students wishing to take an exam in an area not listed above may submit a one-page petition to the Director of Graduate Studies (no later than spring semester of the second year of graduate study). The petition should include a justification for the distinct exam category, and must be co-signed by the faculty member who will lead the exam committee.

**The Qualifying Exam process usually works like this:**

1. Before taking the Exam, the student should take a course in each of their areas of focus
2. The student develops a detailed reading list, organized by topic, and discusses it with the members of the
Guidance Committee who will be overseeing the Exams. When constructing the reading list, a good place to start is the required and recommended readings on the syllabus of the graduate seminars offered in the area of focus. Various lists are also posted on the graduate student Wiki page (collegewiki.usc.edu). To gain exposure to an array of topics and readings currently taught in the area of focus, the student should peruse a variety of syllabi in the area of focus, as well as articles that are published and distributed on the American Sociological Association Teaching Resources Center website. The student should also look at articles and “review essays” on the area of focus in sociological journals.

3. The examiners point out gaps in the reading list and suggest additional readings or specific topic areas.
4. The student adapts the reading list to reflect the examiners’ feedback and submits a finalized reading list (including complete citations) to the examiners. Within each topic area, the student should outline (in a few sentences or paragraphs) the issues or questions she considers to be most important and interesting in that body of literature. Although it is not required, it may be helpful for the student to construct the reading list as an annotated bibliography. The reading list should be submitted to the examiners at least five weeks before the exam date.
5. The student receives the final Standard Qualifying Exam questions on Friday and hands them in on Monday (usually during the first or second weekend of October or March). The first and second exams are spaced two-three weeks apart.

The Qualifying Exam Oral Defense

No later than three weeks following the written portion of the exam, the 5-member Qualifying Committee will administer the Oral Exam covering the two qualifying areas. A substantial portion of the Oral Exam will include questions on the qualifying areas, although some portion of the exam will include a discussion of the student’s plan for the dissertation as it relates to the qualifying exam areas. Discuss this process with you Guidance Committee Chair for clarification of the format of the meeting.

At the conclusion of the exam, the 5-member committee will privately confer as to the student’s performance. In keeping with the USC Graduate School Handbook, the qualifying exam evaluation will be equally balanced between the written and oral portions. Following the faculty discussion the student will be informed as to whether he/she passed the exam.

Options for the exam are as follows:
- Fail
- Provisional Pass (requiring the student to complete additional written or oral work in order to successfully pass the exam)
- Pass
- Honors (reserved for those rare cases of outstanding/ exceptional performance on both the written and the oral portions)

Note: The completion of the Empirical Paper is no longer a prerequisite for the Qualifying Exams.

The Oral Defense process usually works like this:
Before taking the written Qualifying Exams, the student arranges a date/time/place for the Qualifying Exam Defense. This meeting should take place about a month after the completion of the Second Exam (usually early November or late April). All five members of the Guidance Committee need to be present at this meeting, so the student needs to plan ahead in order to accommodate multiple busy schedules.

- All members of the Guidance Committee, including the outside faculty member, must receive copies of the exam essays and evaluations at least two weeks in advance of the meeting.
- The student meets with her Guidance Committee and responds to any questions, comments, or concerns about her Exams. The student will present a brief overview of his/her plans for the dissertation research. A preliminary dissertation proposal may be circulated in advance.
- Following the Oral Defense, the student selects her Dissertation Committee and begins preparation of the Dissertation Prospectus.

Don’t forget the preliminary dissertation proposal

In the months of preparation leading up to the qualifying exams, you may find it difficult to think in detail about your dissertation project. If you succeed with the written quals, however, you have to be ready to discuss your dissertation plans almost immediately. It’s useful to think of the period following the completion of coursework and your empirical project as “the time to develop a dissertation project and study for the quals.” You rob yourself of useful and time-saving dissertation advice if you arrive at the oral portion of your quals without a thoughtful, though preliminary, proposal for the dissertation research. These meetings can be very fruitful, as you will have five faculty focusing their attention on you and your work. You can make the most of it by circulating a short document, outlining potential plans of research, prior to the meeting. Seek guidance from your faculty chair in preparing this document.

Life at the Post-Qualifying Exam Stage

Remember to continuously enroll for at least two units in the fall and spring semester while you are working on the dissertation.
VII. The Dissertation

Writing the dissertation and defending it are the final steps in the program. Like the empirical paper, the dissertation testifies to your ability to conceptualize, conduct, and report the results of original empirical research. Since your goal is a good position in the discipline, you should undertake this process with an eye toward publication.

*Remember,* each of the following steps should be taken with close advisement from your dissertation committee chair, as well as your larger committee.

**Forming the Dissertation Committee**

By this time, you already have formed your five-member guidance committee for the purpose of preparing for and completing the Qualifying Examinations (QEs). After successful completion of the QEs you will form a three to five member dissertation committee: a chairperson, other members from Sociology, and an outside member. The dissertation committee typically consists of select members of your larger guidance committee. Co-chairs are also permitted.

Reducing the five-person guidance committee to the smaller dissertation committee can be easily done at the time of the QEs. The members of the guidance committee are assembled at that time, and there is space on the QE report form to record the composition of the dissertation committee. If your final dissertation committee membership is still in question for you at that time (because your project is insufficiently advanced or members are uncertain of their availability), take note that when the changes are made you will need to file a CHANGE OF COMMITTEE form with the Graduate School.

**The Dissertation Proposal**

In consultation with your dissertation chairperson and committee, you are to develop a formal dissertation prospectus. The prospectus is expected to be ready to defend within six months of the completed Q.E. This proposal should, ideally, be suitable for submission to a foundation for a grant and it is expected that some students will, in fact, submit their proposals for such consideration.

**The Dissertation Proposal Hearing**

When the members of the committee agree that the prospectus is ready to be defended (or in some cases, where a second defense is necessary), a formal prospectus defense is scheduled. Since it is officially a departmental event, the defense date: 1)
must be scheduled and on the department calendar at least two weeks prior to the defense, 2) must be approved by the
graduate director, and 3) must take place at least one semester prior to the actual dissertation defense date. In the rare case of
a proposal oral taking place during the spring or winter break or during the summer, the announcement must take place at
least three weeks in advance. Unlike your Oral Q.E. and your eventual dissertation defense, your proposal defense is open to
all USC faculty and graduate students.

The outcome of the dissertation proposal hearing will be “Acceptance” or “Rejection” of the proposal by the dissertation
committee:

**Evaluation of the Completed Dissertation.**

The official dissertation defense must be attended by all the members of the dissertation committee and may be attended by
any other interested members of the USC faculty and student body. It is suggested but not required that the defense oral take
the form of a seminar presentation by the candidate, followed by a question and answer session. Your committee (especially
your chair) can help you decide which defense format is best for you.

Final approval of the dissertation at the defense oral is not automatic; additional revisions may be required in light of the
discussion that takes place there.

The scheduling rules for your prospectus defense also apply to the final defense oral: they both must be announced in the
department calendar for at least two consecutive weeks before the meetings take place. Exceptions to the rules governing the
scheduling and conduct of the pre-oral and defense oral may be granted upon petition to the graduate committee. In general,
exceptions will be made only when some alternative arrangement has been made to insure that the spirit, if not the letter, of
these policies has been fulfilled.

You must confer closely with the Graduate Advisor in scheduling of the various steps in the preparation and evaluation of the
dissertation.