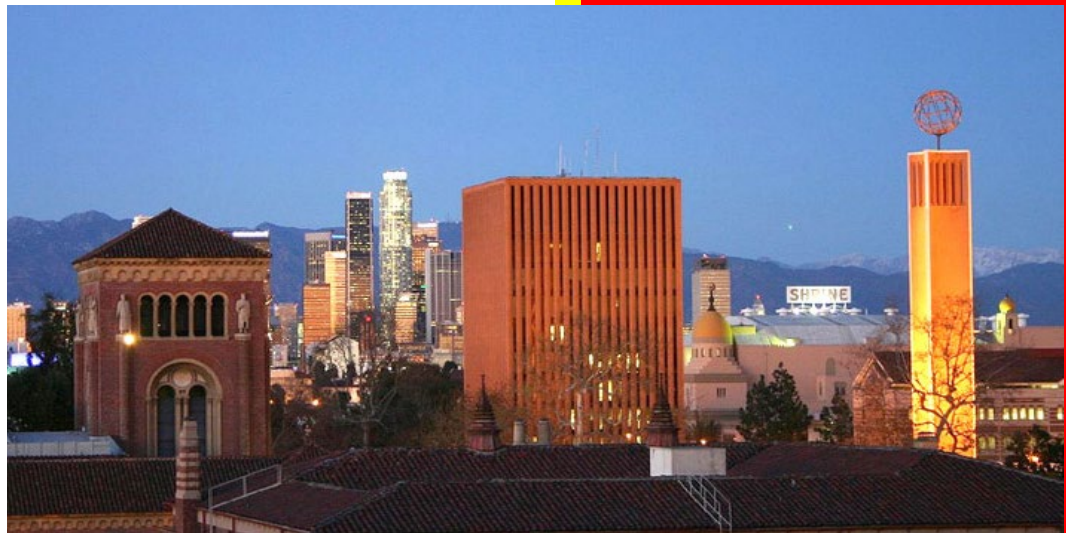


2022/2023

# USC Sociology Graduate Handbook



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## 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 Graduate Program Administrator (GPA) (Stachelle Overland) and the Co-Directors of Graduate Studies (Jody Agius Vallejo and Jennifer Hook) 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 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 first year. Section IV offers important tips on how to seek mentorship. We strive to maintain a friendly, supportive and collegial environment. Much of what you will learn in graduate school will come from conversations with other graduate students. To facilitate this, there are many shared spaces in HSH: shared graduate student offices, the conference room on the 3rd floor, and the 2nd floor communal lounge. We currently provide desks or desk-shares to all students who would like a dedicated workspace in HSH. Graduate students are represented by four elected representatives (representing first, second, third and “fourth and beyond” year graduate cohorts). These representatives attend the monthly faculty meetings (except when personnel or admissions matters are discussed) and provide input to the faculty and information back to graduate students. Students actively participate in department life by serving on key departmental committees, such as the colloquium committee and the race and gender equity committee. 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,

Ann Owens  
Professor of Sociology  
Director of Graduate Studies

Stachelle Overland  
Graduate Program Administrator

## 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. Prior to the Qualifying Exams students should take 12 units per semester. In rare circumstances, students may request extra units. Students should not register for extra units without gaining prior approval. Please contact the GPA 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 30 credits are required courses:

SOCI 510 Sociological Theory I

SOCI 511 Sociological Theory II

SOCI 520 Qualitative Research Methods

SOCI 521 Quantitative Methods and Statistics<sup>1</sup>

SOCI 500 Sociology Professional Seminar (2 units)

SOCI 593 Practicum in Teaching the Liberal Arts (2 units)

SOCI 680 Writing for Publication in Sociology

CHOOSE ONE:

SOCI 620 Advanced Methods – Qualitative Research

SOCI 621 Quantitative Methods and Statistics II

<sup>1</sup> 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.

Regardless of prior experience, you are required to take the entire methods sequence (520/620 and/or 521/621) that aligns with the methodology, or methodologies, required to complete the empirical paper and the dissertation. Students may advance to candidacy only after they have taken the appropriate methods sequence.

### Areas of Specialization:

In addition to required courses mentioned above, students are required to specialize in two areas and to complete at least four units in each of these areas. Specialization in an area means doing sufficient independent reading in that area, as well as coursework, to prepare yourself well for a qualifying exam. Standard Exam Areas in the department include:

- |                                      |                                      |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| · Culture*                           | · Labor & Occupations                |
| · Demography*                        | · Political Sociology*               |
| · Economic Sociology & Organizations | · Race and Ethnicity*                |
| · Family*                            | · Science & Technology*              |
| · Gender*                            | · Social Stratification*             |
| · Globalization                      | · Soc. Movements & Civic Engagement* |
| · Health & Medicine*                 | · Social Theory*                     |
| · Immigration*                       | · Urban Sociology*                   |

\*Areas marked with an asterisk have associated seminars that are offered on a two-year rotation.

**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 faculty members. 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 spring semester of their third year of graduate study.

**5-Member Guidance Committee:**

The 5-Member Guidance Committee will conduct the Qualification Examination of each PhD student. Sociology uses two-person standing qualifying committees for each of our areas. The two standing qualifying review committees (4 members) form the skeleton of the 5-person 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 their Guidance Committee Chair. If the student chooses a chair who is not on one of their standing qualifying committees, that person can be added as a 6th ad hoc member who can run the oral exam. Likewise, if a student wants to add another sociology member who is not currently a member of one of their standard qualifying committees, they may do so.

**Advancing to Candidacy:**

Students advance to Ph.D. candidacy upon the completion of their empirical paper and by passing the qualifying examination. Advancement to candidacy does not guarantee the student will receive a Ph.D.; all degree requirements and department expectations must be satisfied within a timely manner in order for the degree to be conferred.

**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.

**Seven Years and Beyond:**

The Deans in the Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences 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 GPA 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.

## Requirement Deadlines at a Glance:

The following is an overview of deadlines governing the empirical paper, qualifying exam, dissertation prospectus, and dissertation. The consequence of not meeting these deadlines is loss of “good standing” status.

Requirement	Deadline
EP committee formed	Y-1 April 15th
EP one-page proposal approved by chair	Y-1 May 1st
EP preliminary draft to chair	Y-2 April 15 <sup>th</sup>
EP draft to committee	Y-3 Sept 15th
EP approved	Y-3 Dec 15th
Qualifying exams	Y-3 Feb & March
Complete the writing course	Y-3 May 1st
Dissertation committee selected	Y-3 May 1st
Prospectus to chair	Y-4 Sept 15th
Prospectus to committee	Y-4 Nov 1 <sup>st</sup>
Prospectus defense	Y-4 Dec 15 <sup>th</sup>
Dissertation draft to chair	Y-6 Dec 15 <sup>th</sup>
Dissertation draft to committee	Y-6 Feb 15 <sup>th</sup>
Dissertation defense	Y-6 March 15th
Dissertation submission	Y-6 April 1st (SP) or July 1st (SU)

### **Time Limit for Degree Completion:**

As stated in the [USC Catalog](#): "The time limit for completing the doctoral degree is eight years. For students who earned an applicable master's degree within five years prior to admission to the doctoral program, the time limit for completing the doctoral degree is six years from the date of admission to the doctoral program. An academic department or program may grant an extension of one semester at a time, up to a maximum of two years. For PhD students all extensions must also have the approval of the dean of the degree program. In unusual cases, a student's committee and the department chair or program director may petition the Graduate School for further extensions. Approved leaves of absence (up to a total of two years or four semesters) are not counted in the time allowed for completion of degree requirements."

You may be on the job market as early as year five or as late as year seven. For those who have not finished by year seven, we advise you to start actively looking for postdoctoral fellowships; for those who are not finished by year 8, you risk termination from the graduate program.

There are a variety of careers that you can pursue with an advanced sociology degree. Not everyone who completes the PhD in Sociology will want to become an academic or will find a job in academia. Many people with PhD's in sociology build successful careers in government, public policy, non-profits, NGO's and more. The full list of job placements can be viewed here: <https://dornsife.usc.edu/soci/alumni/>

## II. Curriculum

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

**Transfer Credits for Students Entering from a Master’s Program:**

Students entering from a master’s program may petition to transfer credits. It is extremely rare that transfer credits for core courses would be approved, especially for methods courses. More typically, transfer credits are permitted for electives. If a student wishes to transfer credits they must submit course syllabi to the GPA. The GPA, in consultation with the student’s primary advisor and DGS, will then provide the syllabi to the instructor(s) of record to make a decision for each course. It is also extremely rare that a master’s thesis can be “transferred” to fulfill the Empirical Paper requirement. More typically, the master’s thesis may serve as the basis for the EP. Ultimately, it is the decision of the two-member EP committee in consultation with the DGS as to whether a previous master’s thesis may be used to fulfill the EP requirement.

**Suggested Schedule: Year One**

**FALL**

Required Courses (14 units):

- SOCI 510 Sociological Theory I
- SOCI 521 Quantitative Methods I
- SOCI 500 Sociology Professional Seminar (2 units)
- 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
- Look for outside funding possibilities

**SPRING**

Required Courses:

- SOCI 610 Sociological Theory II
  - SOCI 520 Qualitative Methods I
  - SOCI 621 Quantitative Methods and Statistics II
- if completing quant sequence OR Elective

If you are registered for 621 and would also like to take a Soci elective seminar this semester, you may delay 520 until Spring Year 2.

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 the GPA.
- Look for outside funding possibilities
- Prepare or update your CV; repeat at least yearly



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 593 Practicum in Teaching the Liberal Arts (2 units)
- SOCI 620 Advanced Methods – Qualitative Research if completing qual sequence OR Elective
- 1-2 Elective Seminar(s)

If registering for two electives remember to seek permission from the GPA to take 14 units.

Activities:

- Continue research for your Empirical Paper
- Establish professional relationships with faculty
- Submit abstract of Empirical Paper for presentation at a professional conference
  - Submission deadlines: PAA — September; PSA — October; ASA — January.
- Look for outside funding opportunities and draft a grant proposal

**SPRING**

Required Courses:

- 2-3 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 the GPA
- Begin thinking about your outside committee member for your Guidance Committee
- Look for outside funding opportunities and draft a grant proposal

Required Forms:

“Empirical Paper Sign-Off: Part Two” (to be signed by two faculty supervising your empirical paper)

“Appointment of Ph.D. Guidance Committee” (to be signed by four sociology faculty and one outside member who will supervise your Qualifying Examinations)

**Suggested Schedule: Year Three**

**FALL**

Required Courses:

- Specialty concentration electives
- GRSC 800: Studies for the Qualifying Examination (if necessary)

Activities:

- Compile reading lists and study for Qualifying Exams
- Submit “Request to Take Qualifying Examination” form to GPA
- Submit Empirical Paper for conference presentation

Required Forms:

- “Request to Take Qualifying Examination” (to be signed by staff and Guidance Committee who agree that you are ready to take Qualifying Exams)

## **SPRING**

Required Courses:

- SOCI 680 Writing for Publication in Sociology
- GRSC 800: Studies for the Qualifying Examination

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 GPA
- Look for outside funding opportunities and draft a grant proposal
- Submit 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)

### **Suggested Schedule: Year Four**

## **FALL**

Required Courses:

- SOCI 794A Doctoral Dissertation (2 units)

Activities:

- Prepare your Dissertation Prospectus
- 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 GPA
- Look for outside funding opportunities
- Draft a grant proposal
- Submit papers to journals

Required Forms:

- “Approval of Dissertation Prospectus” (to be signed by Dissertation Committee)

### **SPRING**

Required Courses:

SOCI 794B Doctoral Dissertation (2 units)

- Activities:
  - Make steady progress on dissertation and securing external funding
  - Plan for future employment (attend ASA, present papers, submit journal articles, familiarize yourself with the job market)

### **Suggested Schedule: Year Five**

#### **FALL**

Required Courses: SOCI 794C Doctoral Dissertation (2 units)

#### **SPRING**

Required Courses: SOCI 794 D Doctoral Dissertation (2 units)

After Year Five you will register for **SOCI 794Z** (0 units) to keep you at full time while you complete your dissertation.

## **III. Screening**

Every PhD student in the program will be screened by the full faculty annually at the end of the spring semester, beginning in their first year. Screening allows both the faculty and the graduate students to evaluate student progress and goals, and identify opportunities as well as problems.

### **Annual Activities Report:**

At the end of the first year and in each subsequent year in the program, all graduate students are required to submit an annual activities report by the end of Spring semester. The annual report will include an updated CV which notes teaching experience (TA or other), publishing (under review, forthcoming, or published), papers/works in progress, fellowship and grant applications and awards, paper presentations at professional meetings and invited talks, service to the department and university, and other activities of the past year. Students will also be required to include a short paragraph describing their goals for the coming year. Students should also send a current CV to their advisor. The annual report will be utilized to discuss your progress during the Annual Review.

### Annual Review:

The annual full-faculty review of graduate students occurs late in the spring semester. 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. The faculty also utilize the annual activities report to assess your progress. Based on this screening, a student will normally be recommended for continuation in the program and informed if they are making satisfactory progress. The DGS will communicate this information to the graduate student via email, after which the student should confer with their advisor to discuss their evaluation. In some cases, a student may be told that they are not making satisfactory progress, and if this occurs, the student will receive a Warning Letter and 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.).

The faculty advisor may also pass along frank assessments and directives that are intended to help the student (e.g., make timely progress on finishing the empirical paper/dissertation proposal, etc.) as well as commendations on a student's progress, a new publication, a well-defended dissertation proposal or outstanding qualifying exam.

### **Graduate School Screening:**

The Graduate School requires a screening procedure to be administered before the student has taken more than 24 units. Passing this procedure is prerequisite to continuation in the doctoral program. This first official screening is conducted before the end of spring semester the first year during the Annual Review described above. The first year of graduate study is, in effect, a probationary period. To facilitate the screening, the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) gathers the grades from the coursework, and obtains informal feedback from the sociology faculty who have taught the students. This information is discussed confidentially in the Annual Review meeting. The faculty will make a recommendation as to whether the student should continue in the program, or consider other options. The student will receive an email indicating satisfactory progress, a Warning Letter, or if a Warning Letter has already been issued and benchmarks have not been met, a Dismissal Letter.

Please note that at any point, evidence that a student is performing at a less than satisfactory level may be cause for a formal academic review of that student.

### Academic Warning and Dismissal:

Faculty advisers and departments and programs take factors other than satisfactory grades and adequate GPAs into consideration in determining a student's qualifications for an advanced degree. A student's overall academic performance, specific skills and aptitudes, and faculty evaluations will be considered in departmental or program decisions regarding a student's continuation in a master's or doctoral degree program.

Satisfactory progress toward an advanced degree as determined by the faculty is required at all times. Students who fail to make satisfactory progress will be so informed by their department chair, program director, committee chair or school dean via a written warning letter and placed on

academic probation. A warning letter will list the specific areas in which a student is not making satisfactory progress (i.e. failing to form an EP committee, failing to complete the EP by the end of Fall of the third year, failure to pass the qualifying exams by the end of Spring of the third year, failure to form a dissertation committee, failure to defend the dissertation proposal by the end of Fall of the fourth year), and it will include specific guidelines for addressing the problem and the steps that will need to be taken to return to good standing with clear deadlines for completion. A written summary of expectations for improvement will be sent to the student and the adviser, and a copy will go in the student's department file. The summary should specify the student's academic deficiencies, the steps necessary to correct them (if deemed correctable), and the period of time that is allowed for their correction (normally one academic semester). At the end of the warning period, the Graduate Studies Committee will review the student's progress and notify the student of its proposed actions. For students on academic warning or probation, possible outcomes of a later review include: (1) restoration to good standing; (2) continued probation, again with guidelines for necessary remedial steps; or (3) dismissal from the program. Any dismissal requires a discussion and vote of the full faculty. Students may also be dismissed immediately for specific and egregious violations of the USC Student Code of Conduct, as described in [Part B of the USC Student Handbook](#).

#### Forming the Guidance Committee:

The 5-Member Guidance Committee will conduct the Qualification Examination of each PhD student. Sociology uses two-person standing qualifying committees for each of our areas. The two standing qualifying review committees (4 members) form the skeleton of the 5-person 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 their Guidance Committee Chair.

If the student chooses a chair who is not on one of their standing qualifying committees, that person can be added as a 6th ad hoc member who can run the oral exam. Likewise, if a student wants to add another sociology member who is not currently a member of one of their standard qualifying committees, they may do so.

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. These will be taken in the spring semester of the third year. After you have passed the Qualifying Exams, it is likely that you will ask three of the Guidance Committee members to supervise your dissertation. 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 GPA 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. Dornsife College will not provide funding for students beyond the eighth year.

#### Terminal Master's Degree:

Although the department does not typically award a terminal MA, a terminal MA may be awarded in some cases. This degree can be the decision of the student or the decision of the department if a student is not making adequate progress. To receive a terminal MA students must complete a minimum of 32 units including all required courses (with the exception of SOCI 593 and SOCI 680).

## 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 advisors each semester as you're deciding about your classes, and then as many times as is necessary during the year to update them 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.

By the end of your first year, you should identify a main advisor. The main advisor 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 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. Different faculty have different mentoring styles. You should be open with your chair (as well as yourself) about what kind of mentoring you think you want, so that together you can work out a relationship you both will find fruitful for your development. 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. 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.

### Dissertation Progress Meeting:

A dissertation progress meeting should occur annually after the student has advanced to candidacy. The student should schedule the meeting with their advisor/dissertation chair, typically at the start of the fall semester. The student should discuss their progress on their dissertation with their advisor and get advice on any problems that may have arisen during the early stages of writing. These meetings are important for both the student and the advisor and they may result in clear plans for the coming year, professional advice, or early interventions into developing problems or time to degree issues. To prepare for these meetings, students should set an agenda and provide materials that support accomplishing this agenda (e.g., chapters, chapter outlines) to faculty two weeks prior to the meeting.

### **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.

Students should talk to the DGS if they feel that the mentoring relationship with their advisor is strained. If their advisor is DGS, they should talk to the department chair or another member of their committee. They should also be taking it on themselves to seek build relationships with different faculty if primary advisors are not meeting expectations.

## 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. An EP is ready for faculty approval when it shows that the student is able to assemble data in a methodologically rigorous way and use conceptual framework(s) to analyze the data sociologically. While it is ideal for an EP to be close to ready for plausible submission to a sociological journal, that is not a requirement for approving an EP. The EP should be approved prior to enrolling in Soci 680: Writing for Publication in Sociology. This course is designed to further revise your EP into a journal submission. Original 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 Qualitative or Quantitative Methods sequence.

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 sometimes 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. If 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 GPA or on the department website. Once signed, return the form to the GPA.
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 your Qual-1 or Quant-1 methods course.
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 GPA.
5. Present the paper at a professional conference or setting. It's a good idea to present a "paper in progress" at the American or Pacific Sociological Association annual meetings. ASA is held in August with a submission deadline in January. PSA is usually held in a west coast city during the month of April with a submission deadline in October. 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.

### **SOCI 680 Writing for Publication in Sociology:**

You must complete your empirical paper by January of your third year. In spring of your third year you will register for Soci 680. This course is designed to turn your paper into a journal manuscript by the end of the semester. All students are expected to submit their manuscript for

publication at the end the course. In is increasingly important to have a solo-authored publication based on your empirical paper research on your CV prior to going on the job market.

### **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.

## **VI. The Qualifying Exams (QEs)**

Each student in the program must take a Qualifying Exam in two standard areas during the Spring 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.

### **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:**

The 5-Member Guidance Committee will conduct the Qualification Examination of each PhD student. Sociology uses two-person standing qualifying committees for each of our areas. The two standing qualifying review committees (4 members) form the skeleton of the 5-person guidance committee.

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 three questions per area. The student will write three 8-10 page, double-spaced, typed essays. Although the questions on the Exam may be similar to those on Exams from previous years, these questions will not be given to the student in advance. Some exams may provide the option for students to choose from 4-6 questions on the exam (i.e., the exam may consist of six questions of which the student will answer three).

Exam areas are listed on page 4.

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. 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. 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 they consider 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. The first and second exams are spaced three-four weeks apart (for example, the first in February and the second in March).

### **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 they passed the exam.

Options for the exam are as follows:

- Fail Fails to meet minimum standards
- Re-write Inadequate. Requires additional written work to pass
- Pass Demonstrates satisfactory mastery

The Oral Defense process usually works like this:

1. Before taking the written Qualifying Exams, the student arranges a date/time/place for the Qualifying Exam Defense. This meeting should take place about three weeks after the completion of the Second Exam (usually in 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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.

### **The Outside Member:**

The format of qualifying exams varies from unit to unit, so your outside member may be unfamiliar with the process in Soci. You'll want to communicate the following to your outside member:

Students take quals in two standard areas. Each area is staffed by two Soci faculty members responsible for grading the exam. All faculty members then ask the student questions during the oral exam. The oral exam also generally includes a discussion of preliminary dissertation ideas. The student sends the entire committee (including the outside member) all exam answers, exam evaluations, and a short preliminary proposal of dissertation ideas at least one week before the exam.

The outside member does not grade the exams, but is given copies prior to the oral exam. Ideally, the outside member reviews the score sheets and the student's answers to any questions that fall within their areas of expertise. The outside member may contribute as little, or as much as they like to the discussion. Procedurally, the purpose of the outside member is to act as an observer and to ensure that the process is "fair." Students are encouraged to meet with their outside member prior to the exam to discuss their research interests.

### **A Typical Schedule:**

- By April 15th 2nd year - students chooses two exam areas in consultation with faculty advisers and submit areas as part of annual activities report

- Early summer - Faculty committees are established and students are notified of committee assignments
- Summer - Students contact faculty, build or revise reading lists, and secure faculty approval of lists
- Fall-Spring - Read and write memos, continue to communicate with faculty about lists and preparation, begin to sketch out ideas for the dissertation
- Spring of 3rd year - Take exams

### **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. Remember that you will have wanted to cultivate a relationship with a faculty member outside of the department who can serve on your dissertation committee.

### **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.

**A dissertation progress meeting should occur annually after the student has advanced to candidacy (see Section IV).**

#### **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 GPA in scheduling of the various steps in the preparation and evaluation of the dissertation.

## **VIII. Resources**

The department, college, and university offer a number of resources that graduate students may find useful as they advance through the program.

- The department maintains a **Blackboard Organizations** page for the graduate program. Here you can find a variety of resources including examples of successful fellowship and grant applicants, dissertations proposals, and job market materials. New resources are added regularly.
- Soci graduate students coordinate a **Graduate Mentorship Program** that pairs incoming graduate students with more advanced students to ease the academic, professional, and social transition to a PhD program. Mentors and mentees are matched based on overlap in faculty mentors, research interests, and incoming students' stated needs. All mentors and mentees are expected to attend a Fall Introductory luncheon. Graduate mentors provide

advice on things less often discussed with faculty mentors: maintaining a social life, balancing coursework with research, building a social media presence, or finding a place to live.

- The department supports a graduate student **Fellowship Coordinator** position each AY. The coordinator maintains a database of fellowship and grant opportunities, reminds students of upcoming deadlines, coordinates peer review of proposals, and schedules informational sessions for major fellowships.
- The Graduate School holds a yearly [Fellowship Boot Camp](#) designed for early career PhD students who are applying for the NSF GRFP and Ford Pre-Doctoral Fellowships. It is a 10-day intensive writing workshop in which participants learn about these fellowships and complete a personal statement. Participants may be eligible for a travel or research award of up to \$1,000 if they submit a complete proposal to one of the identified fellowships.
- USC is an institutional member to the [National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity](#) (NCFDD), which means that you all can register for individual accounts for free. They have a ton of materials for graduate students including a Dissertation Success Curriculum and a three-part series on the academic job market. They have a variety of materials for earlier stages as well, such as on establishing a writing practice and overcoming imposter syndrome.
- The College provides a 5-year Dornsife [PhD Academy](#) to support students with consistent professionalization programming and training in leadership principles, financial management, public speaking, communication, and other cross-cutting skills. Students can elect to pursue a Ph.D. Academy Certificate in Communication, Leadership, and Management.
- USC is committed to its [Policy on Prohibited Discrimination, Harassment, and Retaliation](#). Reports of discrimination, harassment, retaliation, and sexual misconduct under the Policy will be addressed by the [Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX \(EEO-TIX Office\)](#). The EEO-TIX Office provides a centralized resource for all community members -- student, faculty, and staff policies -- to streamline access to reporting options, resources, and procedural options.
- The [Center for Excellence in Teaching \(CET\)](#) promotes a vibrant culture of teaching and learning, providing teaching and course design resources for the USC community, schools, and faculty.
- Many of our students choose to complete the [Future Faculty Teaching Institute](#). The Institute is a training program for USC graduate students and postdoctoral fellows intended to prepare future faculty to pursue excellence in their teaching, beginning with exposure to an essential background in course design and teaching. Participants who complete a minimum of 12 sessions will be awarded a certificate of completion.
- The department maintains an active [Alpha Kappa Delta \(AKD\)](#) chapter. AKD is the international sociology honor society and was founded in 1920 at USC. AKD provides additional programming (e.g., teaching workshops, editor's panels) and funding opportunities.

## IX. Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

### **Academic Conduct:**

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” <https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

### **Support Systems:**

*Counseling and Mental Health* - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call  
[studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling/](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling/)

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline* - 1 (800) 273-8255 - 24/7 on call  
<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP)* - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press "0" after hours - 24/7 on call  
<https://studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault/>

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)* - (213) 740-5086/Title IX - (213) 821-8298  
<https://equity.usc.edu/>, <http://titleix.usc.edu/>

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

*Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment* - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298  
[https://usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care\\_report/](https://usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report/)

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity |Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs* - (213) 740-0776  
<http://dsp.usc.edu>

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.



*USC Campus Support and Intervention - (213) 821-4710*

<https://uscsa.usc.edu/>

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

*Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101*

<https://diversity.usc.edu/>

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

*USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call*

<http://dps.usc.edu/>, <http://emergency.usc.edu>

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

*USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call*

<http://dps.usc.edu>

Non-emergency assistance or information.

## NOTES