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USC Sociology Graduate Handbook



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Table of Contents

Welcome	3
I. Requirements Overview	4
Core Requirements	4
Areas of Specialization	4
Requirement Deadlines at a Glance	6
II. Curriculum	6
III. Screening	10
Annual Activities Report	10
Annual Review	11
Academic Warning and Dismissal	11
Seven Years and Beyond	12
Terminal Master’s Degree	12
IV. Mentorship, Advising and Faculty Committees	12
Empirical Paper Committee	13
Forming the Guidance Committee	13
Dissertation Committee.....	13
Dissertation Progress Meetings	14
V. The Empirical Paper	15
VI. The Qualifying Exams (QEs)	17
VII. The Dissertation	19
VIII. Resources	20
IX. Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems	22
Appendix A: Program Dismissal	24

Welcome

Welcome to the PhD program in the department of Sociology at USC. This handbook explains the procedures and requirements of the PhD program. The Graduate Program Administrator (GPA) and the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) are available to assist you in dealing with any complexities and to answer questions you may encounter as you navigate through the program. As you enter the PhD program, you will be assigned two initial faculty advisors. 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 seminar 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. The Sociology Graduate Student Association (SGSA) partners with faculty on a range of department activities and is a key source of communication between faculty and students. USC Sociology graduate students also have a vibrant tradition of organizing professionalization workshops and participating in colloquia. Our department maintains an AKD chapter, and sociology graduate students have participated in Graduate Student Government at USC. We wish you a successful academic year ahead!

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 28 credits are required courses:

SOCI 500 Sociology Professional Seminar (2 units)

SOCI 510 Sociological Theory I

SOCI 511 Sociological Theory II

SOCI 520 Qualitative Research Methods

SOCI 521 Quantitative Methods and Statistics¹

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

¹ 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 the required courses mentioned above, students are required to specialize in two areas and expected 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 Qualifying Exam Areas in the department include:

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

*Areas marked with an asterisk have associated seminars that are offered on a two-year rotation, subject to faculty availability.

Empirical Paper:

Success in the field of sociology requires involvement in the conduct of empirical research. Relatively early in the program, 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 advisor and the DGS — 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.

Five-Member Guidance Committee:

The Five-Member Guidance Committee will conduct the Qualification Examination of each PhD student. (Details on forming the guidance committee are found in Section IV of this handbook).

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 Dissertation Completion Plan for all PhD students entering their 7th year in the program or above.

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, which, if not addressed, could lead to program dismissal.

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 th
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 st
Prospectus defense	Y-4 Dec 15 th
Dissertation draft to chair	Y-6 Dec 15 th
Dissertation draft to committee	Y-6 Feb 15 th
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 Catalogue](#): “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.”

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, NGOs and more. The full list of our PhD alumni job placements can be viewed here: <https://dornsife.usc.edu/soci/alumni/>

II. Curriculum

If you wish to follow a sequence other than that 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 theory or 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 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.

Required forms are available on the Sociology Graduate Program Blackboard site.

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
- Become familiar with 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 in advance of annual screening
- Develop a plan for summer with your advisors that includes making EP progress

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
- TA or RA work

SPRING

Required Courses:

- 2-3 Electives

Activities:

- Continue working on Empirical Paper
- Present Empirical Paper at a professional conference (e.g., PSA, ASA, PAA)
- Select qualifying exam areas by May (reported in advance of annual screening)
- Begin thinking about your outside committee member for your Qualifying Exam Guidance Committee
- Look for outside funding opportunities and draft a grant proposal
- TA or RA work
- Develop a plan for summer with your advisors that includes making EP progress

Suggested Schedule: Year Three

FALL

Required Courses:

- 1-2 Elective seminars
- GRSC 800: Studies for the Qualifying Examination (if necessary)

Activities:

- Study for Qualifying Exams
- Submit final EP draft to committee for approval
- Submit Empirical Paper Sign-Off Part two form to GPA
- Submit Empirical Paper for conference presentation
- Secure an outside member for qualifying exam guidance committee
- TA or RA work

Required Forms:

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

SPRING

Required Courses:

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

Activities:

- Complete Appointment of Ph.D. Guidance Committee form prior to qualifying exam 1
- 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
- Submit “Appointment or Change of Committee” form to GPA
- Look for outside funding opportunities and draft a grant proposal
- Submit Empirical Paper for journal submission
- TA or RA work
- Develop a plan for summer with your advisors that includes an EP publication plan and progress on the dissertation proposal

Required Forms:

- “Appointment or Change of Qualifying Exam or Dissertation Committee” (to be signed by four sociology faculty and one outside member who will supervise your Qualifying Examinations; separate form to appoint your dissertation committee)

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
- TA or RA work

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)
 - TA or RA work
 - Develop a plan for summer with your advisors that includes progress on the dissertation

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** 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 identify any challenges and opportunities facing students and to provide you with feedback that will advance your progress in the program. During the annual spring screening, the entire tenure-track 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 a letter or 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 DGS and GPA gather grades from 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 advisors and departments and programs take factors other than 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 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). The warning letter will specify the student's academic deficiencies, the steps necessary to correct them (if deemed correctable), and the period of time (probationary period) that is allowed for their correction (normally one academic semester). The warning letter will be sent to the student and the advisor, and a copy will go in the student's department file. At the end of the probationary period, the Graduate 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. 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](#). For more details about dismissals, please see Appendix A.

Seven Years and Beyond

The Deans in the Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences require a mandatory Dissertation Completion Plan for all PhD students entering their 7th year in the program or above. 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 have a stand-alone MA program, a terminal MA may be awarded in some cases if a student leaves the program before completing the PhD. 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 faculty advisors before you begin your first year of graduate school. Your responsibility is to meet with your advisors at the start of each semester to discuss your plans, 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.

Empirical Paper Committee

The Empirical Paper Committee consists of a chair (typically a student's main advisor) and reader that the student selects among tenure-track RTPC faculty with appointments in the department. The committee is appointed through the form "Empirical Paper Sign-Off Record, part 1."

Forming the Guidance Committee

The Five-Member Guidance Committee will conduct the Qualification Examination of each PhD student. Sociology uses two-person standing qualifying exam committees for each area. The two standing qualifying exam committees (four faculty members) form the skeleton of the five-person guidance committee. The student selects a committee chair among the four Sociology faculty members. (If the student chooses a chair who is not on one of their areas' standing committees, that person can be added as a 6th ad hoc member who can run the oral exam.) 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. This "outside" member may be a faculty member they've taken a class with, share interests with, or someone their advisor suggests. 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 oral exam. 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.

To establish the committee, you will need the form "Appointment or Change of Qualifying Exam or Dissertation 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 is there for your benefit, but it is your responsibility to seek guidance from them.

Dissertation Committee

The Dissertation Committee consists of at least three and no more than five people who oversee the dissertation process. At minimum, the committee consists of two Sociology faculty members and one USC faculty member from outside Sociology ("outside member"). To establish the committee, you will need the form "Appointment or Change of Qualifying Exam or Dissertation Committee."

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 Meetings

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 the DGS, they should talk to the department chair or another member of their committee. Students should also take initiative to build relationships with multiple faculty members, whether or not their primary advisors are meeting expectations.

V. The Empirical Paper

The Empirical Paper (EP) 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. In other departments and universities, this is sometimes called the “MA thesis” or “qualifying paper.”

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. 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.

How do you shape a research question and project?

1. Devise a research question grounded in a theoretical debate
2. Identify methods that allow you to 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, modeled after a sociological journal article in format
6. Revise according to your EP committee’s feedback
7. 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 or 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 article-like in both length and form (approximately 30 pages). The paper must be written in clear English. Discuss prospective journals for publication 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 in consultation with the DGS, and an oral presentation at a conference or similar setting. 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 two faculty members to constitute your "Empirical Paper Committee" during your first year.
2. Ask these faculty members to sign "Empirical Paper Sign-Off Part One," agreeing to supervise, by the end of your first year. These forms are available from the GPA or on the Graduate Program Blackboard page. 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 course: the Qualitative or Quantitative Methods sequence and Proseminar.
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 approval portion of the form.
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. Remember to return the signed form to the GPA.

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 SOCI680. 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 of the course. It 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.

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. 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. Exam questions should balance core knowledge in the area of focus with the many alternative pathways that more specialized interests might follow.

Graduate students are expected to complete at least four units in each of their Qualifying Exam areas of specializations. Sometimes course offerings do not provide this opportunity, and in these cases, students could ask faculty to consider supervising a directed reading course. Regardless, students are expected to learn the bulk of the material for QEs independently. Students must complete at least 32 units before taking the Qualifying Exam.

Written Qualifying Examination:

Students choose their QE areas in the annual activities report at the end of their second year. The department has moved to standardized qualifying exams with standing reading lists. Faculty are asked to provide reading lists by September 1, and the GPA distributes these to students and posts them on Blackboard. Some faculty permit minor customization of the list, e.g., adding in 5-10 readings on a topic of the student's choice. If the student is interested in doing this, they should ask the faculty ASAP.

Students then spend fall and spring semester of the 3rd year preparing for the qualifying exam by reading the material on the reading lists, writing memos and outlines to help them synthesize the material, and meeting with faculty if needed. Students should also identify and confirm the outside committee member and chair of their five-person guidance committee and complete the appointment of committee form prior to taking the written exam.

The GPA will communicate the dates of the two QEs to students (typically four weeks apart). The QEs are distributed to students on a Friday and due the following Monday. Students may use notes and other sources to independently complete the QEs. The format of the qualifying 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).

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. Faculty may request that a student rewrite one or all of the essays. The rewrite can be completed in the designated timeline (see below).

Qualifying Exam Oral Defense:

Approximately three weeks after completing the written portion of the exam, the student should complete the oral exam. The student is responsible for scheduling this meeting in advance and should do so before taking the written exam. 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. The student can reserve a room in HSH for the defense via this link: <https://dornsife.usc.edu/soci/reserve-a-room/> The student sends the entire committee (including the outside member) all exam answers, exam evaluations, and (optional) a short preliminary proposal of dissertation ideas at least one week before the exam.

A substantial portion of the Oral Exam will include questions on the qualifying areas. 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. The student should discuss the oral exam format with the committee chair in advance. While the discussion of the dissertation is informal (and not evaluated as part of the oral exam), it’s a valuable opportunity to have a conversation with multiple faculty members. 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 QEs, however, you have to be ready to finalize your dissertation plans almost immediately. It’s useful to think of the period following the completion of coursework and your EP 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 QEs 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.

At the conclusion of the exam, the five-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

Typical QE Timeline

Week in 3 rd year spring semester	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Student completes appointment of committee form													
Faculty send QE1 exam to GPA													
GPA distributes QE 1 on Friday													
Student submits QE 1 to GPA on Monday													

committees *must* include a USC faculty member from outside the Sociology department. All committees must have a majority of members from the student's home program.

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 QE. 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. Discuss the format of the prospectus with your advisor.

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), the student schedules a formal prospectus defense. The student can reserve a room in HSH for the defense via this link: <https://dornsife.usc.edu/soci/reserve-a-room/> 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: Dissertation Defense

When the members of the committee agree that the dissertation is ready to be defended, the student schedules a formal dissertation defense. Often the chair and the student develop a strategy for the final stages of the dissertation together to ensure all committee members have the chance to provide feedback on chapters before the defense. The student can reserve a room in HSH for the defense via this link: <https://dornsife.usc.edu/soci/reserve-a-room/> 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. Typically, the candidate makes a presentation, followed by a question and answer session. Your committee (especially your chair) can help you decide on the best format.

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 student is responsible for scheduling the defense in accordance with the [Graduate School's submission deadlines and requirements](#), allowing adequate time for potential revision.

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 provides financial support through research collaboration and enhancement grants, as well as travel awards. See <https://dornsife.usc.edu/soci/financial-support/> for further information. As of 2023-24, travel awards for participation in professional meetings are available up to \$750 for one conference and \$1250 total in one academic year (students may use \$1250 for one international meeting)
- The department maintains a **Blackboard Organizations** page for the graduate program. Here you can find a variety of resources including required forms, examples of successful

fellowship and grant applicants, dissertations proposals, and job market materials. New resources are added regularly.

- The SGSA coordinates 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. Graduate mentors provide advice on things less often discussed with faculty: maintaining a social life, balancing coursework with research, building a social media presence, or finding a place to live.
- The Graduate School holds a yearly [Fellowship Boot Camp](#) designed for early career PhD students who are applying for the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program. 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 students can register for individual accounts for free. They have a range 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.
- 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.
- 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.

IX. Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Integrity:

The University of Southern California is a learning community committed to developing successful scholars and researchers dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the dissemination of ideas. Academic misconduct, which includes any act of dishonesty in the production or submission of academic work, compromises the integrity of the person who commits the act and can impugn the perceived integrity of the entire university community. It stands in opposition to the university's mission to research, educate, and contribute productively to our community and the world.

All students are expected to submit assignments that represent their own original work, and that have been prepared specifically for the course or section for which they have been submitted. You may not submit work written by others or "recycle" work prepared for other courses without obtaining written permission from the instructor(s).

Other violations of academic integrity include, but are not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, fabrication (e.g., falsifying data), collusion, knowingly assisting others in acts of academic dishonesty, and any act that gains or is intended to gain an unfair academic advantage.

The impact of academic dishonesty is far-reaching and is considered a serious offense against the university. All incidences of academic misconduct will be reported to the Office of Academic Integrity and could result in outcomes such as failure on the assignment, failure in the course, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

For more information about academic integrity see [the student handbook](#) or the [Office of Academic Integrity's website](#), and university policies on [Research and Scholarship Misconduct](#).

Please ask your instructor if you are unsure what constitutes unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment, or what information requires citation and/or attribution.

Students and Disability Accommodations:

USC welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. [The Office of Student Accessibility Services](#) (OSAS) is responsible for the determination of appropriate accommodations for students who encounter disability-related barriers. Once a student has completed the OSAS process (registration, initial appointment, and submitted documentation) and accommodations are determined to be reasonable and appropriate, a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) will be available to generate for each course. The LOA must be given to each course instructor by the student and followed up with a discussion. This should be done as early in the semester as possible as accommodations are not retroactive. More information can be found at osas.usc.edu. You may contact OSAS at (213) 740-0776 or via email at osasfrontdesk@usc.edu.

Support Systems:

[Counseling and Mental Health](#) - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

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

[988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours

a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

[Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services \(RSVP\)](#) - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call
Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

[Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX \(EEO-TIX\)](#) - (213) 740-5086

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

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

[The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) - (213) 740-0776

OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

[USC Campus Support and Intervention](#) - (213) 740-0411

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

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#) - (213) 740-2101

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

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

Non-emergency assistance or information.

[Office of the Ombuds](#) - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

[Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice](#) - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.

Appendix A: Program Dismissal

Our goal as a department is to support students through the conferral of the PhD. Our program does not admit people with the intention of dismissal or “weeding out,” like some large programs do. However, sometimes our PhD program is not a fit with students’ interests, talents, or actions, and in those situations, dismissal may occur. Students may also decide to withdraw on their own for a variety of reasons. Starting and not finishing a PhD program is not uncommon: of cohorts entering USC Dornsife Social Sciences PhD programs from 2007 to 2013, about 20% of students exited their PhD program, often with a terminal MA.¹

Typically, there are two reasons a dismissal occurs in the Sociology program: academic integrity violation or failure to make sufficient academic progress. Academic integrity violations typically involve plagiarism of coursework or program requirements like the EP, qualifying exams, or dissertation. The types of cases that substantiate dismissal are major plagiarism incidences—minor incidences like forgetting to add a citation for a sentence, or failing to put a phrase in quotes can be corrected in revision as suggested by faculty. Our department does not tolerate plagiarism. Academic integrity is the heart of what we do as scholars and researchers. Representing someone else’s work as your own is not acceptable. In the case that plagiarism is detected by a faculty member, the faculty member would contact the DGS, who would review the claim. In consultation with the faculty member, graduate program administrator, and/or graduate committee, the DGS would determine whether the case warranted dismissal. The DGS would inform the student of the decision, process paperwork for dismissal with the graduate school, and report the case to USC’s [Office of Academic Integrity \(OAI\)](#). OAI follows its own independent process (as described on its website) to determine whether a preponderance of evidence substantiates the claim. If a student is dismissed for academic integrity violations, they cannot appeal the dismissal. Information on avoiding plagiarism is available on the Sociology Graduate Program Blackboard site under Resources. Other behavioral violations of USC’s [Student Handbook](#) could also constitute dismissal.

The second main reason dismissals occur is when a student fails to make sufficient academic progress. Our department benchmarks are designed to help students gain substantive expertise in sociological subfields for future teaching and research activities, gain skills to conduct independent research, and gain experience creating research articles and other products that demonstrate their skills. The graduate school limits [time to completion](#) to eight years—six years for those that earned a prior master’s degree (the department can petition for additional time up to two years, which has typically been awarded). We want to ensure our students can finish in a timely fashion, so our program benchmarks are on a six-year timeline. We try to be accommodating with deadlines, acknowledging that different types of work proceed on different timelines and that students face different challenges and opportunities. However, to ensure graduation within the required time to completion, we do need to ensure progress. The DGS learns about academic progress from students, their advisors, and faculty who teach graduate seminars during annual review and through communication throughout the year. If the DGS and/or advisor is concerned about the pace of progress or the quality of work, that will be expressed to the student in the annual review letter and/or email or verbal communication at other points during the year. Typically, the advisor and/or DGS issues several “soft warnings” to communicate expectations and deadlines in the case of insufficient progress, e.g., setting deadlines with the student. The department does its best to provide multiple opportunities over a substantial period of time to support students’ progress. If progress continues to be lacking, a warning letter is issued (reviewed by the graduate school). The warning letter includes specific achievements and deadlines required to avoid dismissal from the program. The DGS and/or advisor typically meet with the student to ensure they understand the expectations, and the student signs the warning letter indicating they understand and will abide by its terms.

¹ The available data at <https://graduateschool.usc.edu/about-us/phd-program-characteristics/> do not distinguish between dismissals and student-initiated withdrawal.

If the terms of a warning letter are not met, the DGS and/or advisor writes a memo about the student's case to be shared with the department graduate committee (comprising faculty members and the graduate program administrator) for review. The graduate committee, DGS, and student's advisor meet to discuss the case, and a final decision is made as to whether dismissal is warranted. The memo and decision are then shared with the department's executive committee (chair, vice chair, DGS, DUS, and future vice chair), who reviews the case to ensure appropriate procedures were followed. If the final decision is to dismiss a student, the DGS, advisor, and graduate program administrator meet with the student to share this news. Ultimately, a dismissal letter will be issued (reviewed by the graduate school), effective immediately. Students can appeal the dismissal decision (except in cases of academic integrity violations, lack of continued registration, or professional standards violations), following the graduate school's procedures.²

Typically, failure to make sufficient academic progress entails failure to meet department benchmarks in a timely manner, as determined by the handbook and communication with the advisor and/or DGS—e.g., to successfully finish coursework, write an acceptable EP, or pass the dissertation prospectus.³ One other situation that warrants failure to make sufficient academic progress is failure to convene a committee and secure an advisor. We try to admit students based on their fit with *multiple* faculty members to ensure sufficient mentorship, and the DGS is available to assist the student in trying to form a committee if needed. However, if a student is ultimately unable to convene an EP or dissertation committee, they would be dismissed because committees are required to meet program benchmarks. Moreover, it is not in a student's best interest to remain in the program in this situation; it is tremendously difficult to complete a PhD without faculty expertise or support.

Dismissals are incredibly consequential decisions that faculty do not take lightly. We know dismissal can be an extremely difficult experience for the student involved. We try to provide multiple opportunities for students to get back on track if they are struggling to make timely progress. We dismiss a student when we do not see a path forward for them in our program and when we feel that the student should find another environment in which to thrive that is a better fit for their gifts and talents. We also know that dismissals can be difficult for all students, both because a member of the community is lost and because dismissals can raise anxiety and fear about one's own future. Due to privacy rules, specific dismissal cases cannot be discussed (and this lack of transparency can compound other students' fear and anxiety), but students are invited to speak to the DGS if they have general questions about dismissals. If you are ever concerned about your own progress, please speak to your advisor and/or the DGS.

² More information on the warning letter, dismissal, and appeal process can be found under the Academic Warning and Dismissal tab at: <https://graduateschool.usc.edu/current-students/graduate-student-policies-and-procedures/>

³ Note that failing qualifying exams may result in an automatic dismissal that does not require a warning letter. This is extremely rare. More commonly, a student will be asked to rewrite one or more essays and ultimately successfully pass qualifying exams.