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USC Sociology Graduate Handbook



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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 Staff Graduate Administrator (SGA) 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,

Jody Agius Vallejo
Professor of Sociology
Director of Graduate Studies

Introduction to the Graduate School

The mission of the USC Graduate School is to provide a distinguished educational experience at the graduate level for an outstanding and diverse student body, to support and celebrate graduate student achievements, and to lead in establishing and communicating policies, standards, and processes related to graduate education.

Purposes of the PhD Program Handbook

Graduate student success is the result of a collaborative effort among students working at their highest levels, faculty dedicated to high-quality mentorship, and staff who coordinate and advise. One of the most important ingredients in this cooperative effort is a shared understanding about what is required and what resources and support are available.

This document serves as a roadmap for PhD students. It offers a review of expectations for students and for the faculty and administrative staff who support them. The handbook provides three types of information: 1) guidance on program requirements, including university and departmental policies, resources, and expectations; 2) practical advice for common challenges at USC; and 3) information about relevant support services and professional development opportunities.

We hope that the handbook serves as a valuable resource for PhD success, providing students with the information to complete their programs while maintaining academic momentum and personal well-being.

The handbook includes policies and practices noted in the university's catalogue, collective bargaining agreement, and other sources. It does not fully address the terms of the collective bargaining agreement, which is available for your reference on the Graduate School's [website](#).

Department of Sociology Program Requirements

The PhD at USC

The Doctor of Philosophy at USC is a full-time program. It is a rigorous course of study that requires original research, professional maturity, sustained intellectual focus, and academic discipline. Students are expected to devote full-time study to this degree and not undertake employment or other time-consuming commitments during the academic year, from the end of August through mid-May.

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. Students may request extra units and should not register for extra units without gaining prior approval. Please contact the SGA 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, we expect you will have successfully taken an undergraduate statistics course. Discuss any concerns about this with the DGS and SOCI 521 faculty. If necessary, you can take 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/ies 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
- Family
- Gender
- Health & Medicine
- Immigration
- Political Sociology
- Race and Ethnicity
- Social Stratification
- Soc Movements & Civic Engagement
- Social Theory
- Urban Sociology

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.

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/dornsife-alumni/>

II. Curriculum

If you wish to follow a sequence other than that recommended, please consult with the DGS 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 SGA. The SGA, 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 Brightspace 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 AND/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 SGA
- 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 SGA to take 14 units.

Activities:

- Continue research for your Empirical Paper
- Attend sociology department colloquia
- 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
- Attend sociology department colloquia

- 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
- Attend sociology department colloquia
- Submit final EP draft to committee for approval
- Submit Empirical Paper Sign-Off Part two form to SGA
- 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 exams
- Attend sociology department colloquia
- 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 SGA
- 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:

- Attend sociology department colloquia
- 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 SGA
- 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:

- Attend sociology department colloquia
- 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 prompted to provide information about successes, challenges, and 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. Students must pass this procedure to continue in the PhD program. If students fail the screening procedure, they will be dismissed from the PhD program without a written warning. Students who fail the screening are entitled to appeal pursuant to the Academic Dismissal Appeal procedure set forth in Section IV of this Handbook. This first official screening is conducted before the end of spring semester in 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 SGA 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.

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 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 SGA 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 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 and RTPC faculty with appointments in the department (typically RTPC faculty cannot chair committees). 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 your chair is 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 EP? 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 SGA or on the Graduate Program Brightspace page. Once signed, return the form to the SGA.
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 SGA.

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 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.

VI. The Qualifying Exams (QEs)

The qualifying examination is designed to assess a student’s readiness to undertake independent research for their dissertation. It is comprehensive and includes both written and oral parts.

Before taking the qualifying examination, the student must have met all the university’s and program’s requirements for the PhD degree, except the dissertation. The student must have a GPA of at least 3.0 on all USC coursework available for graduate credit and the approval of their qualifying exam committee to proceed to the exam. Additional information can be found in Appendix B.

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 focus area 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 or take courses outside the department. 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.

If not otherwise enrolled, a student must enroll in GRSC 800abz *Studies for the Qualifying Examination* during the semester in which they take the qualifying examination. Students are allowed to enroll in the GRSC 800abz courses a maximum of three times, first in GRSC 800a, followed by GRSC 800b, and, only if necessary, GRSC 800z.

Because two semesters of preparation for the qualifying examination should be sufficient, students enrolling in GRSC 800z must obtain a D-clearance from the Graduate School. In addition, the student will receive a warning letter from their program outlining academic expectations and a path toward completing the PhD in a timely manner.

If the student's written examination is satisfactory, the student may proceed to the oral portion of the exam. The student must complete the oral portion within 60 days of submitting the completed written portion to the qualifying exam committee. If additional material is to be covered in the oral portion, the committee should notify the student of the content expectations in advance.

Qualifying Exam Committee

The qualifying exam committee is responsible for supervising the student's preparation for the exam and for the fair and timely administration and evaluation of the written and oral parts of the examination.

The qualifying exam committee is composed of five members. The committee chair and at least two additional members must have an appointment in the student's program.

The *Appointment or Change of Qualifying Exam or Dissertation Committee* form, available on the [Graduate School website](#), establishes the committee for the qualifying exam. The form requires the signatures of each committee member, the department chair or program director, the dean or the dean's designee.

Changes in Qualifying Exam Committees

The *Appointment or Change of Qualifying Exam or Dissertation Committee* form, available on the [Graduate School website](#), must be completed whenever there is a change to a qualifying exam committee.

Changes to the qualifying exam committee must be made well in advance of the qualifying examination. Informal substitutions for the qualifying examination's written or oral parts are not permitted. Changes in a qualifying exam committee are not permitted between the written and

oral portions of the examination. Modifications made without the prior approval of the dean of the degree program are not recognized and may invalidate the examination.

The examinations must be scheduled when it is possible for all committee members, including the outside member, to participate. All qualifying exam committee members may participate remotely.

A student may not change committee members after failing the qualifying examination the first time. The same faculty must reexamine the student on the same subject matter. If a faculty member is unable to serve on the committee, the dean of the degree program must be notified in writing in advance of the rescheduled exam to approve the change. The faculty replacement must be approved by the dean of the degree program, and the student must file a change of committee form well in advance of the 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 June 1, and the SGA distributes these to students and posts them on Brightspace. 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 should spend summer and fall 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 SGA will communicate the dates of the QE exam period to students. Currently, exams are due in January and distributed the first week of the Spring semester. 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 14 days following the completion of the written exams, the two faculty members assigned to each exam will provide a brief written evaluation of the written exams, including suggestions regarding further preparation for the oral examination. In cases of substantial disagreement in the evaluation of the written exams, 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 ideally 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 may 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.

See Appendix B for more information about the QE procedures.

Outcomes of the Qualifying Exam

There are three possible results of a qualifying exam:

- A. Pass, and proceed to candidacy based on a favorable vote by a majority of committee members.
- B. Fail, with the option to retake either specific sections of the exam or the whole exam, at the discretion of a majority of the committee. The student should not be required to repeat parts of the qualifying examination passed on the first administration. The retaking of a failed qualifying examination or any portion of a qualifying exam must occur between one and six months from the date of the first examination. If not otherwise enrolled, the student must be enrolled in GRSC 800abz *Studies for the Qualifying Examination* in the term in which any portion of the exam is repeated.

- C. Fail, resulting in dismissal from the program. If a majority of the committee concludes that the written portion of the exam is so weak that the oral portion cannot compensate for it, the student does not proceed to the oral portion, and the exam is failed. The committee may provide the option of a retake, but is not required to do so. If a majority of the committee determines that a retake is not warranted, the student will be dismissed from the program.

A student may not take the comprehensive or qualifying examination more than twice and must be appropriately enrolled at USC during the semester in which any such examination is taken or retaken. A student who fails the qualifying examination a second time will be dismissed from the degree program at the end of the semester in which the second examination was taken. No exceptions are permitted.

Report on the PhD Qualifying Exam

Upon the successful conclusion of the qualifying exam, the committee will certify on the *Report on the PhD Qualifying Examination* that: (1) the exam was appropriately rigorous; (2) the student's performance on the exam was at the doctoral level; and (3) the entire qualifying examination process was fair and in keeping with USC's academic and ethical standards. The *Report on the PhD Qualifying Examination* is available to graduate advisers on the Graduate School website in myGradSchool.

Advancement to Candidacy

Graduate students are officially advanced to candidacy for the PhD degree when they have completed the residency requirement and passed the written and oral portions of the PhD qualifying examination.

Application for the PhD

After advancing to candidacy, students must contact their academic department or program to initiate an online degree check that will be transmitted to the Degree Progress Department. Degree Progress counselors will prepare a Degree Audit Report (STARS Report) listing any remaining requirements. Programs must apply all appropriate courses in the Student Information System for the degree to be conferred.

VII. The Dissertation

A dissertation is an original contribution to knowledge in the field and a demonstration that the PhD candidate has sufficiently mastered the field to pursue independent research and scholarship. A dissertation represents the individual candidate's research and writing. In fields where collaborative research has become the norm, the candidate is the sole author of the dissertation. When a paper included in a three-paper dissertation has co-authors, the dissertation candidate must specify their contributions to the research and delineate the contributions of their colleagues.

Dissertations are required to be written in English. Exceptions require the approval of the Vice Provost for Academic Programs or their designee before beginning the work. The exceptions will be granted only when there is scholarly justification.

Writing the dissertation and defending it are the final steps in the program. (Remember to continuously enroll for at least two units in the fall and spring semester while you are working on the dissertation.) 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:

The dissertation committee is appointed as soon as possible after the qualifying examination has been passed and a dissertation topic approved. The committee must be appointed at least one month before the dissertation defense. The Appointment or Change of Qualifying Exam or Dissertation Committee form, available on the [Graduate School website](#), establishes the dissertation committee. The form requires the signatures of each committee member, the department chair or program director, and the dean or dean's designee. The completed form is filed in the student's home department or program, and a signed copy is provided to the student.

The dissertation committee is composed of at least three and no more than five members. The committee chair must have an appointment in the student's program. All committees must have a majority of members from the student's home program.

PhD students may take advantage of the full array of faculty expertise available at USC. This includes the expertise of tenured, tenure-track, and RTPC (i.e., research, teaching, practitioner, clinical) faculty. A USC faculty member from outside the student's home program is referred to as an "outside member." The committee may also include a faculty member from an institution other than USC, referred to as an "external member."

An external member does not substitute for an outside member—all QE and dissertation 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 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.

Any faculty member – external, outside, or from the student's home program – who serves on PhD dissertation and qualifying exam committees must have a professional profile that

demonstrates academic impact on the field in significant, measurable ways. The judgment about these qualifications will be made using the following guide:

- For faculty within the student's home program at USC and external faculty members (who are professors at universities other than USC), the dean, or dean's designee, of the school that houses the student's PhD program will assess a professor's qualification to serve
- For outside faculty (who are professors outside the student's program but internal to USC), the judgment of qualification to serve will be made by the dean or dean's designee of the school/college of the outside faculty member's primary appointment.

In both cases, the CV of the external member must be uploaded to the Thesis Center along with the appointment of committee form, and will become part of the official record. Judgments of demonstrated impact will be based on evidence: for example, peer-reviewed publications in major journals and presses, grant funding, and exceptionally influential practice in a given field, taking into account the person's total career, current stage of career, and any changes in performance in a more recent period.

Faculty who are evaluated based on criteria other than those noted above will not normally be considered appropriate members of PhD and qualifying exam committees, except with the explicit permission of the Vice Provost for Academic Programs acting on the advice of the school dean.

Emeriti faculty appointed to a qualifying exam committee when they were full-time faculty at USC may continue to serve on the dissertation committee as "internal" committee members until the student has graduated. Similarly, a former USC faculty member who was appointed to the qualifying exam committee while they were a full-time faculty member may continue to serve on the dissertation committee as an internal committee member until the student graduates.

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 between the student and their advisor should occur annually after the student has advanced to candidacy (see Section IV).

Defense of the Dissertation

After passing all required courses and the qualifying examination, and after meeting all other requirements, the candidate must write and defend the dissertation. The doctoral dissertation must be an original contribution to scholarship or scientific knowledge. The dissertation defense assesses whether this standard has been met.

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/>. 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.

While the oral examination is open to the general university community, only the members of the dissertation committee have the authority to recommend acceptance of the dissertation. Their recommendation must be unanimous.

For the dissertation defense, some committee members may participate remotely. The committee chair and the student must be present in person, unless the relevant dean and the Vice Provost for Academic Programs provide express written permission for remote participation.

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.

Final Approval of the Dissertation

After the dissertation defense has been completed, and the committee determines that no further edits or revisions are required of the dissertation manuscript, each member of the committee electronically certifies on the *Approval to Submit Defended and Final Copy of Doctoral Dissertation* that: (1) the defense was appropriately rigorous; (2) the student's dissertation makes an original and substantial contribution to its field of study; and (3) the defense process was fair and in keeping with USC's academic and ethical standards. This includes adherence to departmental formatting requirements. No changes can be made to the manuscript's content after the *Approval to Submit* form is complete. The *Approval to Submit* form is electronically available through [Thesis Center](#), the Graduate School's online thesis and dissertation processing system.

The dissertation committee must unanimously agree for the student to pass the defense.

Dissertation Submission

Doctoral dissertation manuscripts must be submitted to the Thesis Center on the [Graduate School website](#). At the time of submission, all manuscripts should be formatted and edited according to the style determined by the student's department or program. Students have three months from the date the committee chair signs the electronic *Approval to Submit* form to complete any

required formatting corrections in the Thesis Center. After the Graduate School has approved the dissertation manuscript, a copy is sent to the USC Libraries. All dissertations will be made available digitally via the USC Libraries.

Completing the Dissertation

The Graduate School provides a [schedule for completing the dissertation](#) on its website. Students must submit complete documentation and finish all corrections to the manuscript before the degree can be conferred. Upon completing all requirements, the official USC transcript will serve as evidence of the degree until the student receives their diploma.

VIII. Academic Policies and Procedures

Academic Integrity

Academic integrity depends on our collective commitment as a university community. Reporting academic integrity issues helps reinforce academic standards and preserves the value of USC degrees. If faculty suspect academic misconduct on any work that a student submits (in final or draft form), they are required to submit a report to the Office of Academic Integrity (OAI).

Information about the university's academic integrity policies is available in the USC [Student Handbook](#) and from the [Office of Academic Integrity](#).

Because PhD students have already earned a bachelor's degree and are enrolled in advanced academic training, they are held to a higher standard of integrity in all academic work. This standard reflects the heightened ethical expectations of advanced scholarship, the student's potential role as a mentor and instructor to others, and the impact of their conduct on the broader research and academic community.

OAI is responsible for investigating and adjudicating academic integrity violations. If OAI determines, by a preponderance of the evidence, that a PhD student has committed an academic integrity violation, there is a presumption that dismissal from the academic program without conferral of the degree is the appropriate outcome. This presumption applies regardless of whether the violation occurred in coursework, research, examinations, or instructional settings.

In such cases, doctoral students are not entitled to a Review Panel under the general disciplinary process. Instead, the findings and determination of responsibility will be referred directly to the student's academic program. The program will issue a decision letter that includes outcomes and any additional information relevant to the student's academic standing. No prior written warning is required to support dismissal under this policy. The program's decision will be provided to OAI for record-keeping, and a transcript notation indicating program dismissal for academic integrity reasons will be entered.

PhD students may not appeal the findings or sanctions through the general academic integrity appeal process. Instead, their sole opportunity to challenge the finding or rebut the presumption of dismissal is through the Academic Dismissal Appeal process described in the Student Handbook.

PhD students are expected to familiarize themselves with the full list of academic integrity standards and examples of violations outlined in the USC Student Handbook, including but not limited to plagiarism, cheating, unauthorized collaboration, falsification, misrepresentation, and misuse of instructional materials. Ignorance of policy or lack of intent is not a valid defense.

In cases where a student has registered for a course on a Pass/No Pass (P/NP) basis and an academic integrity violation has occurred, a penalty letter grade will be assigned when a grading option exists. A Pass or No Pass determination is only issued in these circumstances when a letter grade cannot be issued. A student may not withdraw from a course in which they committed or were accused of committing an academic integrity violation.

Satisfactory Progress, Academic Warning, and Dismissal

Students are expected to maintain satisfactory progress towards their degree by meeting the benchmarks detailed in this handbook (passing grades in courses, making progress toward and passing the empirical paper and qualifying exams, making progress on the dissertation, etc.). If a student has a question or concern about their progress, they should consult with their faculty advisor or PhD program coordinator.

If a student fails to make satisfactory progress, the department chair, program director, or school/college dean will notify them in writing. Written letters should a) explain how the student is falling short of the satisfactory progress standard and b) include specific benchmarks describing how the student can succeed in the program within a reasonable timeframe. Warning letters are sent as early as possible so the student can take advantage of the recommended actions.

Students who do not meet the established benchmarks may be dismissed.

Academic Dismissal Appeal

The [USC Student Handbook](#) includes information on how to appeal a dismissal. The Graduate School Dismissal Appeal provides the final consideration of a student's dismissal from a graduate program when the dean of the relevant school has upheld the dismissal. This does not include students who have not met the conditions for continuing registration or those who have violated the Student Code of Conduct. The Graduate School will schedule the appeal once the student provides written verification of dismissal and states in writing that they want to proceed with the appeal within 30 days of the dismissal. For more information, please visit the Graduate School [website](#). (See appendix A more detailed information).

Unit Requirement

The minimum number of units for a doctoral degree is 60, including at least four units of 794ab Doctoral Dissertation. At least 24 units must be completed at USC (excluding Doctoral Dissertation 794).

Enrollment Status

To be considered full-time, a doctoral student must be enrolled in at least six units of 500-level and above coursework each semester. Most students enroll in 12 units to make timely progress toward their degree; 16 units constitute the maximum load. Students wishing to carry more than 16 units must have prior permission from the degree-conferring unit; such permission will be granted only in exceptional circumstances.

There are two exceptions to this six-unit requirement:

1. A student who has completed all coursework for the doctoral degree will be considered full-time during the semester in which the student is preparing for the doctoral qualifying examination, provided the *Appointment or Change of Qualifying Exam or Dissertation Committee* form has been completed and submitted to the program and the student is enrolled in GRSC 800abz, Studies for the Qualifying Examination.
2. Doctoral students who have been advanced to candidacy, that is, who have completed all coursework and have passed the qualifying examination, will be considered full-time when enrolled in 794 Doctoral Dissertation.

Enrollment Information for F-1 and J-1 International Students

F-1 and J-1 international students on student visas who are not enrolled in either GRSC 800abz or 794 must be enrolled in at least six units or receive authorization from the [Office of International Services](#) to enroll in fewer than the minimum units. International student with questions about their registration should consult the Office of International Services.

Immigration regulations require F-1 and J-1 student's physical attendance for classes during each fall and spring semester of their program. If the summer term is the student's first or last semester at USC, then physical attendance for classes is also required.

No more than one online class (up to 3 units) per semester can be counted towards the full course of study for an F-1 or J-1 student. If you only need to be registered in one course to complete your degree program during your final term, it must be in-person.

794ab Doctoral Dissertation

794ab Doctoral Dissertation confers full-time enrollment status on students who have been admitted to candidacy. Students are expected to be enrolled in 2 units of 794 each semester, except summer sessions, for a minimum of two semesters, until all degree requirements are completed.

Students are expected to complete and defend their dissertation in less than five semesters of 794. No more than eight units of 794 will be applied toward the PhD degree.

Concurrent Enrollment

If a student is simultaneously enrolled elsewhere, they may not transfer credits to USC without advance permission from the dean of the school that hosts the USC degree program. Failure to obtain permission will invalidate coursework taken during periods of unauthorized concurrent enrollment.

Transfer of Credit

The Degree Progress Department in the Office of Academic Records and Registrar determines whether coursework taken elsewhere is available for transfer credit. The faculty of the student's degree program determines whether such credit is applicable toward a specific graduate degree, subject to approval by the dean of the degree-conferring unit. The faculty will decide by the end of the second year.

Continuous Enrollment

Students are considered to be pursuing advanced degrees only when formally enrolled. PhD students must be enrolled at USC for fall and spring semesters each year until all degree requirements have been satisfactorily completed within the time limit.

Enrollment in graduate-level course work is necessary to meet the continuous enrollment requirement. Graduate students who fail to register are no longer considered to be enrolled in a graduate degree program. After an unauthorized absence, formal readmission is required. Students who have been granted an official leave of absence do not need to apply for readmission following the approved leave. However, students who fail to return at the conclusion of any form of leave without obtaining an approved extension violate the continuous enrollment policy.

A doctoral candidate who has passed the qualifying examination must enroll each fall and spring semester in 794 Doctoral Dissertation until the dissertation has been approved. Students are expected to complete and defend their dissertation in less than five semesters.

Some courses with no academic credit, including 794z, require payment of tuition.

Student Financial Aid and Satisfactory Academic Progress:

To be eligible for certain kinds of financial aid, students are required to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) toward their degree objectives. Visit the [Financial Aid Office webpage](#) for [undergraduate](#)- and [graduate-level](#) SAP eligibility requirements and the appeals process.

Grade Point Average Requirement

At no time should the overall GPA drop below 3.0. A minimum grade of C (2.0) is required in a course to receive graduate credit. Work graded C- or below is unacceptable for subject or unit credit toward any doctoral program and could result in dismissal from the program.

Pass/No Pass Coursework

Graduate students may elect to enroll in courses on a pass/no pass basis with department or program approval. However, coursework taken on a pass/no pass basis cannot be applied toward a graduate degree. Students should consult their academic advisors before enrolling in any course on a pass/no pass basis.

Incompletes

An incomplete (IN) is assigned when work is not completed because of a documented illness or another emergency occurring after the 12th week of the semester (or 12th week equivalent for any course scheduled for less than 15 weeks).

If a student receives an incomplete, the instructor will fill out the *Assignment of an Incomplete (IN) and Requirements for Completion* form, which will specify the work remaining to be done, the procedures for its completion, the grade in the course to date and the weight to be assigned to the work remaining to be done when computing the final grade.

One calendar year is allowed to complete an IN. If the IN is not completed within the designated time, the course is considered “lapsed,” the grade is changed to an “IX” and will be calculated

into the grade point average as 0 points. Courses offered on a Credit/No Credit basis or taken on a Pass/No Pass basis for which a mark of Incomplete is assigned will be lapsed with a mark of NC or NP and will not be calculated into the grade point average.

Completing the IN within the one-year period should be the student's highest priority. A student may petition the Committee on Academic Policies and Procedures (CAPP) for an extension of time for the completion of an IN. Extensions beyond the specified time limit are rarely approved if the student has enrolled in subsequent semesters.

In all cases, a petition for an extension of time to complete an IN must have departmental approval and include a statement from the instructor explaining what is needed to complete the course and why the instructor believes the student should be given additional time for completion.

Audited Courses

Students who wish to audit a course at USC must register for the course on Web Registration and select the Audit grade option. Audited courses will not receive credit and will not appear on the USC transcript or grade report. However, tuition is charged, and students should check with their school or program to determine if auditing courses is an option. As noted in the USC Student Handbook, attending a course without being officially registered in it is prohibited.

Time Limit for Degree Completion

Progress is measured from the beginning of the first course at USC applied toward a specified degree, and all requirements for that degree must be completed within a specified time. The university's time limit for completing the doctoral degree is eight years. For students who earned an applicable master's degree within the five years before 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. Approved leaves of absence (up to two years or four semesters) are not counted in the time allowed to complete degree requirements.

Extensions may be granted in extraordinary circumstances. If granted an extension, the dean will allow registration for the specified extension period.

Leaves of Absence, Sick Days, and Bereavement

Students in good standing and making satisfactory progress toward a degree who must interrupt studies for compelling reasons may petition for a leave for a stated period, usually one semester. A leave must be requested before the drop-add deadline and approved by the dean of the degree program, the committee chair, and the department chair or program director. The request should include a plan for academic progress upon return. During the leave period, a student is not entitled to assistance from the faculty or use of university facilities.

If granted, the leave is recorded on the student's transcript, and the leave period is not counted in the time allowed to complete degree requirements. A leave of absence may be allowed for one semester at a time, up to a maximum of four semesters. Students who fail to apply for a leave of absence or for whom a leave has been denied (or has expired) are subject to policies governing continuous enrollment and readmission.

International students should consult with the Office of International Services before considering a leave of absence.

Parental Leave for PhD Students

PhD students are eligible for a one-semester paid parental leave if they:

- Are pregnant or are the primary caregiver of their newborn child or adopted child under six years of age
- Have completed at least one semester in the PhD program and are making good progress
- Were admitted with a Multi-Year Funding Offer (MYFO) letter that includes a four or five-year “package” consisting of support through any combination of teaching assistantship, research assistantship, and fellowship.
- F-1 and J-1 international students must additionally qualify for a [medical reduced course load \(RCL\)](#) if they plan to remain in the U.S. while taking parental leave

Parental leave may be taken during the semester in which the child is born or adopted, or in the semester immediately following. A student on an approved parental leave will receive tuition, fees, and a stipend. The Graduate School provides the base stipend. Schools and programs provide the tuition, fees, and a top-off the base stipend to the level specified in the student’s Multi-Year Funding Offer letter.

Students should enroll in GRSC 804 to ensure continued access to health insurance and the monthly stipend. While on parental leave, students are not eligible for federal financial aid. Students with loans should consult with the Office of Financial Aid before beginning parental leave. F-1 and J-1 international students should consult with the Office of International Services to discuss parental leave and ensure there are no unforeseen issues related to their visa status.

Students interested in taking parental leave should consult with the staff graduate advisor in their department or program. The program will submit a petition to the Graduate School and will be asked to provide a copy of the initial funding letter, a statement as the primary caregiver, and one of the following:

- Verification of pregnancy signed by a US doctor (available at USC Student Health Center),
or
- Birth certificate for the infant child, or
- Statement of adoption from an adoption agency

Health Leaves for PhD Students

Health Leaves are administered by USC Campus Support and Intervention (CSI) in consultation with the student’s program and the Graduate School, pursuant to the university’s Student Health Leave of Absence Policy.

PhD students interested in a health leave should meet with a CSI health leave coordinator to develop an individualized health and academic plan. These plans are developed through an

interactive process involving the Health Leave Coordinator, the student, the academic unit, and the Graduate School.

F-1 and J-1 international students are eligible to request a health leave. They must meet with an advisor in the Office of International Services (OIS) before finalizing plans for the health leave. Students can either return to their home country or, if a doctor recommends, remain in the U.S. for medical treatment. The student should request the health leave through a CSI health leave coordinator, who works with the student, their healthcare provider, and the Office of International Services (OIS) to determine the necessary steps to approve the leave request.

A paid health leave, including tuition, fees, and at least the minimum stipend, is available for one semester. A second semester covering tuition and fees may be available if necessary. The Vice Provost for Academic Programs must review and approve additional health leaves beyond two semesters.

Sick Days and Bereavement Leave

PhD students may use up to five days of sick leave per Academic Year due to illness or to care for a family member. Students may also have up to five days of bereavement leave per Academic Year for the loss of a family member.

Readmission

A PhD student who leaves the university without obtaining a formal leave of absence, or otherwise violates the continuous enrollment policy, is not automatically readmitted. A student wishing to apply for readmission to a graduate degree program must first obtain the recommendation of the department chair or program director and submit an Application for Readmission to the dean of the degree program.

If the student's cumulative GPA is below 3.0 or if readmission is sought after more than two years of an unapproved absence, the Application for Readmission must be sent to the Graduate School for approval.

The readmission approval process must be completed by the first day of classes for the term in which the resumption of graduate studies is sought. Approvals to be readmitted are based on the academic merits of the student's request and the likelihood of academic success and completion of the degree. If readmitted, the student will be subject to all of the current University Catalogue requirements for the degree in effect at the time of readmission. Individual exceptions to the Catalogue year require the approval of the dean of the degree program. Students seeking readmission after an absence of more than 10 years may be required to reapply to the university.

A student may not be readmitted into a terminated program of study. The student must either be subject to retroactive enrollment or admission to the new program of study with the corresponding catalog requirements.

IX. Funding and Financial Support

PhD students at USC benefit from fellowships, assistantships, and scholarships administered by the Graduate School and various academic units.

Graduate Assistant (GA)

GA is an overarching term used to describe Teaching Assistants (TA), Research Assistants (RA), and Graduate Assistant Lecturers (AL). GA appointments include tuition, fees, and a stipend at or exceeding the university's minimum rate. A 50% GA appointment requires an average of 20 hours per week, which is considered "full-time" for a graduate student, as the remaining 20 hours per week should be dedicated to coursework and scholarship leading to the degree. A 33% GA appointment requires an average of 13 hours per week, while a 25% appointment requires an average of 10 hours per week.

GA appointments are confirmed through an official offer letter generated via the university's TARA system or the Dornsife Student Database. The offer letter should be sent to the student at the beginning of the academic year or the start of a semester. These letters must use the standard Graduate School-approved template and detail the length of the appointment, the time commitment, the department's expectations, and benefits. Ideally, the offer letter should include the total stipend the student will receive, including top-offs. The student should sign the letter, which will be shared with the appropriate financial staff and archived by the department or program.

The university requires TAs, RAs, and ALs to be enrolled in a minimum of 6 units every semester or in equivalent full-time courses such as GRSC 800abz or Dissertation 794.

Fellowships

Fellowships provide financial support to PhD students pursuing their degrees. A fellowship is equivalent to a 50% appointment as a Graduate Assistant and includes tuition, fees, and a stipend at or exceeding the university's minimum rate.

PhD students with a fellowship are expected to commit 20 hours per week to their research. PhD students receiving fellowships may not undertake employment or other time-consuming commitments during the academic year from mid-August through mid-May. The Vice Provost for Academic Programs will review exceptions to this policy through the Graduate School's Petition system. Students on fellowships may not receive funding as GAs simultaneously.

External Fellowships

PhD students are encouraged to seek external fellowships and support that encourage intellectual independence and enhance a student's record. The USC Graduate School provides a variety of resources to support PhD students seeking funding, including information sessions, boot camps, and proposal review workshops. Students who receive one of several designated national awards may be eligible for stipend top-offs from the Graduate School.

PhD students applying for external fellowships that are "institutionally limited," meaning that there is a limit placed on the number of students who can apply, or whose applications require

the approval of a university official, should contact the Graduate School well in advance of any deadlines.

Tuition Benefits

A 50% TA, RA, or AL appointment and a fellowship include tuition remission up to 12 units per semester and six units of tuition remission for the summer following the fellowship.

A 33% TA, RA, or AL appointment includes tuition remission up to 10 units per semester of the appointment and five units of tuition remission for the summer following the assignment.

A 25% TA, RA, or AL appointment includes tuition remission up to 8 units per semester of the appointment and four units of tuition remission for the summer following the assignment.

TAs, RAs, and ALs who wish to use tuition units for coursework outside their home program must obtain written approval from their faculty advisor, program director, and the dean of the school. If students do not have prior authorization, they may be responsible for covering the cost of these units. The tuition allowance is non-transferable from semester to semester and will be applied to the student's account in the amount appropriate for the courses they take.

Students should contact their staff graduate advisor if tuition is not appropriately credited to their account.

Tuition Refund Insurance

Students should opt out of Tuition Refund Insurance when their tuition is being covered as part of an assistantship or fellowship. If a student has already accepted Tuition Refund Insurance but would like to decline it, they can do so [here](#).

Stipend Distribution

The first stipend of the academic year will generally be available in August. To receive the stipend, students must be registered for classes well in advance of the start of the fall semester. Students are encouraged to work closely with the staff in their programs to ensure their stipend is processed appropriately.

Students switching from Graduate Assistant appointments to a fellowship or vice versa should be aware that the stipend schedules and distributions are different. However, they should still receive the university's mandatory stipend for the academic year.

Stipends are processed through Payroll. Students are highly encouraged to sign up for direct deposit through Workday. Instructions on how to sign up for direct deposit can be found [here](#). Students who do not sign up for direct deposit will have their stipends mailed to the current address listed in myUSC. International students must also have an up-to-date Glacier account to receive their fellowship stipend.

Stipends are not processed on the same day every month. Students on fellowship should expect the stipend early in the month, while students receiving stipends for GA appointments will receive the stipend towards the end of the month.

Stipends are not considered late until after the 26th of the month.

Summer Support

During the summer semester (mid-May through mid-August), students receiving support as Graduate Assistants (RA, TA, and ALs) with a 50% appointment and PhD students with fellowships may work additional hours beyond the 20-hour maximum, up to an average of 40 hours per week in other on-campus or off-campus roles.

Students who have received offers of full-time employment off-campus during the summer semester may not simultaneously hold positions as Graduate Assistants or PhD Fellows.

Students who wish to decline summer support from USC in favor of full-time off-campus employment or internships will be asked to confirm their decision in writing. This information will be archived in the student's Advise USC file. International students should review the Office of International Services website for information about [Curricular Practical Training](#).

Students who serve as TAs, RAs, and ALs during the summer receive a stipend and tuition remission proportional to the appointment. The health center fee will also be provided, and the student will have access from the first day of the appointment until the end of the summer. (The spring coverage period for the USC student health insurance includes January through the end of the summer as well.)

Students who are invited to campus for any other sponsored academic purpose, such as a professional development institute, receive access to the student health center from the first day of the academic event until the end of the summer.

Mandatory Fees, Health, and Dental Insurance

Graduate Assistant appointments and fellowships include tuition, a stipend at the university's minimum rate or higher, health and dental insurance, access to the student health center, the Student Programming Fee, Norman H. Topping Student Aid Fund Fee, and the Transportation Fee.

Students who will not be in Los Angeles for the fall and/or spring semester should contact the health insurance office to see if they need to register for satellite health insurance. Students can visit the [Student Health website](#) for more information about student health insurance.

Parking and Transit Benefits

PhD students may participate in USC's Student U-Pass program. USC offers PhD students a limited number of permits for 2 or 3 days a week (partial week permits). These passes are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Permits are subject to availability at either UPC (150 campus permits total) - Shrine, Figueroa, and Grand, or HSC (50 campus permits total) - Valley and Lot 71.

Support for Conferences

Travel and professional development grants may also be available through USC's Graduate Student Government. Please see section VIII: Resources, for more information.

Other Types of Support

Schools and programs may offer scholarships and awards in addition to the GA appointment or fellowship. Scholarships are distinct from fellowships, as they do not include tuition or fees, and

the dollar amount does not need to meet the university's minimum stipend requirement. Scholarships are often merit-based and do not require students to be engaged in research or teaching-related activities. Schools and programs may also provide stipend top-offs to PhDs to supplement the university's minimum stipend or a stipend received from an external funder.

General Awards are credited to students' accounts after all other awards (such as tuition) have been processed. If this creates a credit balance, the excess funds will be automatically sent to the student's bank account, provided they have set up eRefund information in their student account and have no recent checks pending, no ACH payments in process, and no active payment plans. If students have not set up eRefund information, the credit will remain in their account to cover future charges while they remain enrolled. If students do not enroll in the following fall or spring term, once the settlement deadline passes, the university will contact them to verify their mailing address and send a physical check for any remaining balance.

PhD students may occasionally be hired as hourly Graduate Student Workers. The duties of Graduate Assistants (TA, RA, and AL) should be distinct from activities performed by hourly graduate student workers.

Collective Bargaining Agreement

Graduate students at USC are represented by the Graduate Student Workers Organizing Committee-UAW Local 872. All graduate students enrolled at USC who are employed as Teaching Assistants, Assistant Lecturers, Research Assistants, or internally-funded Fellows in STEM programs are considered part of the union. The Collective Bargaining Agreement is available on the Graduate School [website](#).

X. GA Appointments and Responsibilities

Eligibility

To be eligible to serve as a Teaching Assistant (TA), Research Assistant (RA), or Graduate Assistant Lecturer (AL), students must:

- have been admitted to a graduate degree program with regular graduate standing
- be enrolled full-time
- be in good academic standing with a GPA of no lower than 3.0
- be verified by their home program to be making satisfactory academic progress toward the degree
- have met the university's standards for proficiency in the English language

The university requires TAs, RAs, and ALs to be enrolled in a minimum of 6 units every semester or in full-time equivalent courses such as GRSC 800abz or Dissertation 794.

Types of GA Appointments

Research Assistant

RAs are responsible for the accuracy, validity, and integrity of the research on which they are contributing. The quality of the research reflects on the student, the faculty supervisor, and the university. Deliberate falsification of research results may result in dismissal from the university. RAs must maintain the confidentiality of the faculty mentor's professional activities and research before presentation or publication, in accordance with existing practices and policies in the area of research activity. In the publication and presentation of research produced as an RA, the student must acknowledge the contributions of the faculty supervisor and other members of the research team. RAs should assume responsibility for making proper use of the intellectual, instructional, and physical environment in which they are conducting research. The nature of some research projects may require that the RA be available during holiday periods or semester breaks. Students and their faculty supervisors should discuss expectations and time off before the appointment is accepted.

Teaching Assistant

The responsibilities of TAs are carried out under the established supervision of the departmental faculty. The duties of TAs may include the following: reading course texts and materials, assisting during lectures, leading discussion sections or lab meetings, holding office hours each week, responding to student concerns, grading course assignments and exams, leading and monitoring lab exercises, participating in regular meetings with supervising faculty and other TAs, designing and leading review sessions, serving as a liaison between the instructor and students, upholding the university's policy on academic integrity, and assisting with the management of the course details. The Center for Excellence in Teaching is a good resource for support and information.

As with faculty at USC, TAs are evaluated by their students. TAs should review evaluations at the end of each semester, after grades have been submitted. TAs are encouraged to keep a record of student feedback for their teaching portfolio.

Our department offers a mandatory 2 units course for first time TAs SOCI 593 Practicum in Teaching the Liberal Arts

Practical principles for the long-term development of effective teaching within college disciplines. Intended for teaching assistants in Dornsife College. Graded CR/NC.

Graduate Assistant Lecturer

ALs teach in the Freshman Writing Program, language programs in the Dornsife College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences, the American Language Institute (ALI), and other programs approved by the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs. Assistant lecturers may serve as instructors of record.

Expected Effort

A graduate student's first responsibility is to their doctoral research and studies. For this reason, GA awards cannot exceed 20 hours per week for a 50% appointment or 10 hours per week for a 25% appointment, averaged over a semester. Students receiving a 50% GA appointment may not undertake employment or other time-consuming commitments during the academic year from mid-August through mid-May. Students receiving a 25% GA appointment during the academic year may be eligible for part-time, off-campus employment.

F-1 and J-1 International students with a 25% GA appointment may be eligible for part-time [Curricular Practical Training](#) (CPT), if they meet the CPT eligibility requirements, and if academic department signs off on the CPT request. The Vice Provost for Academic Programs reviews exceptions to this policy through the Graduate School's Petition system.

Appointment Periods

Semester	Approximate Start Date	Approximate End Date
Fall	August 16	December 31
Spring	January 1	May 15
Summer	May 16	August 15

Financial Support

All TA, RA, and AL appointments include tuition units, health insurance, access to the student health center, and a stipend. Each year, the Provost sets the base stipend for TAs, RAs, and ALs. Schools, programs, and PIs may offer appointments with higher amounts.

Payroll Set Up and Direct Deposit

All students (domestic and international) should be sure to sign up for direct deposit via Workday to receive fellowship and assistantship stipends. Sign up here

Please make sure your current address is up to date in myUSC. Update your information here
International students should work with the graduate program administrator to make sure their Glacier account is up to date

GA-related Warning and Dismissal

PhD students serving as a GA may be disciplined, suspended or discharged for absenteeism; lateness; failure to adhere to stated course or research deadlines; failure to aid in the preparation of course or research materials; failure to hold sections, labs, or office hours; failure to grade, failure to perform assigned lab duties, willful abandonment of teaching or research assignments; failure to comply with applicable policies. Students and their faculty supervisors should discuss expectations and time off before the appointment is accepted. Discipline will only be for just cause and each case will be taken very seriously, recognizing that the Collective Bargaining Unit also may need to be involved.

When possible, a conference meeting will be held with the student and their supervisor before a suspension or discharge. The student may request to have Union representation present at the conference meeting. The University will notify the student and the Union in writing of the issuance of discipline or any investigative leave.

XI. Tax Information

Taxable Income and Withholding

General tax information for PhD students is available on the [Student Financial Services website](#). USC staff cannot provide tax advice. We strongly advise students to contact the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) or consult with a tax professional for tax-related questions.

International Student Considerations

International students may wish to consult the [Office of International Services \(OIS\)](#) website, which offers general information about tax exemptions, tax-related forms, and access to Sprintax, a tax preparation software. OIS cannot advise on tax-related issues. Students should consult with a qualified tax professional for individual assistance.

Graduate Students Supported by Fellowships

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) provides information regarding the tax treatment of fellowship awards. The IRS also provides information regarding the 1098-T form. Some education-related items that are included in your fellowship may not be taxable, for example, tuition remission. Other items, such as living expenses including room and board, transportation, and entertainment, are generally considered taxable.

While receiving a fellowship, domestic students will not receive a W-2 form. However, according to the IRS, you must report all taxable amounts, whether or not you received a Form W-2. If you have taxable income from your fellowship, you may need to make estimated tax payments. For more information, see Pub. 505, Tax Withholding and Estimated Tax, and the IRS help on estimated taxes.

International students (non-resident aliens for tax purposes) on fellowship receive their stipends through University Payroll Services. The stipend may be treated as taxable income by the IRS. Therefore, the university may be obligated to withhold income taxes. The amount of this tax withholding depends on the individual's circumstances, including their total stipend and the status of the tax treaty between their home country and the United States. Tuition remission provided to an international student on fellowship is not taxable.

Graduate Students Supported by Graduate Assistantships

The stipends provided via the University Payroll Services to domestic and international students who are serving as TA's, RA's, and AL's are treated as taxable income by the Internal Revenue Service. Therefore, the university may be obligated to report the income and withhold income taxes. The amount of this tax withholding depends on the individual circumstances of the student, including the total stipend, the instructions provided by the student on Form W-4, and, if an international student, the status of the tax treaty between their home country and the United States, as well as Form 8233. Tuition remission provided to a TA, RA, or AL is not reportable or taxable.

Students Hired as Graduate Student Workers (Hourly)

The payment that domestic and international students receive as hourly graduate student workers is treated as taxable income by the Internal Revenue Service. The amount of this tax withholding depends upon the individual circumstances of the student, including the total amount paid per pay period, the instructions provided by the student on Form W-4, and, if an international student, the status of the tax treaty of their tax residence country and the completion of IRS Form 8233.

XII. Health Insurance and Health Center Access

The Engemann Student Health Center website provides information about the USC health insurance, on-campus medical services, student counseling services, and wellness. Students can also make appointments through the website. The Engemann Student Health Center is used primarily by students based at UPC.

The Eric Cohen Student Health Center website provides information about the USC health insurance, on-campus medical services, student counseling services, and wellness. Students can also make appointments through the website. The Eric Cohen Student Health Center is used primarily by students based at HSC.

XIII. Academic Calendar

Holidays

PhD students with graduate assistantship (GA) appointments will observe the academic holiday schedule. If a student serving as a GA is unable to observe a holiday due to the obligations of their appointment, they will be provided with an alternative day off instead of the missed holiday during the same semester, with the advance agreement of their designated faculty supervisor and, as needed, the Director of Graduate Studies.

XIV. 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 2025-26, 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). This is taxable income to the student.
- The department maintains a **Brightspace** 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.

Child Care Fund

A childcare subsidy of up to \$1,800 is available per semester for each child under the age of six. The subsidy is considered taxable income and is subject to reporting on the appropriate forms. The student is solely responsible and liable for any tax liability resulting from the subsidy provided to the student or their dependent.

If a student has a loan, particularly Direct Loans, the Child Care grants could reduce the student's loan eligibility. Students should contact the Financial Aid Office to confirm.

International students should note the following:

- To remain eligible for this grant, students must maintain valid F-1 or J-1 status, and their dependents must maintain F-2 or J-2 status.
- This grant cannot be used as proof of funding for bringing dependents (spouse and/or children) to the U.S. under F-2 or J-2 status. Information regarding proof of funding for dependents is available on the Office of International Services [website](#).
- J-1 students who receive this grant must request a new DS-2019 with updated funding information by submitting a Financial Update Request through the [Trojan International Portal](#). Once processed, a new DS-2019 will be issued.
- Students in F-1 status on post-completion Optional Practical Training (OPT) or STEM OPT Extension, as well as J-1 students on post-completion Academic Training, are not eligible to apply for or receive this grant.

Child Care Fund Eligibility Criteria

The student must be a graduate student worker in the union bargaining unit in the semester in which the provider expense was incurred. Applicants must furnish supporting documentation as reasonably requested by USC. Eligible childcare providers include:

- A licensed childcare center
- A licensed family childcare provider
- A licensed after-school program
- A daytime summer camp program
- An in-home provider with a Social Security or Tax I.D. number. An in-home provider cannot be a spouse, relative, child under age 19, or anyone who lives in the same household as the student. Nannies and nanny shares are covered if the caregiver has a valid Social Security number or Tax ID Number.

Funds are not available for overnight camp, team registration fees, extracurricular activities, or club sports. The program's primary intent must be to provide childcare while the parent is working. Summer programs can be considered a childcare program if they meet the requirements above.

Applications are processed in the order received. Applications will not be accepted or processed when funds for the academic year have been exhausted. More information is available on the [Graduate School Website](#).

Short Term Hardship Grant

Short-term hardship grants are available to students with dependents. Grants are subject to a cap of \$2,500 per graduate student worker per semester. Grants may not be used for expenses that are covered by another fund or account. The grant is taxable income and is therefore subject to taxation and reporting on the appropriate forms. The student is solely responsible and liable for any tax liability resulting from the grant.

Short Term Hardship Eligibility

The student must be a graduate student worker in the bargaining unit in the semester in which the provider expense was incurred. The student must have a dependent, and they must furnish supporting documentation as reasonably requested by USC.

Hardships may include, but are not limited to, events resulting from a sudden or unexpected illness, imminent loss of housing, loss of property due to natural disaster, or medical, dental, and vision expenditures not covered by any other source.

If the dependent is covered by a health insurance plan, unanticipated emergency or short-term out-of-pocket expenses are not covered by the insurance plan. If the dependent is not covered by a health insurance plan, unanticipated emergency or short-term out-of-pocket medical expenses incurred by the Graduate Student Worker.

Applications are processed in the order received. Applications will not be accepted or processed when funds for the academic year have been exhausted. More information is available on the [Graduate School Website](#).

Resources for International Students

The Office of International Services (OIS) supports F-1 and J-1 international students, helping them maintain immigration status, navigate complex immigration regulations, and succeed academically and personally. Key services include immigration advising, travel advising, and guidance on employment rules, such as on-campus work, CPT, and OPT.

With expertise in F-1 & J-1 immigration regulations, OIS advisors collaborate with government agencies and university departments to ensure students comply with their visa requirements while at USC.

For more information, please visit the OIS website at ois.usc.edu.

OIS advisors are available for [one-on-one meetings](#) daily via Zoom - no appointment is necessary:

- Mondays, Wednesdays, & Fridays: 1 PM-3 PM

- Tuesdays & Thursdays: 10 AM-12 PM
- J-1 advisors are available Tuesdays, Wednesdays, & Thursdays

Lactation Support

PhD students have access to spaces for expressing and storing breast milk. Rooms on the UPC and HSC campus are listed [here](#).

American Language Institute

Many international students are from countries where English is not spoken as a native language. The American Language Institute (ALI) provides classes and other resources to assist international undergraduate and graduate students in improving their English and adapting to an American university program. Before they can be cleared to begin teaching at USC, all international Teaching Assistants are required to take part in a training program run by ALI.

Center for Excellence in Teaching

The [Center for Excellence in Teaching \(CET\)](#) is the university's think tank for innovative teaching. As a faculty-led initiative, CET draws upon the talents of experienced faculty to promote a commitment to excellence in teaching, learning, and scholarship. CET provides training and resources to improve teaching at USC, including supporting faculty and Teaching Assistants as they devise new courses and develop enriching out-of-class activities. CET offers seminars and lectures throughout the semester on a variety of topics and provides a training session at the beginning of each semester for Teaching Assistants.

Library Resources

[Accessibility Training for Teaching Assistants at USC](#)

Organized and developed by a collaboration between the Undergraduate Student Government (USG), Graduate Student Government (GSG), and USC Libraries as a resource for accessibility training for teaching assistants.

Disability Accommodations

The University provides reasonable accommodations to PhD students who are disabled or become disabled and need reasonable accommodations to perform the essential functions of their job. More information is available from USC's [Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#). 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.

Graduate Student Government

The mission of GSG is to enhance the graduate and professional student experience by serving as the face of the student body. GSG is responsible for managing student resources efficiently, providing a voice for the student community, building a community that fosters interdisciplinary exchanges, and informing students about their rights, resources, and opportunities. Elected officers, senators who represent all schools and departments, and special interest committees tackle issues specific to graduate and professional students and provide venues for interaction beyond the academic realm. An Executive Board of 29 officers is selected every spring by the GSG senators and outgoing executive board members. The Executive Board oversees the daily operations of GSG and works closely with the Senate to promote graduate and professional student interests within the USC administration and academic departments.

More information is available from the [Graduate Student Government](#) website.

Other Support

[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 consists 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) 740-2500

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.

Campus Support and Intervention (CSI)

CSI connects with members of the USC community when they need support in achieving their academic, professional, and personal goals.

(213) 740-0411

uscsupport@usc.edu

USC Kortschak Center for Learning and Creativity

KCLC offers outreach, programming, and individual coaching services to USC students and departments to promote a campus-wide understanding of learning differences and their potential to facilitate creativity and academic excellence.

(213) 740-7884

kortschakcenter@usc.edu

Office of the Ombuds

Available to faculty, staff, and students experiencing University-related concerns, conflicts, or challenging situations.

(213) 821-9556 (University Park Campus)

upcombuds@usc.edu

(323) 442-0341 (Health Sciences Campus)

hscombuds@usc.edu

Counseling and Mental Health

Provides counseling and support for all students.

(213) 740-9355 (WELL)

Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS)

Provides support services for individuals with disabilities.
(213) 740-0776 (University Park Campus)
(323) 442-1000 (Health Sciences Campus)
osasfrontdesk@usc.edu

XV. Post-Graduation

Accessing Your Dissertation

The dissertation manuscript will be available for search and download from the [USC Digital Library](#) shortly after completing all of the steps in the Thesis Center, or after any requested restriction expires.

Official Transcripts and Diploma

The Registrar's Office oversees the distribution of university diplomas and transcripts, in compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Most diplomas are mailed to the permanent address on record six to eight weeks after a degree is conferred. More information is available on their [website](#).

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, SGA, 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 Brightspace 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

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

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.

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 SGA) 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, who reviews the case to ensure appropriate procedures were followed. If the final decision is to dismiss a student, the DGS, advisor, and SGA 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

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.

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.

Appendix B: Qualifying Exams Procedures

2nd year

May: students indicate their qualifying exam (QE) areas in their annual activities report

June/July: Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) assigns two committee members for each QE area and shares this information with students and faculty. Students' full QE committees comprise the two faculty members assigned to each of the two areas, plus an outside member chosen by the student (outside = USC faculty member whose primary appointment is not in Sociology). If a student's advisor is not part of the four sociology faculty assigned to the QE areas, they can also be added to the committee.

Summer: Students can review old reading lists on Blackboard. If they have any concerns or suggestions, they can reach out to faculty about the content of these lists. 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.

3rd year

September 1: faculty finalize qualifying exam reading lists and send to staff graduate administrator (SGA), who posts them on Brightspace/Resources/Quals and sends to students taking QEs

Fall semester:

1. Students prepare for QEs. Tips for preparation: skim and/or read articles with purpose: to extract key data (e.g., what is the main argument, who is this scholar in conversation with); write summaries or outlines that synthesize each section of the reading list, articulating main ideas and debates in anticipation of questions; create tables or system for tracking the main findings of each article; imagine questions that could connect different sections of the reading list and outline potential answers
2. Students identify and confirm outside committee member. This may be a faculty member they've taken a class with, share interests with, or someone their advisor suggests. The outside member does not grade the written exams but receives copies of the answers and grade sheets prior to the oral exam for review. The outside member may contribute as little or as much as they like to the oral exam. Procedurally, the outside member serves as the dean's representative to observe and ensure that the process is fair. Students are encouraged to meet with their outside member prior to the exam to discuss their research interests. The student should also choose and confirm a committee chair from the four Sociology faculty.

Spring semester:

Students prepare to take exams the first two weeks of the semester.

Around December 1st (or when requested by SGA): student completes “appointment of committee” (AOC) form

Week 1: SGA requests and receives all exam questions from faculty

Week 1: both exams are distributed to students Friday of week 1

1. Both exams are due Friday of week 3

2. Both exams are distributed to faculty to grade, faculty return grade sheets to SGA by Tuesday of week 6, SGA sends score sheets to students

Week 3 (at latest): students reach out to faculty to schedule oral exams during weeks 11-13

At least one week prior to the oral exam: The student should send their answers and grade sheets to all committee members (including outside member).

Week 11-13: oral exam occurs. The evaluation of qualifying exams is equally balanced between the written and oral portions, and the oral exam occurs only after the written portion is satisfactory. Students should talk to their QE chair about the format, but oral exams typically provide a space both to discuss, clarify, and improve QE answers, based on the score sheets, and have a preliminary discussion about dissertation ideas. If a preliminary discussion about dissertation ideas will occur, the student may want to distribute a one-page document to summarize ideas to faculty in advance. (Preliminary discussions about the dissertation are not evaluated as part of the QE.)

If rewrites are necessary: Faculty can request that a student rewrite one or more essay. The rewrite will be due Friday of week 7. The student should let the committee know whether the defense must be rescheduled (no later than weeks 11-13, during study days/exam period). A student who fails the written portion of the qualifying exam a second time is automatically dismissed from the program.

3rd year, Spring Semester

3 rd year, Spring Semester Weeks	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	SB	11	12	13
Student completes AOC form														
Faculty send exams to SGA														
SGA sends both exams to students (Fri)														
Both exams are due (Fri)														
SGA sends exams to faculty to be graded (Mon)														
Oral defense schedule is set														
Grades due (Tues); SGA sends to students														
<i>If rewrites are needed</i>														
Rewrites due (Fri)														
Grades due (Fri)														
Oral defense														

Green = faculty action required