

**HANDBOOK OF RULES AND POLICIES
FOR GRADUATE STUDY IN SOCIOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH**

Updated August 2015

**GRADUATE HANDBOOK
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH**

Preface

This booklet is intended to provide information on graduate study in the Department of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh and to provide general information on departmental matters pertaining to graduate students in the department. The Department of Sociology is part of the School of Arts and Sciences (A&S) at the University of Pittsburgh. Students in Sociology are also bound by all of the rules and policies of A&S and the university. It is your responsibility to know these rules and policies, which are summarized in the A&S Graduate Programs Bulletin (www.umc.pitt.edu.16080/bulletins/graduate/).

The Department of Sociology has the discretion to modify, alter, overrule, or change any of the rules or policies set forth in this Handbook according to established practices, while remaining within the rules and policies of A&S and the University of Pittsburgh.

This edition concerns the programs as last modified in August 2015.

1. INTRODUCTION

The special character of the University of Pittsburgh's graduate program in Sociology is its emphasis on individual interests, combined with rigorous training in theory and method. The department's structure and culture support students who pursue their own intellectual concerns, stimulated and helped by the faculty and their peers. The department provides in-depth training in two thematic areas,

- * Social Movements
- * Politics and Culture

Within these two areas, we pay attention to race, class, gender, and other forms of social inequality as well as to the global and comparative dimensions of sociological inquiry. The academic program in Sociology begins with the required courses and seminars. Courses are augmented by individually designed reading courses, as well as by departmental colloquia, personal advising and supervision by faculty, informal study groups with peers and teaching opportunities at the undergraduate level.

Development of research expertise is fostered through course offerings in research design, qualitative methods, quantitative methods and basic statistics. In addition, departmental faculty are affiliated with numerous research institutes of the University of Pittsburgh.

2. ADMISSION

The graduate program in sociology focuses primarily on the PhD degree. (In special circumstances, applicants may be admitted to pursue the MA degree.) The MA is also awarded to students in the course of working toward the PhD. Applications are considered once a year for fall admission only. The department is strongly committed to increasing diversity in the discipline.

All students wishing to apply must submit their application electronically at:

<http://www.pitt.edu/~socdept/gradadmissions.html>

Additional application materials include:

- **Indication of program desired.** Only select MA if this is the highest degree desired. If you wish to pursue the PhD degree after receiving the MA, you should select PhD. If you wish to be considered for financial support, please know that students desiring only the MA are generally not considered for funding.
- **Three Letters of recommendation** from former teachers or others who can evaluate your intellectual and academic qualifications for graduate study. Each person who writes a recommendation must seal it in an envelope and give the envelope to you so you can include it in your application packet or the letters can be submitted electronically at: <http://www.fas.pitt.edu/admissions.html>

- **Career Statement.** The statement should in 2-3 pages respond to some of the following questions:
 - What kinds of sociological problems and methods interest you?
 - What kind of career do you have in mind, and how will being a disciplined sociologist help you meet your goals?
 - How do you evaluate your current proficiency in the discipline, and what sort of training will best develop your capacities?
 - What stimulated your interest in **this** Department of Sociology?
- **Writing Sample.** A sample of written work (e.g., a senior thesis or term paper) that provides evidence of creative and critical thinking, quality of writing, and potential for engaging in independent research.
- **Application fee.** Applications will not be accepted without the \$50 fee.
- **Official transcripts.** Transcripts of degrees, courses, and grades from all education at college and higher level are required.
- **International Applicants.** The following transcript documentation is required for an applicant with a degree from a non-English speaking college or university:
 - a certified copy of the original academic transcript with degree posted, accompanied by a certified translation if the transcript is not in English;
 - a certified copy of the diploma awarding the degree, accompanied by a certified translation, if the transcript does not post the degree.
Please note: Transcript documentation must be sealed in an envelope by the granting institution or the official agency certifying the documentation.
- **Graduate Record Examination (GRE)** test scores. The general test, comprising verbal, quantitative, and analytical writing is required. There is no subject test in Sociology. The GRE scores must be submitted directly to the University of Pittsburgh, Department of Sociology by the Educational Testing Service.

Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and/or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is required for international applicants. The University accepts a minimum score of 90 with a minimum of 22 in each section for the TOEFL and an IELTS score of 7.0. The TOEFL or IELTS score must be submitted directly to the Department of Sociology by the Educational Testing Service. In addition, admitted students whose first language is not English and whose financial package includes teaching as TA or TF, are required by the University to pass an English comprehension exam before they can assume a role in classroom teaching.

The additional application materials should be submitted as one complete packet (except for the test scores that must be sent directly by the Educational Testing Service) to be sent to:

**Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Sociology, University of Pittsburgh,
2404 Wesley Posvar Hall, Pittsburgh, PA 15260.**

3. GENERAL INFORMATION

3.1 Advisors

The Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) supervises the graduate program as the representative of the department in all academic matters concerning graduate students. The DGS interprets the requirements to students, registers all students for their courses each term, monitors the progress of students through the program and their satisfaction of requirements on schedule, and acts to enforce departmental and university rules and polices. The DGS also acts as an advocate for the graduate students to the department.

Upon a student's accepting admission to the graduate program, she or he is advised by the DGS. Before the end of the first year, the student chooses a faculty advisor in the student's intended area of training and expertise within Sociology. The faculty advisor offers advice, assistance and consultation, including (but not limited to) counsel in designing a course of study appropriate to the student's interests. A student may at any time choose a new faculty advisor. When a student is formally admitted to PhD candidacy, the functions of advice, assistance, and consultation are normally passed to the dissertation chair, who is then the official advisor of the student.

3.2 Registration

After the first year, students should submit their plan for course enrollment each term to their faculty advisor for approval. It is the student's responsibility to acquire the appropriate course registration forms, fill them out, bring them to the faculty advisor for approval and signature, and have the forms processed by the graduate administrator before the course registration deadline. If necessary, student's must also secure the appropriate "add/drop" forms, fill them out, bring them to the DGS for approval, and have them processed by the graduate administrator before the add/drop deadline.

The deadlines for course registration and add/drop are fixed each term by the academic calendar of the university and can be found online at www.pitt.edu. The university charges a fee for registration after these deadlines; these fees are outside the department's jurisdiction and cannot be waived by the department. The add/drop deadline is usually about two weeks after the first day of classes.

3.3 Course Enrollment

The range in which a course's number falls indicates its approximate level:

Zero-level (courses numbered 0010-0999) are introductory undergraduate courses. Graduate students are ineligible to take these courses for credit.

1000-level (courses numbered 1000-1999) are primarily advanced undergraduate courses. Graduate students are ineligible to take these courses for credit.

2000-level (courses numbered 2000-2980) are designed for graduate students and constitute the bulk of the department's graduate instruction. These courses are designed to introduce graduate students to a field, topic or methodologies. Such courses are typically completed with research papers and presentations, and students are assigned a letter grade upon completion of the course.

Directed Study (SOC 2902 for MA students and SOC 3902 for PhD students) courses are meant to fulfill special needs, not to replace standard graduate courses. Directed study courses will not replace any of the department's required courses as described in sections 4.0 and 5.0. They can count toward the elective course requirement with prior permission from the instructor, their faculty advisor, and the DGS.

An appropriate purpose of the directed study would be to pursue an individualized and focused research program. For example, a student who is interested in social movements might want to pursue a program of studies on social movements concerned with health issues, a subfield with a large and growing literature. Departmental faculty are often happy to work with students on an individualized basis for such purposes (but each case needs to be individually negotiated between student and professor). Departmental faculty, however, are usually not willing to offer a directed study when the subject matter is covered by a regularly taught course. Repeated registration for directed study is possible. Students are typically assigned an S/U grade option for directed study. Students are allowed to register for up to 12 credits in directed study.

Independent Study (SOC 2990) is for students in the program not yet admitted to candidacy for the PhD degree yet who have completed the requirements detailed in sections 4.0 and 5.0 of this Handbook. Students may register for up to 12 credits of this course. Grades are either S/U for Independent Study. Repeated registration for this course in different terms is strongly discouraged as this course does not replace standard graduate courses. Directed study courses will not replace any of the department's required courses as described in sections 4.0 and 5.0. They can count toward the elective course requirement with prior permission from the instructor, their faculty advisor, and the DGS.

Comprehensive Examination Preparation (SOC 3903) is for students who have completed the MA degree and are preparing for their comprehensive exams. Students may register for up to 6 credits of this course.

Dissertation Research for PhD Degree (SOC 3000) is for students who have been admitted to candidacy for the PhD degree. Students may register for up to 12 credits of

this course, but they may opt to not take it if they have already accumulated 72 graduate credits and have passed the Comprehensive Examination (at which point they could register as FTDS; see below). Grades are either S/U for dissertation research. Repeated registration for this course in different terms is permitted.

Full Time Dissertation Study For students who have completed 72 or more credits and passed the Comprehensive Examination. Students must register for FTDS.

Students may also take courses in other departments at the university, and if appropriate, pursue a graduate certificate in any of the area studies programs or pursue a secondary MA degree.

3.4 Grades and Evaluations

The grades which a student may receive are detailed in the *Arts & Sciences Graduate Bulletin* (www.umc.pitt.edu.16080/bulletins/graduate/) as are policies detailing calculation of QPA and credit. According to university policy, a graduate student who fails to maintain an overall QPA of 3.3 or higher will automatically be placed on academic probation for a period (typically one term), and subject to dismissal at the end of the term unless the student demonstrates an ability to meet requirements determined by the department. Note that students on academic probation are ineligible for scholarship and fellowship support.

3.5 Annual Review, Satisfactory Progress and Expected Learning Outcomes

Once a year each student's progress is reviewed by the entire faculty of the department. Prior to student's progress review departmental meeting (usually held in February), an Annual Activity Report **MUST** be sent to the Graduate Administrator by each student. The Graduate Administrator will distribute the Annual Activity Report form in January to allow ample time for student submissions. Topics discussed include instructors' comments, grades received, satisfactory progress or its absence, and reports from the DGS and/or the thesis or dissertation advisor and committee members. Decisions regarding continuation in the program and financial support are made at this meeting.

Permission to continue in the graduate program, and continued financial support, depend on satisfactory progress of the student in meeting the requirements detailed in this Handbook. Failure to satisfy any of these requirements will be *prima facie* reason for terminating the student from the program and/or financial support.

The DGS writes each student a letter in which the student is informed of the result of the annual departmental review, as well as any specific comments, recommendations or requirements which the faculty wishes to communicate to the student. If applicable, a letter notifying the student of probationary status in the program will be sent along with the annual review letter written by the DGS.

Expected Learning Outcomes

We encourage students to try to achieve the following goals during their graduate training in order to maximize their learning and to enhance their abilities to compete successfully for grants, awards, and professional positions.

Mid-way Learning Outcomes (3 rd year)	ABD/PhD Completion Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Propose and Write an acceptable MA Thesis • Submit an article based on thesis research to scholarly publication • Present work in the department or for other campus audience (includes poster presentations) • Present a research paper at a professional conference • Prepare an Individual Development Plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate competence in three recognized areas of sociology • Apply for external fellowship, grant, and/or award • Publish article in peer-reviewed scholarly journal relevant to sociology • Write an acceptable dissertation

3.6 International Students

In addition to passing the TOEFL or IELTS exam, international students whose native language is not English are required to take an English proficiency test upon arrival. Those who have teaching assignments are examined for the comprehensibility of their spoken English. These tests are administered by the university as part of university policy, and may not be waived by the department. Foreign students **MUST** arrive two weeks prior to the beginning of the term so arrangements may be made for this proficiency test.

3.7 Transfer Credits

Graduate study done elsewhere may sometimes be counted toward satisfaction of the required and elective courses in the department. In each case, the student should submit a petition to the graduate committee, stating precisely toward which requirements previous work is to be applied, with a detailed description (syllabi, reading lists, and thesis) of the relevant earlier work to aid the graduate committee in its decision. Note that transfer credit will not be accepted for courses in which a letter grade of B or lower has been received; grades and quality points are not recorded for credits accepted by the transfer.

According to university regulations, a maximum of 6 credits may be accepted by transfer toward the requirements for the MA degree. Students that have completed a master's degree at another approved graduate school are eligible to transfer up to a maximum of 24 credits. A student who transfers 24 credits due to completion of an MA degree at another institution may not earn a MA degree in the same discipline at the University of Pittsburgh. If the MA degree is in a discipline other than sociology, the department may require the student to write a thesis in sociology. It is the student's responsibility to be familiar with university rules and policies regarding transfer credits; see the [Arts & Sciences Graduate Programs Bulletin](http://www.bulletins.pitt.edu/graduate/) for details (<http://www.bulletins.pitt.edu/graduate/>).

3.8 Leaves of Absence and Medical Leaves

Under special conditions, graduate students may be granted one leave of absence. A maximum leave of two years may be granted to doctoral students or one year to master's students. The length and rationale for the leave of absence must be stated in advance, recommended to the dean by the department, and approved by the dean. If approved, the duration of the leave does not count against the total time allowed for the degree being sought by the student. However, students must apply for an extension of such requirements together with an application for a leave of absence. Readmission following an approved leave of absence is a formality.

The department will review proposals from students for leaves of absence. A petition detailing the reasons for the requested leave of absence, and specifying its length should be submitted to the DGS no less than one month before the beginning of the leave.

Medical leaves of absence typically cannot be predicted; the department, in conjunction with the Arts & Sciences Dean of Graduate Studies, deals with each medical leave on case-by-case basis. In exceptional cases, a student may be granted an unofficial leave of absence. For an unofficial leave, the student may apply to the DGS and the Chair of the Department of Sociology. If granted, readmission is not automatic, there is an application fee and the University clocks are not stopped.

3.9 Financial Support

Students who have external funding already secured may be admitted without financial commitment on the part of the department. Most students, however, are usually admitted with a commitment of four years of support for a student making satisfactory progress. Exceptionally, we are able to offer a five-year support package. This support for 4 (or sometimes 5) years is made up of a mix of teaching assistantships, teaching fellowships, departmental fellowships, research assistantships, or other fellowships. Teaching in another unit within the university is counted in determining the total years of support, as well as any other fellowship received by the student during the 4-5 years of financial support. In other words, to take a concrete example, if a 3rd year student wins an external fellowship for 1 year or works as a research assistant on a funded project, that counts as part of the 4 (or 5) year period of committed funding. However, we do urge and expect students to apply for university or external fellowships as appropriate because they free one from a student responsibilities other than their own research, because they confer prestige that is valuable in the eventual academic job-hunting, and because they frequently provide a superior stipend. Since the department requires clear financial planning several years ahead, it is important to note that obtaining such external fellowships, encouraged as it is, does not extend the department's own financial commitment beyond the 4th (or 5th) year.

In all cases, the renewal of funding for a subsequent year depends on the student's making satisfactory progress.

Beyond the 4th (or 5th) year of support commitment, a student's priority for departmental support is reduced. It often happens that there is available funding,

however. Since the availability of funding in such cases is not obvious until the last minute, we strongly urge every student who may be in residence beyond four years to be thinking about obtaining financial support from other sources. For example, Sociology students are eligible for fellowships in Women's Studies, East Asian, Latin American, Russian and Eastern European, and West European Studies offered through the University Center for International Studies (UCIS), the Mellon Pre-doctoral fellowship, and Provost Fellowships (open to women and minority students). For more detailed information on external funding sources available, visit the Women's Studies and UCIS websites. In addition, there is a range of non-university based fellowships, such as those offered by the National Science Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, and various foundations.

Application for financial assistance is made with application for admission to graduate study. Admission to graduate study does not carry with it any implication concerning the award of financial aid. All applications for financial assistance will be reviewed and supported to the extent of available funds. Note that only students with full time graduate status are eligible for funding through teaching assistantships and fellowships.

The departmental financial support is in the form of the stipend, tuition and fees remission, and other work-related benefits (such as health insurance) a TA or TF receives as an employee of the University of Pittsburgh. The TA instructional support comes in the form of running weekly, 50-minute discussion sessions (known as "recitations" – more on these below), grading, and performing routine administrative and clerical tasks for the instructor in a lecture course. The TF responsibilities and training involves teaching independent courses in sociology.

In all cases, financial support depends on the student making satisfactory progress in the graduate program. All decisions regarding a student's funding status are determined by the graduate committee in consultation with the DGS. After the end of financial support from the department, students are strongly encouraged to seek external funding from either other university sources or national or independent fellowships, scholarships, research grants, grants to study abroad, and so on. It may sometimes be the case that the Department of Sociology is able to offer financial support to students in their fifth year or beyond in the form of Part-Time Instructorships (PTI) or when additional funds become available for TA or TF slots. However, such opportunities often materialize at the last minute and cannot be guaranteed.

Lastly, in order to remain eligible for departmental funding, students must:

- Complete their MA Thesis (including defense) by January of their third year
- Complete their comprehensive paper and have accomplished a satisfactory level of work on the PhD thesis overview by January of their fourth year.
- Must be Admitted to Candidacy by April 30

NOTE: These timeframes are the latest possible dates for accomplishing major milestones in the program, and the department strongly recommends that students aim to complete these more quickly, if possible.

Summer term support

In the summer, fewer students end up with support than request it. Unlike either fall or spring terms, the department does not guarantee summer funding. Typically, summer funding is available only through Teaching Fellowships and a small number of summer research fellowships. Note that only students who are eligible for Teaching Fellowships (see section 6.2) are able to teach in the summer term. Prior experience assisting in a particular course is typically necessary condition for being assigned that course. Very senior students may sometimes be assigned courses they have not previously assisted. The university reserves the right to cancel assigned courses for under-enrollment in the summer terms.

Travel support policy

Graduate students will be supported to make presentations at appropriate professional conferences as funds permit. Presentations may include giving a paper, functioning as discussant, or participating in a round-table. Requests for travel funds will be solicited annually by the Chair. Any student requesting travel funds from the department's extremely scarce resources is expected to apply for other appropriate university funds in support of student conference travel. Please see the Graduate Administrator for a list of such sources or visit the A&S Graduate Office website under the Financial Assistance/Travel Grants link. The purpose of this funding is to encourage students to present research results. It is not in support of research expenses as such.

4.1 MASTER'S PROGRAM

Students who begin graduate study in this department without a master's degree must first fulfill the requirements for the MA degree. Only after completion of the MA degree and with the recommendation of their thesis committee, may students proceed to doctoral study. Study for the MA degree includes a sequence of required core courses, elective courses, and a master's thesis overview and defense. Graduate study for the MA degree is expected to take between two and two-and-a-half years of full-time or full-time equivalent study (less for a student transferring credit for prior graduate study).

4.2 Requirements for the MA Degree

For the MA degree, a student must earn 36 credits in approved graduate studies (less if credit is transferred from graduate study completed at another institution). Graduate study for the MA requires 10 courses (3 credits each) and an MA thesis (6 credits). Study for the MA comprises the following courses and credits:

Social Theory	3 credits
Research Methods	3 credits
Qualitative Methods	3 credits
Quantitative Methods	3 credits
Four elective Sociology courses	12 credits
Three elective courses; these may include individualized Directed Study and/or graduate courses in other departments	9 credits
Master's Thesis	6 credits

4.3 Sequence of studies for the MA degree

The MA degree can be earned in two years by earning nine credits each fall and spring term. Credits can also be earned during the summer for individualized directed study.

Note: At least 4 of the elective courses must be taken in sociology. The remaining elective course may be taken either in sociology or in another department.

4.4 Proseminar

First year students are required to meet monthly in a Proseminar to get to know one another and all the faculty, discuss progress in the program, explore issues related to pedagogy, research, publication, and professional development, and reflect on their experiences. Students are not assigned credit for this course.

4.5 Master's Thesis Committee

During the second term of the first year, the student chooses a topic for the master's thesis and selects a thesis advisor. The student's MA thesis committee should consist of the thesis advisor and two other faculty members (either both from sociology or one from sociology and one from outside the department). This committee has to be approved by the Graduate Committee.

4.6 The Master's Thesis

The master's thesis demonstrates ability to develop and execute a sociological research project. The completion and defense of the thesis is expected by the end of the second year of graduate study and required by no **later than December of the third year**. Early in the first semester of the second year, the student should begin working on a thesis overview, which the student must present and defend before the student's committee. The student proceeds with the thesis research after gaining approval of the thesis overview.

Throughout the second year, the student conducts the research to produce a thesis manuscript. The thesis should serve as the basis for an article suitable for submission to an academic journal. The student defends the thesis in an oral examination conducted by the thesis committee.

Immediately following the oral defense, the thesis committee gives one of four evaluations of the thesis: pass; pass with distinction; pass subject to revisions; or fail. If the committee passes the thesis, it recommends the student to either continue or to not continue to the doctorate. Passing the thesis defense earns the MA degree.

4.7 Satisfactory Progress

By the start of their second term, students making satisfactory progress will have completed the fall term Social theory, Research methods, and at least one other seminar. By the start of their second year, they will have completed three additional seminars including the other required methods course. MA thesis committees should be formed at the end of the student's first year and the thesis should be defended by the end of the second year, but no later than December of the third year.

5.1 Requirements for Candidacy for the Ph.D. Degree

Students are required to have 72 graduate credits and an MA in Sociology. Up to 24 credits may transfer with an MA in Sociology, and the thesis requirements may be waived if the graduate committee accepts a thesis defended elsewhere. For students who come without an MA in Sociology, the first 36 credits, including an MA thesis, go toward earning the MA. Students must also pass their Comprehensive doctoral examination (written exam and panel presentation) and their Overview of proposed dissertation.

5.2 Duration of Graduate studies Leading to the PhD

On average, graduate study for the PhD degree is expected to take on average three to five years depending on prior graduate education and transfer of credits. The graduate office records progress toward the degree and student progress is evaluated annually by the faculty. The student should check periodically with the graduate administrator to ensure that the record is up to date.

Requirements for the PhD Degree

For the PhD degree a student must earn 72 credits in approved graduate studies (less if credit is transferred from graduate study at another institution). This includes study for the MA degree. Study for the PhD comprises the following required and recommended courses and credits:

Standard Course of Study	
Social Theory - required	3 credits
Research Methods- required	3 credits
Qualitative Methods - required	3 credits
Quantitative Methods - required	3 credits
Seven elective Sociology courses - required	21 credits
Three elective courses; these may include individualized Directed Study; and/or graduate courses in either Sociology or other departments – certificate coursework encouraged	9 credits
Master's Thesis: Soc 2902 (recommended)	6 credits
Faculty Development Seminar: (required for solo teaching)	3 credits
Comprehensive Examination Preparation: Soc 3903 (recommended)	6 credits
Overview of PhD dissertation: Soc 3902 (recommended)	6 credits

Admission to Candidacy and Dissertation Defense: FTDC 3999***

***Although only 60 credits are listed here, you must have 72 credits and passed the

Comprehensive Examination in order to be eligible for FTDC

5.3 Sequence of studies for the PhD

First Year

Fall

*Post-Classical Theory
Research Design
1 or 2 Electives
Proseminar*

Spring

*Quantitative Methods
Qualitative Methods
2 or 3 Electives (may
include 1 Directed
Proseminar*

Summer

*Begin MA Thesis OR begin
Comp Exam Prep
(for credit if experienced Soc
TA w/MA and teaching Summer course;
otherwise not for credit*

Second Year

Fall

*2 – 3 Electives (may
Include 1 Directed
Study)*

*Defend MA Thesis
Proposal (3credits
OR Comp Exam Prep
(3 credits)*

Spring

*2 – 3 Electives (may
include 1 Directed
Study)*

*Write MA Thesis
(3 credits) OR
Comp Exam Prep
(3 credits)*

Summer

*Complete and Defend MA
Thesis OR complete Comp
Exam*

*Possible TF for students
with MA (in which case,
register for Directed Study,
Comp Exam, or Overview
Credits)*

Third Year

Fall

2 – 3 Electives

*Comp Exam Prep
(Soc 3903 OR
Overview Prep*

Spring

2 – 3 Electives

*Complete Comp Exam
(Soc 3903) and
at end of semester OR
Complete Overview
Prep enter Candidacy*

Summer

Teach Summer Course

*Begin Dissertation Overview
(for credit if teaching) submit
paper for Professional
Presentation*

Fourth Year

Fall

*Electives, Directed Study Soc
2902, Independent Study
Soc 2990, Overview Prep
OR FTDC*

TF

*Defend Dissertation
Overview*

Spring

*Electives, Directed
Study for PhD (9 credits)
OR FTDC*

TF

Summer

Teach Summer Course

Dissertation

Apply for External Funding

Fifth Year & Beyond

Fall

FTDC

*Submit Papers for
Publication*

*Apply for grants and
Fellowships*

Apply for Jobs

Spring

FTDC

Interview for Jobs

Defend Dissertation and Graduate

5.4 Phases of Studying for the PhD

There are three phases of advancing towards the PhD:

- A. The comprehensive phase
- B. The overview phase
- C. The dissertation phase

A. Comprehensive Phase:

Comprehensive Examination Committee

By the beginning of the third year, the student selects a comprehensive examination committee consisting of three faculty members, one of whom may be from outside the department. The student's advisor acts as Chair of the Committee. The proposed comprehensive examination committee is to be approved by the DGS.

COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION PROCEDURE AND POLICY

Purpose and Connection to Goals and Assessment

The comprehensive examination is a key point in assessing graduate students' progress toward three of the learning outcomes we have articulated:

- Apply principles and techniques of sociological inquiry to empirical problems and disciplinary debates.
- Convey the findings of research to a variety of audiences.
- Use expertise in specialized disciplinary literatures to guide conceptual, methodological, and empirical practices of research

The comprehensive examination is designed to provide students with an opportunity to apply what they have learned about disciplinary principles and techniques to the task of identifying and characterizing debates and puzzles, to use written and verbal skills to convey their ideas and the findings of their engagement with sociology, and to develop expertise and use concepts, methods, and the findings of previous research to guide their own inquiries.

Recommended Areas of Concentration Sociology Comprehensives/ Certification

The following areas of concentration are meant as a guide to graduate students and their committees, not as a mandatory or all-inclusive list. Students may work with their committee members to define their two areas of concentration in ways that best reflect their skills, interests, and career objectives. In addition to these specific areas, students may select a world **geographic area** of concentration or an appropriate **interdisciplinary** area. Comprehensive certificates should highlight students' strengths, while at the same time showing how their work communicates with larger sociological bodies of knowledge. Defining the optimal balance between the two is left to the specific graduate committees.

1	<u>Collective Behavior & Social Movements</u>
2	<u>Communication and Information Technologies</u>
3	<u>Community and Urban Sociology</u>
4	<u>Comparative and Historical Sociology</u>
5	<u>Culture</u>
6	<u>Economic Sociology</u>
7	<u>Environment and Technology</u>
8	Gender & Sexualities
9	<u>Global and Transnational Sociology</u>
10	Immigration
11	Labor, Work, and Occupations
12	<u>Racial and Ethnic Minorities [Race and Class]</u>
13	<u>Peace, War, and Social Conflict</u>
14	<u>Political Economy, Development, and World-Systems Analysis</u>
15	<u>Political Sociology</u>
16	Religion
17	Research Methods
18	Sociology of Organizations
19	Stratification and Inequality
20	<u>Theory</u>

Assumptions and Procedures

Students entering without a Master's degree should have some ideas about the issues, puzzles, and problems they plan to address in their dissertation research by the end of the *second* year. It is at this point that the graduate student selects a comprehensive examination committee. Students who enter with a Master's degree and whose thesis has been accepted by the department differ with respect to their certainty about their doctoral research: some have already done extensive background research, including a Master's thesis, on the subject; others can only describe a general domain of interest; some are able to select a comprehensive exam committee within a matter of weeks, therefore, whereas it takes others well into the second term before they have narrowed the focus of their interest sufficiently to identify the faculty most relevant to that subject. But it is expected that all students entering with a Master's degree will have selected a comprehensive examination committee by the end of their *first* year in the program.

The comprehensive examination committee consists of three faculty members. One, the

chair of the committee, must be a member of the graduate faculty with a primary appointment in sociology. The other two members must hold graduate faculty appointments in the university, and at least one of them must hold a primary appointment in the sociology department. In special cases, the graduate student and chair of the examination committee may petition the graduate committee to have a faculty member from another local university who has special qualifications serve as the third member. It is expected, though not required, that these three faculty members will form the core of the student's dissertation committee. The proposed comprehensive examination committee must be approved by the Graduate Committee before the graduate student begins written work on the comprehensive essay.¹

In the comprehensive examination, students are expected to identify, analyze, and integrate the conceptual, methodological, and empirical literature relevant to the central puzzle or question that will be driving their dissertations. Continuous consultation with the members of the examination committee, especially during the initial explorations of the literature, will provide guidance concerning the focus and scope of the project. Students are permitted to take six credits of directed study with their committee members in preparing their comprehensive essay.² Whether these six credits of comp essay directed study are taken and, if so, how they are distributed throughout the third year is up to the student and her/his comp committee.

Guided by her/his committee, the student is expected to demonstrate, through the essay, both broad and deep acquaintance with the literature that defines the domain or issue the student has selected. In the course of this reading and frequent interaction with the committee, it is expected that students who lacked a clear focus for their dissertation research will have constructed one as well as developed an outline for the paper they will produce based on their critical overview of the literature. This paper must be of professional quality and usefulness: it must critically analyze and interpret significant work in the relevant literature, in historical context, emphasizing conceptual, methodological, and empirical problems and lacunae as well as substantive and methodological progress. Finally, the paper should point to a particular problem or gap in our understanding about an issue or phenomenon that warrants clarification. Thus, the critical analysis and interpretation of the literature that constitutes the comprehensive examination should connect seamlessly with the dissertation phase.

Most papers will probably range between 35 and 50 pages (including references), the goal being to approximate manuscript length, style, and quality. The purpose and focus of the comprehensive essay is to develop a research question, based on the state of the literature that can frame and focus a subsequent dissertation proposal. The written essay is evaluated as Pass with Distinction, Pass, or Revise. In the case of Revise, the committee gives written suggestions for improving the student's preparation of the examination document. Students who entered the program without a Master's degree must pass the written component of the comprehensive examination by the end of August of their third year; for those who came with a Master's degree, completion of the comprehensive essay must occur by the end of August of their second year in residence to be considered making satisfactory progress towards their degree. These are outside limits in the amount of time necessary to reach successful completion of the comprehensive essay; the department expects most of its graduate students to fulfill this requirement considerably sooner. It would be especially desirable, moreover, if comprehensive examination committees attempted to bring their students' projects to completion by the end of the Spring Term, since faculty-student interaction tends to be somewhat sporadic over the summer months.

Upon completion of the written part of the comprehensive examination, the student will be required to give an oral, conference-style presentation of the results of her/his written comp project. On a specified date (typically in April), all graduate students who have completed their comprehensive essays since the previous year's presentations will prepare and deliver an 12 – 15 minute conference-style presentation to their committee, the comprehensive committees of other students presenting that year, the DGS and Chair as well as other interested faculty and graduate students. The objective of this event is to give each of the students completing their written essay further experience in presenting their findings to a disciplinary audience. The oral presentation of findings is not intended as an oral examination; its purpose is to give students the opportunity to identify core questions and research agendas that emerge from the comprehensive paper's review of existing literature and, as appropriate, to discuss their emerging dissertation proposal. It will expose students to new and different, albeit not necessarily subject-matter competent, perspectives on the sociological domain the student has been investigating. This oral presentation is the required final component of the departmental comprehensive examination.

¹ If the DGS is selected and agrees to chair a comprehensive examination committee, then that committee must be approved by the department chair and the Graduate Committee.

² It is strongly suggested that each three credit directed study (nominally with the chair of the committee) requires meeting that member at least every other week. But beyond any formal requirement about meetings, students should be communicating frequently with all committee members, especially during the first months of the project when a great deal of time and energy can be lost or saved through active faculty guidance.

B. Overview Phase

The doctoral overview should follow quickly after the comprehensive exams. By the end of the third year, having passed the comprehensive examination, the student should define a dissertation topic. The overview phase is the final stage before entering formal PhD candidacy. In this phase, students work with their major advisor to select a dissertation committee and to prepare a written prospectus of their proposed dissertation. This will be an essay of approximately 15 or so pages (the format and length of the prospectus should be determined in consultation with the chair of the dissertation committee) that describes the purpose, scope, significance, sources, and methods to be employed in the proposed dissertation.

Dissertation Committee

Students should form a dissertation committee of four persons, one of whom must be from outside the Department of Sociology. It is sometimes the practice that a fifth member is also added to the committee. A&S requires that at least 3 members of the committee, including its chair, must belong to the graduate faculty in sociology (see the A&S website for a complete list of all university faculty with graduate faculty status). The members of the dissertation committee need not be identical to the members of the comprehensive exam committee. However, the composition of each student's dissertation committee must be approved by the

DGS.

When the chair of the dissertation committee (the student's major advisor) agrees that the student's prospectus can be presented for the overview, copies will be distributed to all members of the committee, and the graduate administrator will schedule the overview defense. The dissertation committee may approve the prospectus or recommend changes and request a further overview before final approval.

C. Dissertation Phase

After the dissertation committee accepts a Prospectus, the student becomes eligible for admission to candidacy for the PhD degree. In order to become a candidate, the student and the dissertation chair must file an application, using the appropriate university forms, with the Chair of the Department and the Dean of Graduate Studies. If approved, the student will be informed of admission to candidacy and the approval of the membership for the dissertation committee; a copy of this document will be placed in the student's file.

Admission to candidacy for the PhD degree constitutes a promotion of the student to the most advanced stage of graduate study and provides formal approval to devote essentially exclusive attention to the research and the writing of the dissertation. The doctoral dissertation presents the results of an original research project. An appropriate research project involves a substantive piece of original and independent research grounded in and contributing to sociological knowledge. Once the dissertation is completed, the student defends the thesis in an oral examination conducted by the dissertation committee.

Approval of the proposed dissertation research and research design does NOT imply either the acceptance of a dissertation prepared in accord with those plans or the restriction of the dissertation to this original proposal.

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5.5 Annual Meeting of Dissertation Committee

The university requires that all doctoral candidates in residence meet annually with their dissertation committee. At the initiative of the student, a fall or spring semester date for such a meeting should be set suitable for the dissertation chair and other members of the committee. At the review meeting, progress on the dissertation and changes from the original Prospectus are reported and commented on. A written summary of progress, agreed upon by the candidate and the dissertation chair is signed and distributed to the entire committee. The written progress report is placed in the student's departmental file and serves as a record of the required annual meeting.

For doctoral candidates not in residence, the candidate will provide a written progress report for the dissertation chair, who will circulate the report (with or without comment) to all members of the committee. All committee members are invited to comment on this progress report and, at her or his discretion, the dissertation chair will call a meeting of the committee to discuss possible problems.

Dissertation chairs must inform the administrator of graduate studies that a review meeting

(or equivalent) has taken place and will provide a copy of the report for the candidate's file. The Graduate Studies Office will keep a log of the occurrence of such meetings.

5.6 Defense of the Dissertation:

The doctoral defense will only be scheduled when the student's dissertation committee chair and committee members decide that the dissertation is ready for a final defense. Every member of the committee must be consulted on this point by the chair. ***Every member of the committee, therefore, must be provided with the draft of the dissertation at least one month in advance of a proposed defense date.*** Students are responsible for meeting this deadline.

Students must be enrolled during the semester in which the defense is scheduled. The student is responsible for ensuring that the format of the manuscript conforms to the regulations of the university and the College of Arts and Sciences, for paying certain fees, and for otherwise fulfilling the requirements for graduation. The dissertation committee will determine whether or not to approve the dissertation and award the PhD. If it approves the dissertation, it decides whether it has passed; passed with distinction; or passed subject to revisions. The committee should also advise the candidate on prospects for publication.

If the committee does not approve the dissertation, it will advise the student on what changes are needed in order to pass it. In that case, the student may, within the statute of limitation, defend the dissertation again only after the committee is satisfied that all required changes have been met satisfactorily.

5.7 Graduation

Each candidate for graduation must file an official Application for Graduation in the Office of Graduate Studies early in the term in which graduation is expected and *must be registered* at the University during that term. Students are required to register for at least one credit (or the Full Time Dissertation Study course) in the term of graduation. University deadlines for application for graduation are announced for each term. Students are responsible for meeting all University deadlines. Diplomas are mailed approximately four weeks after the end of the term of graduation.

5.8 Statute of Limitations

There is a university mandated statute of limitations: From the student's initial registration for graduate study, all requirements for the master's degree must be completed within 4 years. All requirements for the PhD degree, including a successful defense of the dissertation, must be completed within a period of 10 years, or within eight years if the student has received credit for a master's degree. A student who is unable to complete all PhD requirements within seven years after passing the comprehensive examination is required to retake the examination. University policy allows no exceptions to this rule.

If the dissertation is not completed in this time frame, students are required to petition the DGS and the Chair of the Department for readmission into the department. If students beyond the statute of limitations are approved for readmission, they are required by the university to repeat their comprehensive exams. A student approaching the statute of limitation may request an extension which, if granted, will not require the student to petition for readmission. Request

for extensions are exceptional and must be in writing. A petition should include a precise statement and detailed explanation for the reasons for such extension and a detailed time frame for the completion of the dissertation. Supporting materials such as letters or evidence of related work may also be submitted in support of the petition. If the department approves the petition to extend the statute of limitations, then the DGS formally petitions the Dean of Graduate Studies for the extension.

It should be noted that the request for the extension is ultimately determined by the Dean of Graduate Studies. The graduate committee (or the department) does not create policy with its response to any given petition, no matter the response. In particular, the response to a given petition does not constitute any sort of precedent. The graduate committee (or the department) is not obliged to defend its ruling to the student, although typically an explanation will be provided.

6.1 TEACHING POLICIES

Teaching assignments are made by the DGS, the scheduling committee and the chair. The actual assignment of individuals to courses and sections is governed by the students' status in the department and departmental needs. Students without a MA degree are only eligible to be assigned as Teaching Assistants. Upon completion of the MA degree and the university required Faculty Development Seminar (which can be taken either prior to becoming a TF or concurrent with the first semester of a TF), students are eligible to become a Teaching Fellow. Students whose first language is not English are required by the University to pass an English comprehension exam before they can assume a role in classroom teaching.

Guidelines for Appointments of TA/TF

The following are the two main criteria utilized to determine allocations of TA/TF lines:

- Departmental teaching needs
- Student progress and timeliness in completing program milestones

Other factors include:

- Where possible, the department seeks to make TA/TF placements that enhance student abilities to complete program milestones in the most timely way
- Student's prior teaching experiences in a substantive area (i.e. allowing a chance to teach multiple iterations of a course and to improve a class over time)
- Student mentoring opportunities (TA Assignments)
- Student professional development (we expect all of our Ph.D. students to have some teaching experiences before graduation)

6.2 Teaching Assistants

One part of graduate education at the University of Pittsburgh may include employment as a Teaching Assistant (TA). Appointment as a TA serves three main purposes: financial support for graduate study, instructional support for large undergraduate courses, and training and practice in teaching Sociology.

Each course is different, and each instructor organizes lecture courses differently. It is hard to make generalizations about your precise duties, responsibilities, and opportunities as a TA. In some courses, you will be the only TA. In other courses, there will be two of you (in Sociology, there is usually one TA for every 100 students enrolled in a course, and most

lecture courses are capped at 100 or 200 students). You are encouraged to contact the instructor in the course to which you have been assigned as soon as possible to acquire the syllabus and reading materials for the course and to clarify mutual expectations.

Recitations are discussion and problem-solving sessions that meet once a week as a supplement to lectures. They are designed with several instructional purposes in mind. Recitations are an opportunity for students to work in a smaller, more interactive setting than the lecture hall. In recitations, students can reasonably be expected and encouraged to ask questions and also to demonstrate their learning by explaining new concepts or ideas in their own words (hence “recite”). Recitations are a place where the combination of more individualized attention and small group interactions ideally make teaching and learning more effective and enjoyable for both teacher and student. TAs are there to make this process possible. TAs usually lead 4 recitation sections each week, with 25 students in each session.

TA appointments are typically for 20 hours/week. All instructional employees at the University of Pittsburgh have to fill out a time sheet every semester. This is easier if you use the spreadsheet (in an Excel file) available from the Office of Graduate Studies. Use this for your own records (you’re not expected to hand it in to anyone). If you find you are working over 20 hours a week *on average*, talk with the instructor or the Director of Graduate Studies, who will try to help you find a balance of time devoted to teaching, research, and your own coursework

- **TAs grade student work.** Homework assignments, problem sets, presentations, papers, and essay examinations may all be part of the materials you are expected to evaluate. The “how-to” materials on grading student work from the FAS TA orientation and training are excellent, but are no substitute for communicating clearly and frequently with the instructor about standards, expectations, and the like. Return materials promptly. In some weeks, the time you spend grading may push your hours over the usual 20 hours/week; show some flexibility, and be prepared for some “rush” periods if the instructor has organized the course to have you grading 100 items at once.
- **TAs hold office hours.** Schedule *at least* 2 hours per week for office hours. Demand and need are likely to vary over the course of the term. Expect a relative flood of students just before and just after exams or big assignments, for instance. Coordinate with the instructor so that your office hours do not entirely overlap (although a partial overlap is not a bad idea, for consulting on questions you feel you can’t answer thoroughly yourself). Be prepared to meet with students by appointment if necessary, as well and to respond quickly and often to student email. Feel free to use your office hours to read for class, grade, or meet your other TA obligations. But be sure to set aside time when students know you will be available to them for asking questions, discussing materials, explaining comments or grades on assignments, helping with homework (preferably in small groups meeting during office hours), preparing for exams, etc.
- **TAs keep administrative records.** Usually, you will create a spreadsheet for this purpose. Each row is a student, and the various columns record scores on homework assignments, exams, attendance, recitation participation, and other requirements. Use the syllabus and discussion with the instructor to identify all the course requirements and set

the categories for materials that will be evaluated/graded and need to be recorded in this type of format. Sometimes, you can ask more experienced TAs for a “shell” spreadsheet and help in setting it up. Don’t hesitate to ask for help from the instructor, but also don’t be afraid to experiment and come up with your own best system. Be sure to keep multiple copies of computer files (backed up on diskette, for example) and hard copies of printout. TAs also help out with routine administrative tasks, such as placing orders from Media Services, making deliveries to Student Services for students with disabilities who take their exams separately, and filling out the paperwork that goes to the Athletic Department for student-athletes.

- **TAs may link students and instructors.** Some undergraduate students, especially in large lecture courses, find the size of the class and the distance from the instructor intimidating or alienating. Do what you can to learn students’ names, respond to their questions, and enhance their learning through more personal attention than is practical in lecture. Pass on complaints and compliments, questions and concerns, confidentially or not as appropriate. Keep your ear to the ground for possible problems, and warn the instructor if you suspect trouble is brewing. If the instructor asks for it, provide feedback on lectures and discussions. Some instructors schedule weekly meetings to keep in touch with TAs. Some prefer to communicate via email. Some use a mix of techniques. *Check your email daily*, to keep up with possible communications from both students and the instructor.
- **TAs must be evaluated using the OMET student survey of teaching.** Be sure to sign up for this service, and to request a meeting with the instructor when you get the results so you can discuss areas of strength and improvement. Submit a copy of your OMET score sheet, and a summary of the written comments from your students, to the office of the DGS after you get the results. You also may arrange to have your recitation videotaped for evaluation purposes. Some instructors make frequent or occasional visits to recitations, which can be nerve-wracking but helpful opportunities for observation and feedback.
- **TAs do not establish social, romantic, or sexual relationships with students.** The University has a clear policy on sexual harassment and consensual relationships: they are disallowed between TAs and their students. A pamphlet describing the policy is available from FAS and from the office of the Director of Graduate Studies. Avoid any appearance of impropriety (favoritism, *quid pro quo*, or hostile learning/working environment) by refraining from social, romantic, or sexual relationships with your students while they are in your classes.
- **Some TAs also:** Write questions for examinations and assignments, design their own discussion materials and recitation curriculum (this is for more experienced TAs who have taught the same course with the same instructor before), help with syllabus revisions, and compile teaching portfolios (more on this from FAS and CIDDE).

6.3 TEACHING FELLOWS

Promotion from TA to TF

Students who have completed the MA degree (or received transfer credit for a MA degree), completed the required Faculty Development Seminar, and are making satisfactory progress toward the PhD as certified by the DGS, will be recommended for teaching fellowships. Students are not automatically promoted to TF status upon eligibility and may alternate between TA/TF status as determined by the teaching needs of the Department and the Departmental Annual Evaluations of the student. All TF's are required to have a Faculty Mentor (explained below) and should submit the required forms provided by the DGS office designating the Mentor two weeks prior to the beginning of the term in which they will be teaching an independent course.

Normal Duties of those teaching an independent course

1. Prompt attendance at each and every course meeting is absolutely required. If circumstances such as sickness arise, the TF should inform their TF Mentor and the Director of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) and assist in arranging for a substitute approved by the DGS. If a class is missed in whole or in substantial part, the matter should be reported to the DUS and a make-up class arranged to suite the convenience of the students. No TF should ever change the time or place of any section meeting without prior approval of the TF Mentor and the DUS an appropriate notification of the Department.
2. Regular announced office hours (not just "by appointment") are expected of all TF's. These office hours must be kept. At least two hours, on different days are essential. It is especially important that TF's of CGS courses schedule office hours at a time convenient for CGS students. All the ordinary obligations of a teacher, such as grading and commenting upon paper, constructing and grading examinations, submitting grades, etc. must be performed on time. In particular, teaching duties take precedence over the TF's own academic obligations.
3. Before submitting textbook requisitions, the TF must submit to the TF Mentor, a course syllabus which outlines the projected course and includes a list of required and suggested texts. Once the syllabus has been approved by the TF Mentor, the TF should submit the textbook requisition through the Departmental Undergraduate administrator. In absence of the TF Mentor, summer teaching materials may be approved by an appropriate faculty member.
4. The TF is required to have her or his course evaluated through the Office of Student Evaluations. OMET results must be submitted to the DGS and the TF's Mentor promptly and a copy is placed in the student's file.

Supervision of Teaching Fellows

All TF's are required to have a faculty mentor. At least once a year, the mentor should either attend a class meeting at a mutually agree time or view a recording of a class meeting in the company of the student, followed by a discussion with the student. Note: It is required that student's teaching their own course for the first time as a Teaching Fellow be observed by

their chosen faculty mentor during the semester of teaching. **It is the responsibility of the student to work with the faculty mentor in a timely way to arrange a time for this observation.** Failure to do so will negatively impact future teaching assignments.

After each term of independent teaching (summer term included), the mentor will review the mandatory student course evaluations, syllabi and course materials, and discuss these with the student. Each term the mentor will prepare a written evaluation of the past semester's teaching for inclusion in the student's Departmental file. The student will make evaluations, course descriptions and syllabi from the past semester available to the mentor for the purpose of writing the evaluation. The mentor will be available to the student for consultation on teaching issues, ranging from routine matters to long-term objectives and aspirations.

7.0 Graduate Student Organization

The Sociology Graduate Student Organization is an official university student organization that advocates the interests and concerns of the graduate students of the Sociology Department. The GSO provides the primary avenue of communications between graduate students and Sociology faculty and staff as well as other university entities. The Sociology GSO schedules regular meetings and socials that all graduate students are welcome to attend.

Representatives from the Sociology GSO attend monthly Sociology department meetings and Arts and Sciences GSO meetings and cast votes at such meetings on behalf of Sociology students. The A&S-GSO is responsible for dispersing 50% of the student activity fees graduate students pay each semester. They also offer travel grants three times per year for students presenting research at conferences and honor graduate student teaching with an annual award.

8.1 POLICY ON STUDENT RESEARCH IN CLASSES: ETHICAL CONCERNS

The following addresses ethical concerns when undergraduate or graduate students conduct research for course credit. A copy of this policy is available from the Administrative Assistant and should be distributed by all faculty and instructors (including PTI's and TF's) to students in their classes who are doing research that poses potential ethical issues. This includes ALL student research that involves human subjects in any way, including passive observation, interviews, focus groups, etc. It includes research in which the human subjects are other students in the class as well as others. In addition, all such research assignments must be approved IN ADVANCE by either the University's Institutional Review Board OR, if appropriate, by the Departmental Research Ethics Committee. In general, instructors should begin with the departmental committee by submitting, in writing and in a timely fashion, a full description of the research assignment and its ethical consideration. No student research involving human subjects may begin before departmental or IRB approval is received.

8.2 Introduction

As sociologists, our research always takes place within an ethical context. Though ethical issues may take varied forms, one area of particular concern involves the ways in which we treat others in the course of our research and writing. In seeking to understand the world, we must do so in ways that will not harm the people with whom we work and study.

To address these issues, sociologists (among many others) have developed professional norms that guide their work. Such guidelines are far from perfect, but they help to transmit the wisdom of the profession to new practitioners, and they encourage all investigators, from students in an introductory class to experienced scholars, to think seriously about these important matters. In general, these guidelines are of two different types: those which help you assess the potential risk to others of your work; those which provide ways of dealing with potential harm, either by proscribing certain activities or by providing ways to minimize risk.

8.3 Assessing the Potential for Harm.

As you formulate your research project, you need to think about the risks involved along four dimensions: the methodological approaches you are using, the topics you are studying, the people with whom you are working, and your plans for dissemination of your results. The purpose of doing so is not to avoid all risks--to do so would mean the cessation of any research. Rather, by identifying potential problems, you may design your research to minimize those risks and actively assess whether your project is ethically acceptable.

Methodologies. In general, investigations that rely on public information (e.g., newspapers, census data) involve little or no risk to others, while those that create new information through interaction with others involve greater risk. Specific methodological approaches differ to some extent in the risks they pose, depending primarily on the extent to which they actively engage participants. Thus, simple observational strategies typically pose little risk, while questionnaires and interviews pose somewhat greater risk and experiments considerably more risk. Whatever the technique, the deception or the manipulation of people significantly increases the potential for harm.

Topics. Investigations that focus on private matters are riskier than those that explore public life are. This is particularly the case where matters deemed private are illegal, deviant, or potentially stigmatizing. Whether private or public, studies of behavior pose greater risk than those that focus on beliefs, attitudes, and values.

Participants. Studies that focus on less powerful peoples pose greater risk to participants than those that study equals or more powerful individuals do. Such differences in power may arise from differences in competence (adults versus children) or from differences in social organization (employers studying employees or teachers studying students).

Dissemination. Investigations that disseminate their results widely pose more risk to participants than those that do not do so. Thus, the use of interview material in a paper read solely by a professor poses relatively little risk, while the presentation of such material in a campus talk or, for example, a Pitt News article poses greater risk.

8.4 Ways of Dealing with Potential Harm

To lessen the potential for harm to those we study sociologists have developed a variety of strategies. Some are used routinely in nearly all professional research, and we, as a department, require the use of such strategies by students. Others are used only under certain

conditions, and whether you incorporate them into your work will depend on serious thought and consultation with your professor.

Human Subjects. Human subjects are people from whom researchers get data or information. Regardless of how this information is obtained (for example, from interviews, interactions, journals or interventions in the lives of other people) these people become human subjects. In addition, if the information obtained is identifiable and private, the person is a human subject.

Disclosure. Whenever you are directly working with people as a participant observer, interviewer, or experimenter, you must tell people who you are, what you are doing, and how you plan to use the material you collect. This may be done in different ways (in an introductory conversation or a cover letter to a questionnaire), but participants need to be informed about your identity and purposes. If you plan to disseminate your findings through writing or talks, you must inform them of this possibility. If for some reason you cannot meet these basic requirements for disclosure, you must not undertake your project.

Voluntary Participation. People who participate in your research must do so voluntarily. Such agreement presumes that they know the purposes of your research (disclosure); it also implies that they have freely consented to talk with you, fill out a questionnaire, or let you observe their private behavior. If people do not wish to participate, you must not pressure or in any way coerce them to do so. If you cannot meet this basic requirement, you must not undertake your project.

Anonymity and Confidentiality. Anonymity implies that you, as a researcher, do not know the identity of the person you are observing. This might be the case if you were observing behavior in a public setting or you collect questionnaires from respondents that cannot be identified. Confidentiality means that you know the identity of the person you are working with but that you do not disclose that person's identity in any way to others. Where you are doing research that is not anonymous, you need to inform participants whether or not you will treat their behavior or conversations as confidential. For instance, if you are going to attribute a quotation to a particular person, you must ask their permission to do so. If you are not going to attribute a quotation to a particular person, you need to tell people their participation will be treated confidentially. This is a promise to that person and must be honored. In most cases, research should be designed to insure the confidentiality of participants. Where this is not possible, extra care must be taken.

Prohibitions on Research: High Risk Topics and Participants. As noted above, some research poses significantly greater risks, particularly that which explores illegal activity or involves minors. As the risks of such student research far outweigh the pedagogical benefits of such work, students are not allowed to undertake such work without the formal approval of the Department of Sociology and the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The University's Institutional Review Board. Because some research poses exceptional risk, the University has created a board to evaluate research proposals that have greater potential for harm: e.g., those involving deception, problems of confidentiality, high risk topics, or vulnerable participants. This board, like the norms of the profession, functions to ensure that

all researchers consider the ethical (and legal) dimensions of their work. Students whose work poses the potential for such risk must consult their professor, the departmental chair, the Departmental Research Ethics Committee, and/or the University's IRB.

8.5 Is Your Research Ethical: Should You Do It?

While it is relatively easy to determine that some projects are ethical and some unethical, there is no simple moral calculus that can be applied to every project. Rather, it is your responsibility as a sociologist to think carefully about these matters, and where you have doubts, to consult with your professor and the Department of Sociology. In some cases, your professor and/or departmental chair may suggest you redesign your project to minimize potential harm or to go through the University's Institutional Review Board's formal procedure for evaluating research proposals.

9.0 REQUIRED GRADUATE COURSES AND DESCRIPTIONS

2102 Sociological Theory

This course surveys the major works of post-classic and contemporary sociological theory. These are discussed from the standpoint of how they built upon, revised and extended the classics and how they are relevant to us today. Relevant selections from classical sociological theory are also covered.

2205 Research Design

This course is designed to: (1) provide an overview of a variety of methodologies and perspectives in social science research and their strengths and limitations; (2) introduce principals of research design; (3) orient students to contemporary critical debates in the social sciences, and (4) assist in developing methodological approaches and strategies for your own research efforts. This course covers basic philosophical and epistemological foundations of social science research; methodological issues of research design; principles of data collection; and ethical and political issues of social science research. Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies will be discussed.

2202 Quantitative Methods

Complementing the required course on qualitative methods, this course provides an overview of quantitative research methods in the social sciences. Topics will include quantitative research design, data collection, and statistical analysis. The course will focus primarily on the analysis of social data, providing students with the necessary foundation conducting quantitative research. The skills acquired throughout the course also enable students to understand and critically evaluate several of the advanced research methodologies employed in the social sciences. Students are expected to leave the course with a broader understanding of the range of quantitative techniques they may employ in future empirical endeavors.

2203 Qualitative Methods

This course will offer an overview of qualitative research methods in the social sciences. It will emphasize interpretive approaches to social research, and cover the research process from the beginning to end. Key topics include issues inherent in many types of research such as research design, conceptualization, operationalization, data collection, analysis, interpretation, syntheses and theory construction. It will emphasize the importance of reasoning and conceptualization as well as practical skills and techniques, and also cover different epistemologies, reflexivity and research ethics. The uses of triangulation and combining research techniques will also be considered. Students will carry out their own empirical projects using specific qualitative techniques, such as the interview and participant observation