Guidelines for Completion of the PhD in Sociology

Brown University

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The PhD in Sociology at a Glance:

The goals of the doctoral course of study are to enable students to: (a) master the fundamentals of the discipline and develop a thorough command of advanced scholarship in multiple sociological subfields; (b) form a sophisticated intellectual agenda in at least two areas of specialization; (c) design and carry out a challenging program of original research; (d) successfully pursue external research funding; and (e) provide thoughtful, creative, and compelling instruction in the discipline.

PhD in sociology requires successful completion of the following:

1. 24 credit units of coursework (16 for those entering the program with an approved Master’s). This coursework must include:
   - Six first year courses (Classic Sociological Theory (SOC 2040), Contemporary Sociological Theory (SOC 2050), Fields and Methods of Sociological Research (SOC 2430), Qualitative Methods and Field Work (SOC 2210), Multivariate Analysis (SOC 2010), and Advanced Regression Models (SOC 2020).
   - 1 unit of teaching experience

2. Master’s paper, to be completed by the beginning of the fourth semester of graduate study (unless student enters with an approved Master’s degree)

3. Two preliminary exams in one of the standing areas offered by the department. The preliminary exams may only be completed after the Master’s paper is completed.

4. Dissertation Proposal, successfully defended before the department (in a Brown Bag presentation) and approved by the committee.

5. The successful completion and defense of the Dissertation.

The Faculty in sociology also strongly recommend:

- A writing course (either SOC 2250 or a similar course approved by the graduate committee).
- Obtaining teaching certification from the Sheridan Center.
The Requirements for the PhD

Coursework

The required coursework, normally taken in the first year of graduate study, focuses on theories and methods of research that characterize sociology. The required coursework includes a two-semester sequence on theory (Classic Sociological Theory (SOC 2040), Contemporary Sociological Theory (SOC 2050), a course on the logic of inquiry (Fields and Methods of Sociological Research (SOC 2430), a qualitative methods course (Qualitative Methods and Field Work (SOC 2210), and a two-semester sequence covering basic applied statistics (Multivariate Analysis (SOC 2010), Advanced Regression Models (SOC 2020).

In addition to the required courses, students take advanced courses in theory, research methods (e.g., survey methods, qualitative methods, advanced statistics), and areas of substantive specialization. The goal of these courses is to master foundational knowledge in two or more areas of specialization within sociology, and to acquire the empirical research skills to complete the dissertation. The additional coursework is normally selected from graduate courses numbered over 2000. Selected courses should include seminars covering the department’s preliminary exam areas, other advanced courses in sociology and other advanced courses in appropriate departments. Additionally, 1870-level seminars and courses between 1000 and 1860 may be taken if appropriate.

The residence requirement for the Ph.D. is the equivalent of three years of full-time study past the Bachelor’s degree (i.e., 24 tuition units). At least two semesters beyond the Master’s degree must be spent exclusively in full-time study at Brown University. Students who have completed graduate work while in graduate residence at another institution and who have not completed the required number of courses in fulfillment of the Ph.D. degree may, on petition to the Graduate Committee and with the approval of the Registrar, transfer credits equivalent to eight (8) tuition units in partial fulfillment of the residence requirement at Brown.

Teaching experience is both a fundamental aspect of scholarly development and a valuable signal on the job market. To provide all students with this experience, the program requires completing an approved teaching experience. During the semester in which a student is completing the teaching experience, she/he should enroll in a 1-unit R&R (independent study—reading and research) with a sponsoring faculty. The department provides three options for completing this requirement. Students may (1) teach the labs or discussion sections as part of their TA assignment in one semester, (2) give three guest lectures to be designed by the student for a class taught by a faculty member in the student’s area of specialization, or (3) complete the teaching certification program at the Sheridan Center. Other arrangements may be made with sponsoring faculty.

The Master’s Paper

The Master’s Paper is designed to provide a structured research experience of limited scope that covers the main elements of research, including selecting a research problem, reviewing current knowledge in the field, generating hypotheses or key points that require exploration, examining
these hypotheses or key points with evidence, and drawing conclusions. The Master’s Paper should be the quality and length of a published paper in a major sociology journal. The scope, structure, quality, and tone of a Master’s Paper should resemble a published paper in a major sociology journal. However, the Master’s Paper usually contains a more extensive literature review and a more detailed discussion of methodology than would a typical journal article (typically 30-35 pages of text, along with a modest number of tables, figures, and references). For some areas of research the paper may need to be longer but ordinarily should not exceed 50-60 pages of text.

The Master’s Paper must be approved by a thesis committee that consists of two faculty members in the sociology department selected by the student, one of whom serves as the supervisor of the paper and the second as the reader. With prior permission from the Graduate Committee, the second reader may have a faculty appointment in another department at Brown. The thesis committee must be selected by the end of the second semester of graduate study. A final draft of the paper must be submitted to the thesis committee by the beginning of semester 4 of graduate study (end of January of the second year). Failure to meet these deadlines may jeopardize consideration for good standing.

Following acceptance of the Master’s Paper, a copy signed by the committee members must be submitted to the Department. A final, approved, and bound copy of the MA Paper must be deposited with the department’s student affairs coordinator.

**Preliminary Exam Areas**

Mastery of sociology as a discipline requires in-depth study of specific areas of interest and broad coverage of the major themes of sociological inquiry. Sociology as a field has a large number of specializations and the faculty in the department at Brown cover many of these areas. The areas of specialization selected as preliminary exam areas normally represent the areas in which the student plans to teach and carry out research for the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees.

Students will specialize in two areas of sociology selected from a standing list of areas offered by the department. The exams for each area will draw on a standard bibliography of the field, compiled and maintained by the standing faculty committees who are the examiners in each area. Each area is approximately the breadth of a section of the American Sociological Association, or a recognized subfield within sociology. Each preliminary exam area corresponds with an advanced seminar (200 level), which may be offered biennially in the department. For some areas, this seminar will be a SOC 187 seminar. Students are strongly advised to complete the relevant advanced seminar(s) before taking the exam. In exceptional cases, students may propose an alternative exam approximately equivalent in breadth to the existing areas (i.e., an ASA section) in an area not regularly offered. The graduate committee will consider these alternatives only if two faculty members have agreed to be examiners.

Completion of these preliminary examinations should take place in the third year of graduate study. Students should, however, begin planning their areas of specialization through consulting with their advisor early in their graduate study. The schedule for the exam in each area will be set by the standing committee of examiners in each area. The committee will schedule exams...
once or twice a year. The scheduled exam date will be provided to students within six weeks of the date on which students officially indicated their intention to take an exam in a designated area. Each exam will involve a 3-day take-home exam. Two exam periods will be scheduled for each exam offering so that students who wish to take their two exams at the same cycle may do so. However, students need not take exams in both areas at the same time, but should take both exams in adjacent exam periods. Students may pick up questions from the student affairs coordinator at the beginning of the 72 hours, and must return answers by the end of that period.

The Dissertation

The PhD dissertation is an original contribution to the field of sociology. Its completion has two stages: (1) the preparation and oral defense of a dissertation proposal, and (2) the completion and oral defense of the dissertation itself. The dissertation is supervised by at least three committee members, one of whom is the chair, two of whom are members of the dissertation committee. The chair and at least one other member of the committee must be a regular faculty member in the Sociology Department. Students may petition the Graduate Committee in writing for exceptions to this rule. Students choose their committee before starting the proposal, and while this committee may be changed, the Graduate Committee must be notified of changes.

The preparation and defense of a PhD dissertation proposal should occur during the semester following the successful completion of the second preliminary examination. The proposal describes the unique contribution to the sociological literature to be made by the dissertation, reviews relevant research, and addresses methods and feasibility for the proposed research. Students are encouraged to prepare their proposals early to expedite the completion of the graduate program and to facilitate obtaining outside fellowships. Proposals should be presented at a “Brown Bag” by the start of the seventh semester in the program. The dissertation committee, including the chair and at least one other member, must be present at the Brown Bag. The purpose of this oral presentation is to encourage careful, preliminary investigation of the dissertation topic and to obtain critical advice from faculty and other graduate students. After the Brown Bag, the student works with the dissertation committee to revise the proposal, address questions, suggestions, and comments raised at the Brown Bag presentation. Completion of this phase occurs when the committee has signed its approval of the revised dissertation proposal.

After the research and writing of the dissertation is completed, the student must successfully defend the written dissertation at an oral examination by a group composed of the dissertation committee and two outside readers appointed by the department chair and the director of graduate studies. The dissertation committee and outside readers must receive copies of the dissertation at least two weeks before the defense date. The committee and outside readers will give final approval for the defense to occur at least 48 hours prior to the scheduled defense. Each student is examined orally on the dissertation in accordance with the general procedures of the Department. The oral defense is considered “passed” if the dissertation committee unanimously votes approval and at least one (1) outside reader votes approval. After the successful oral defense of the dissertation, the student should prepare a final version of the dissertation taking into account the comments and suggestions of the committee. After the final changes to the dissertation have been approved, and the dissertation cover page has been signed signaling this approval, the dissertation should be submitted to the Graduate School. The same electronic version must be submitted to the department’s student affairs coordinator at the same time.
The Graduate School requires that a graduate student complete the dissertation within five years after passing the preliminary examinations. The five-year period is not extended when a student takes a leave of absence. All petitions for extension of time beyond the five-year limit must come before the Graduate Committee of the department. In general, extensions will be granted only when there is evidence of substantial progress on the dissertation during the previous year and evidence that the candidate has remained current in the candidate’s fields of specialization.

**Program Evaluation and Completion**

By virtue of our size, students are closely mentored from the first weeks in the program through to the final stages of the program, including in the job search process. Students are assigned an advisor upon starting the program, based on stated interests in the application. After the first year students should decide on an advisor for the Masters’ Thesis, as well as a second reader. After the Masters’ Thesis students should settle on an advisor who will guide them through the stages of the dissertation. Students may switch advisors at any time, but should inform the Graduate Committee of their decisions.

Students are also evaluated at several points in their career. In addition to successful completion of program benchmarks (masters’, prelims, Brown Bag), students are formally evaluated by the graduate program at the end of each year, with special attention devoted to the first year evaluation. These evaluations focus not only on timely completion of program requirements but also overall progress and professional development. Specifically, the committee considers the development of each student’s conceptual and analytical thinking skills, including the ability to make theoretical abstractions, to link theoretical material to empirical methods, and to critique conceptual arguments and empirical approaches. Additionally, the committee considers a student’s demonstrated potential to execute an independently crafted research project that can make a contribution to the discipline. Lastly, the committee also considers a student’s overall awareness of professional behaviors.

The graduate school currently provides five years of funding to students in good standing. The course of study for the sociology PhD is designed to be completed in five years and students are encouraged to do so. We recognize that in certain cases, especially when involving primary data collection, the course of study may extend into a sixth and seventh year. Students who need to extend the course of study beyond five years must remain in good standing and will be expected to secure external funding.

**Entering the Program with a Masters Degree**

Students who enter the Department with an acceptable Master’s thesis from another institution require 16 additional units of coursework. A maximum of eight credits may be counted towards the residency requirement. All of students’ previous coursework will be examined to determine which courses can be counted toward the program at Brown. Specific course requirements may be waived by the Graduate Committee in consultation with the current instructor of the course for which the waiver is sought. All previously completed Master Theses are evaluated by one or two faculty members in the sociology department at Brown. A student whose Masters’ thesis is
determined to be of suitable quality is exempt from the Masters’ thesis requirement and should work with her/his advisor to develop an individualized course study for program completion.
The PhD, Year by Year

First Year of Graduate Study

In the first year, graduate students normally take eight courses, six of which are the required courses described above, and two of which are other substantive courses based on student’s areas of interest. During the summer after the first year of study, students build on their coursework and pursue a research project. The project normally forms the basis of the MA thesis. An advisor is assigned to each entering student who will work with the student to formulate a plan of study for the first year, and to identify a chair for the Master’s thesis. At this time students should also begin to identify areas of specialization and eventual preliminary exam areas.

The Second Year

In the second year, students may take additional seminars in theory and advanced methodology courses, along with courses in areas of substantive specialization. Students should enter the second year with an appropriate advisor to supervise the MA thesis and guide subsequent steps. Students write their MA thesis in the second year and submit the thesis to the committee by the beginning of semester 4 of graduate study (end of January of the second year). After successful completion of the MA thesis, students are strongly encouraged to quickly submit the thesis to a journal for review for publication. During the second year students continue refining their planned areas of specialization for the preliminary exam, taking courses in the areas of their intended exams.

The Third Year

In the third year, students take additional seminars in theory and advanced methodology courses, along with courses in areas of substantive specialization. In the third year, students focus critically on their preliminary exams through independent study and enrolling in the above described advanced seminars. Completion of these preliminary examinations should be before the beginning of the fourth year of graduate study. For those without teaching experience, the third year is also the time to fulfill the teaching requirement.

Subsequent Years

The preparation and defense of a PhD dissertation proposal should occur during the semester following the successful completion of the preliminary examination. The fourth year is normally devoted to the collection of research materials for the dissertation and the drafting of analytic chapters. In addition, the student should focus on the publication of research papers alone or in collaboration with her advisor during this year. The fifth year is devoted to completing and defending the PhD dissertation and preparing papers for presentation at professional meetings and publication. Preparation for applying for teaching and research positions, the job interview process, and related issues typically occur in the final year.